Affected

by Laurea

Summary

After being repeatedly challenged by Naegi in the class trials, Togami finds his mind unduly focused on the boy. He thinks Naegi should be equally focused on him - but his plan doesn't go quite the way he expects. His miscalculation affects not only himself, but the entire course of the killing game.

Usually updates on Sundays.

Notes

So I was trying to write something short and fluffy to see how I felt about writing with the characters' last names instead of first names... and this happened.

This story will have MAJOR SPOILERS for the whole first game, and possibly a few minor ones for the second game.
Chapter 1

Togami scowled at Naegi as the boy sat across from him in the library, paging through a book much too fast to be reading it. Why did the boy insist on spending time with him? Shouldn’t insult piled on insult deter him?

Nothing about Naegi made sense. The boy seemed so ordinary at first glance, but in the trials, he’d even cornered Togami himself. Facing the boy had been strangely exhilarating, a real opponent that he hadn’t expected to find. His blood pounded even from the memory, adrenaline rushing through him again at the remembered challenge.

And now Naegi could apparently just sit across from him, like it hadn’t affected him at all.

Togami realized with a sharp, sudden clarity that he wanted Naegi to be affected. Just as Naegi had beaten him during the trial, he wanted to turn that defeat on itself, to leave Naegi overcome and consumed by thoughts of him.

He stood abruptly, abandoning his book on the table. “Follow me.”

Naegi looked puzzled, but he didn’t object as he followed Togami into the archive. That would be the best place. The door might not lock, but the rest of the students barely even entered the library at all, let alone made their way back to the dusty room. It would be better than trying to navigate the walk back to the dormitories, which would take a long enough time that Naegi would almost certainly try to chatter unnecessary questions about Togami’s plans.

No, much better to take him by surprise. As soon as the door closed behind them, Togami spun, slammed Naegi against it, and crushed their mouths together.

It was a perfect plan. A successful Togami heir had to excel in all areas, and he had ensured this would be no exception. He was certain Naegi could never have experienced a kiss like this, a deliberate onslaught of pleasure to dull the mind and conquer resistance.

And sure enough, Naegi’s initial shock melted into compliance. He pressed forward, arms wrapping around Togami, lips parting in willing acceptance of his defeat.

It had been so easy, Togami was almost disappointed. Not that he’d really expected Naegi to fight it, but it wasn’t much of a victory if he didn’t have to earn it at all. He’d thought Naegi would need more persuasion.

Instead, Naegi kissed back eagerly – not with a finesse to match Togami’s, but openly and without reserve. That wasn’t the reaction of a defeated opponent – it was the response of a challenger.

Well, he’d just have to show Naegi exactly what it meant to challenge Byakuya Togami. He ground his hips forward, rubbing full body against Naegi. The beautiful friction elicited a deep moan from Naegi that Togami swallowed with satisfaction, feeling the other boy’s teenage hormones kick into overdrive.

He’d intended to leave that at point – to say something appropriately scathing and walk off looking untouched. In his fantasy, Naegi would stare helplessly after him, hard and needy and unable to think of anything else.
Except that unaccountably, Togami found he wasn’t unaffected. The thought of pulling away from Naegi’s mouth seemed as impossible as going without air. Everywhere their bodies touched shot fire directly into Togami’s blood. Almost against his will, his hips thrust forward again, and yet again, white hot electricity searing through his clothes.

He’d miscalculated. He’d thought he would have no trouble walking away. Or maybe he just hadn’t been able to admit how badly he’d wanted to feel Naegi writhing against him.

At least Naegi wanted it, too – there was that consolation. The boy’s hands clutched at Togami like a lifeline, his breathing heavy and his eyes glazed with desire. It was an appealing look, visual evidence that Naegi’s undivided attention was his.

Well, his original plan might be out of the question, but there were other ways to bring Naegi to defeat – ways that would overcome him even more thoroughly than he’d originally intended. With that thought foremost in his mind, Togami dropped his hands to unzip Naegi’s pants and shove them down to his ankles, accompanying the action with an even more punishing kiss.

It should have left Naegi unable to think of anything else – but Togami realized too late that Naegi’s hands had been busy too. His own dress slacks and underwear slid crumpled to the ground, exposing his arousal to the air. One of Naegi’s hands snaked around to rest on Togami’s naked ass, and he felt himself get even harder than before.

That wasn’t right. He’d intended to destroy the commoner brat, to remove his ability to think rationally with the intensity of physical sensation. Naegi shouldn’t even be able to consider trying to affect Togami in turn.

He’d just have to step things up, then. Togami broke the kiss and dropped to his knees, smirking at Naegi’s gasp. This would ruin him, Togami was sure of it.

Togami had always appreciated the power inherent in the ability to give an effective blowjob. When done right, it let him completely control the recipient. A few choice swipes of the tongue and manipulations of the lips, and he owned the other man. He’d always taken malicious satisfaction in seeing an otherwise composed partner fall apart beneath his mouth, exposing weaknesses and vulnerability in the false belief that Togami’s actions had done the same.

And sure enough, Naegi collapsed weakly back against the door, panting as Togami’s mouth worked on him. This was how it should be – Naegi flushed and desperate and entirely focused on him. God, it felt good to put the brat in his place.

It felt really good, actually. Too good. Naegi’s whimpers of pleasure jolted right down to Togami’s cock, leaving him quivering with his own need. If this kept up…

Togami jerked back, scarlet flooding his face. What was wrong with him? He’d nearly brought himself to a climax just from giving Naegi a blowjob, before the other boy had even finished. Teenage over-eagerness was one thing, but that lack of self-control was ridiculous. Maybe this hadn’t been a good idea. Maybe he should go, just walk away before this got any worse.

And then Naegi knelt too, face to face with Togami, and put a hand on his shoulder. The contact sizzled, every nerve too sensitive, and it drew them closer like magnets.

Naegi was the one to close the last distance, leaning forward to kiss him again. Well, at least that meant he couldn’t stay away, that had to be a victory – so Togami allowed it, even tilting accommodatingly back when Naegi climbed forward for better access.
They toppled back onto the floor, Naegi straddling him and pressing him to the ground. Togami would have demanded to know what Naegi thought he was doing, but the other boy’s lips were too distracting for the question to stay in his head. This kiss grew sloppier than their first, Togami’s mouth still sore and tingling from being wrapped around Naegi, but for all that it was even more heated. Naegi trailed his mouth up Togami’s jaw in a line of pure fire, leaving him gasping. He tried to swallow back the sounds as Naegi did wonderful things to the sensitive skin below his ear, but how was he supposed to be quiet with such provocation?

But Naegi seemed to understand. Without stopping his maddening kisses, he pressed a hand to Togami’s mouth, fingers sliding between parted lips. Togami’s mouth closed around them automatically, leaving them slick and wet as he muffled his moans. He couldn’t understand it – he’d never been loud in bed before, but with Naegi on top of him he was losing the fight to be silent.

After a few moments of this, Naegi pulled his hand away and brought his mouth back to Togami’s. The other boy blushed pink with this kiss, even though it was less a hot tangle of mouths than the earlier kisses. This one was surprisingly firm, almost like the other boy was trying to stifle further sounds. Why would he –

Togami felt Naegi’s hand on his ass again, this time seeking to plunge inside – and the encouraging sound he released into Naegi’s mouth made him cringe. What was he thinking? This – he’d never done this, not from this side of things. He’d always thought he had no interest in it, that he didn’t want it, and he should tell Naegi so –

Naegi’s finger found his prostate, and any other thoughts evaporated from Togami’s mind. A deep, rough groan filled his ears, and he only knew distantly that he himself was making it. He didn’t care what he sounded like, not when it felt that good – he hadn’t known anything could feel so good –

– and then Naegi added another finger.

Words came tumbling out of him now, his lips moving against Naegi’s to vocalize what he’d never meant to say to anyone. “Please – please don’t stop –”

The voice sounded like his own, but those shuddering, broken words had to belong to someone else.

Naegi didn’t seem to grasp that, though. He dropped one last life-giving kiss to Togami’s lips, then pulled his fingers out and slid his cock inside, still slick from the earlier blowjob. A distant part of Togami’s mind registered that he was being fucked with his own spit, but as Naegi began to move, he couldn’t muster the strength to care. It felt too good, too right, and he was too far past the point when he could stop. A mess of half-garbled words and noises spilled from him, the sensations short-circuiting his brain into inarticulate mush.

Naegi’s hand slid between them, finding its way to Togami’s erection and stroking as he thrust. Togami’s world spun and narrowed, leaving him nothing but the pounding between his legs, the firm hand moving on his cock, the hot breath panting against his skin, the lips and teeth worrying at his collarbone hard enough to leave a mark.

The thought of bearing Naegi’s mark on his skin sent him over the edge, stars exploding white in his head and carrying him to a place beyond all rational thought. Through the haze, he felt Naegi gasp and surge against him, body shuddering with release. Feeling Naegi’s orgasm sent a wave of satisfaction through him, intensifying his own pleasure. He’d wanted this. He hadn’t even realized what he wanted, not really, but in the end it had been this.
Togami came down from the high of sex slowly, awareness of the rest of the world gradually returning to him. His skin felt scraped where his body had rubbed against the rough stone floor, and his spine ached from the awkward position. His mouth was nearly bruised and almost certainly a visible red. And his ass felt stretched and awkward, oversensitive and tingling from the unaccustomed use.

Naegi still lay on top of him, a warm weight he couldn’t quite bring himself to move – not when Naegi’s eyes were lidded with soft contentment and his head pillowed on Togami’s shoulder. Soft brown hair brushed against Togami’s cheek as the other boy nestled closer, a small smile on his lips. It was an appealing expression, one that urged Togami to kiss him again. But it wasn’t the expression he’d wanted to see. This wasn’t the look of a boy who’d been defeated and humiliated, who’d been forced to acknowledge Togami’s power over him.

But it wasn’t the look of a victor, either. By all his reckoning, Naegi had overcome him in every way he’d thought to destroy the other boy, reducing Togami to a creature of sensation and instinct – but Naegi didn’t seem to treat it as a triumph or to rub in the defeat. Instead, he seemed happy to lie there in Togami’s arms on the cold stone floor – like he thought this had meant more than a challenge between opponents. Like he hadn’t seen it as a battleground.

There was still a chance for victory in that, Togami realized. He could shove Naegi away, laugh, say something cruel – do everything he could to destroy the boy’s illusions about what had just occurred. If he made it clear that he had seen it all differently, he would still have won, would still have Naegi’s mind fixed on him as an all-consuming opponent. It would negate any weakness that he’d shown. It would be easy.

He looked down at Naegi watching him – and he pulled the boy closer, pressing a kiss to his forehead. Naegi’s face relaxed, a small measure of peace entering his expression for the first time since their opening ceremony.

Well. If that was the case, maybe Naegi wasn’t quite as unaffected by him as he’d thought. After all, he’d wanted Naegi to focus on him – and that was what he’d gotten. He just wasn’t sure what it was going to mean.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, I started a new multi-chapter fic the same day as National Novel Writing Month begins, and it just sort of turned into my writing project. Poor decision-making skills are a go! I’m planning to keep to a schedule of one new chapter a day, but if it has to slow down, I’ll post a comment saying so.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi should have remembered that nothing good can ever last at Hope's Peak.

Junko Enoshima yawned, eyes fluttering open. Had she fallen asleep in front of the monitors again? Crap, she really had to stop doing that. Who knew what her beloved classmates might be doing if she didn’t keep a close eye on them? Especially Kirigiri, that girl just would not stop nosing around. Maybe it was time for a third motive – that should distract her for a while.

But a quick scan of the monitors showed that Kirigiri seemed to be occupied with the laundry room, at least for now. Good, not like she could cause much trouble there. And Asahina and Ogami were wasting time in the locker rooms, no shock with that. She saw Yamada, Hagakure, Celeste, everything looked boring as always, it didn’t look like she’d missed much –

Her eyes fell on the library cameras and her jaw dropped. Naegi and Togami, of all people, were lying together on the archive floor, half-undressed and sticky and cuddling.

“What the freaking hell did I sleep through?”

A quick scramble of the replay function, and Junko saw exactly what she’d missed. Holy hell, she hadn’t thought Naegi had it in him. It really was too bad Mukuro wasn’t around to check it out.

Of course, if Mukuro was around, Junko would have been able to rest properly and nip this in the bud. A little sex appeal might draw in the viewers, but she wasn’t running a porn studio! The airways had to be kept clean so that people of all ages could enjoy her despair-inducing programming.

She headed into the Monokuma control room and found the switch for the archives.

“Upupupupu…”

She cackled as Naegi and Togami screamed.

Fukawa wandered along the second floor hallway, frowning as she considered possibilities. Her White Knight had managed to evade her earlier today, and she’d been scouring the school for him ever since. No one had seen him – or at least, no one would admit to it – and she was starting to suspect he might have returned to the library after she’d abandoned it as empty earlier that afternoon. It would be a clever strategy, definitely worthy of her White Knight. Surely he’d be pleased if she managed to unravel the tricky riddles he’d left for her!

She’d just turned the corner when twin screams echoed through the halls – and one was in her White Knight’s voice! What could make her poised and icy beloved raise his voice like that? Had someone tried to attack him?

She broke into a sprint. Not that she really believed anyone else could take down her brilliant knight, but if they tried – if they dared –
Her hand went to the scissors Jill kept hidden beneath her long skirt.

She burst into the library just as Togami and Naegi came tumbling out of the archive, Monokuma laughing behind them. They looked messy, disheveled, like something really had occurred.

“Y-y-you!” Fukawa pointed furiously at Naegi, who took a startled step back. “What did you do to my White Knight?”

“N-nothing!” Naegi turned red, a sure sign of a liar. And the stuttering – was he trying to mock her?

“You d-don’t fool me!” she snarled. “The innocent act was all just a f-façade, wasn’t it? You’ve been s-secretly plotting this the entire time!”

“No! I wasn’t plotting anything!”

“Oh, really? Then why was my White Knight screaming? Are you saying you didn’t do anything to make him scream?”

“Well – I mean, that is –” Naegi’s mouth opened and closed a few times.

“I knew it!” She advanced on the boy. “So what was it? A knife, to slit open his throat and stain the world s-scarlet with his blood? A bat to crack his skull open and send his brains splattering across the floor? Or was it p-poison, to leave him unwounded in death?” Her hands clasped together at the thought of her knight’s body collapsing to the floor in the throes of a vile poison. “And then I could s-suck the venom from him and save his life, taking the filth directly from his body into my own mouth, swallowing it to preserve him from harm!” The thought made her groan with excitement.

“Um.” Naegi had a very uncomfortable look on his face. “You – wait. You think I tried to kill him?” He shook his head hastily, waving his hands. “No – no, that’s not –”

“That’s exactly what happened.”

Fukawa looked over at Togami, who’d crossed his arms and was staring icily at them. “It – it is? Really?”

“No –”

“Yes.” Togami glared at Naegi. “He attacked me, I survived, that’s all.”

“Oh, that was all, was it?” Monokuma said, tilting his head questioningly. “So I saw him attacking you? Gee, I wonder what kind of weapon he was using. Where did it go, huh? Huh?”

Togami turned to glare at Monokuma. “You stay out of this.”

And as he turned, Fukawa saw it – at the base of his neck, only visible now because his shirt and jacket had been pulled askew, a dark red bruise in the shape of a mouth. A mouth that hadn’t been hers – that was the same size as –

She spun to stare at Naegi. Yes – she hadn’t seen it before, but yes, his mouth was dark from pressure, his hair in disarray like there had been hands running wild through it, and his pants were – still unzipped –

“You!” The words caught in her throat. “You – and my White Knight, you were –” Her eyes went to the archive door. “You were in there – where anyone could have seen you? Where I could have
opened the door and found you naked and entwined, too consumed by illicit passions to notice, ignoring me as you continued to satisfy your depraved urges –”

“Stop talking.”

Her knight might be glaring at her now, but there was an edge of pink to his face. So that meant it was true – and he was thinking about it, about what could have happened. Her breathing quickened as the images passed before her eyes – her White Knight overcome by a filthy lust, pinning Naegi to the wall as the smaller boy whimpered and begged – and then he would look over to the open door and see her, he’d notice her watching and smile – he’d tell her to stay, allow her a glimpse of the look on his face as he buried himself in Naegi –

No, that wasn’t right. She had spent hours gazing longingly at her White Knight, and she knew every detail of his posture. And right now, from the way he was standing –

The images reversed themselves before her eyes. She saw herself opening the archive door to find her precious White Knight on his hands and knees, face screwed up in a perverse combination of pain and pleasure as Naegi forced himself between his legs. Her knight would moan in unwilling ecstasy as he looked up at her watching, not sure if he wanted to beg to be saved or to beg for more –

The fantasy was too much for her. Fukawa felt her blood rushing dizzily to her head as she collapsed. The last thing she heard before the world went dark around her was her White Knight snarling, “Run!”

Junko collapsed back into her chair, laughing madly, as the two boys bolted out of the library, leaving the unconscious Fukawa behind. “Abandoning a girl in distress? How cruel!”

The boys had only just made it out in time before the writer bounced back to her feet with the wild red eyes of her alter ego. “Huh? What the hell made Gloomy lose it in here? Did I miss a corpse? Gyahahaha!”

Junko grinned, sending Monokuma towards the girl. “Too bad, nothing so exciting as corpses in here today. Just a certain someone hiding from you.”

“Oh?” Genocide Jill’s face predictably lit up at the implication that Togami had been around. “My White Knight was here? Where did he go?”

“Just down the stairs a few seconds ago. You should be able to catch up with him if you hurry. Upupupupupupu…”

Junko kept laughing even after Genocide Jill tore out of the room after the boys. She’d been planning to offer money for her next motive – but this was so much better. It might finally knock the serial killer off the non-killing wagon, or maybe drive dirty-minded Fukawa to snap. Or better still, Togami was barely one little push away from a murder himself – maybe this could twist around to give him the incentive he needed to stop overthinking it.

She could hardly wait to find out which way this would end. No matter who lost it first, the despair from the resulting class trial would be magnificent.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Naegi has to admit, he's not really sure what just happened.

Naegi had half-expected Togami to follow into his dorm room as they fled from Jill, but he was clearly well practiced in getting back to his dorm room without looking like he was running. The heir had locked himself in his own room before Naegi had made it to his door, so Naegi shrugged and got himself safely into his own room too. It was close enough to curfew, after all – he might as well avoid Jill until morning by going to bed a little early. He didn’t want to think about what the serial killer might do to someone who had laid hands on her White Knight.

And not just hands, either. Naegi flushed at the memory of what he’d done. What had come over him? Sure, he’d been noticing how attractive Togami was more and more frequently, and he’d definitely been trying to spend more time with the heir – but that was just because he wanted to understand Togami better. Togami was an undeniable force during the class trials, and Naegi had wanted to know how his mind worked, why he thought his actions were a good idea. And while Naegi hadn’t liked the actions themselves, he had to admire the conviction that drove Togami to them. But that didn’t all add up to a crush or anything, did it?

Well, maybe it did. He must have been pretty obvious about it, if Togami had thought it would be okay to kiss him without so much as hinting about it beforehand.

Of course, it had been okay – more than okay! It had been amazing. That first kiss had been unlike any other Naegi had experienced, electrifying and addictive. He’d thought he’d be happy to kiss Togami forever – right up until Togami had taken things a step further.

That was the point when things had gotten out of control, Naegi thought – the point when Togami had, without any prior discussion, decided to get on his knees and suck Naegi off. Naegi had to admit that he’d daydreamed about it once or twice, lying alone in his bed at night, but he’d never actually considered the possibility. So the stark reality of Togami’s mouth on his cock, the wet heat of his lips and tongue, had entirely blanked out his mind. That was the only explanation Naegi could think of.

Because what else could have made him respond to Togami the way he had? Togami had stopped suddenly, jerking back with as little warning as when he’d started, leaving Naegi boneless against the door, confused and gasping. He had wanted to protest, to beg the other boy to resume – but the look of sheer mortification on Togami’s face had given him pause. He hadn’t been entirely sure why Togami was suddenly embarrassed, but he hadn’t liked it. He’d just wanted to soothe the nervous feelings away. That’s all he’d meant to do when he’d knelt to kiss the other boy.

And then all the rest had just happened, taking Naegi by surprise as much as Togami. He hadn’t even realized he knew how to do any of that. It had been instinctive, his body knowing how to act without his mind consciously telling it what to do. Maybe that was the result of watching way too much porn or something? That didn’t seem likely, but it was the only explanation he could think of for how he’d gone from an awkward virgin to fucking Togami like he’d done it a thousand times.

And if Togami’s reactions had been anything to judge by, Naegi had apparently done a pretty good
job of it. He had to grin a little to himself at that. Togami had been a mess by the end, and it had
felt good – really good – to know he’d caused that loss of composure. Not that he ever would have
tried to force such a reaction on the heir – he’d paid close attention to the other boy’s words and
reactions, trying to make sure it really was okay to do what he’d wanted. But at every turn Togami
had been willing and responsive, gasping out encouragements before Naegi could even ask for
permission. And at the end, when Naegi would have checked a final time before actually entering
Togami, the blonde had begged before losing the ability to say coherent words.

Naegi would hold tight to that memory, especially the next time Togami decided to act superior
about something. Whatever else the heir might say or do, Naegi would always know he’d been able
to make the other boy fall apart. And Togami would know it too.

Which was probably at least part of why Togami had tried to claim that Naegi had attacked him.
Naegi frowned about that. He could understand not wanting to tell Fukawa all the details, but there
must have been a better way to avoid it than that. What if she’d believed him? Fortunately, it didn’t
seem like she had – she’d been able to spot the truth pretty quickly. Naegi sighed. He hoped she
wasn’t too disappointed by it – and that her alter ego didn’t take it as a trigger to run wild.

Of course, that brought up the next question for him – what was he supposed to do now? He
wasn’t sure what happened after this. He would have been content to lay in Togami’s arms for
quite a while longer, and he assumed that some kind of conversation would have happened at some
point if they’d been left to their own devices there. But they’d been forced to go their separate ways
without discussing anything, meaning – what?

Were they dating now? Naegi found he rather liked that idea, even though it wasn’t like they could
really date trapped here in Hope’s Peak. And he didn’t know what Togami thought of the idea,
either. It was possible that Togami had only been interested in the physical, not any kind of
relationship. But if that was the case, would he want to do it again?

Naegi really liked that idea. He especially wished he’d gotten the chance to get Togami’s shirt off,
as well as his pants, and to see the heir entirely naked in his bed. Or maybe in the shower. Against
the wall. Bent over the table. His imagination supplied him with a wide variety of vivid
possibilities.

He shook his head to clear it. He shouldn’t focus on things like that, not when he didn’t know what
Togami would want yet. He’d just have to track the heir down tomorrow and talk to him about it.

Of course, the next day, Naegi quickly realized that the problem with that plan was that he actually
had to be able to find Togami. Faced with Fukawa’s stalking, the heir had quickly mastered the art
of remaining hidden unless he wanted to be found – and now it seemed that he didn’t want Naegi to
be able to find him.

That actually suggested that all those times Naegi had hunted Togami down in the library to chat,
the other boy had let Naegi find him, no matter how annoyed he’d acted. There was some comfort
in that, Naegi supposed – though it was hard to remember that when he’d scoured the entire school
again without seeing a trace of Togami. He frowned, scowling at the cafeteria like it was the
room’s fault Togami wasn’t in it.

“What are you doing?”

Naegi turned around to see Kirigiri watching him from the laundry room doorway with a quizzical
look on her face.

“I was looking for Togami.”
A faint grimace crossed her usually blank face. “Why?”


Kirisu gave him a long look. “I see.”

She probably did – she seemed like she saw everything sometimes. Naegi’s blush got worse.

She tapped her fingers on her crossed arms, then said, “I know it isn’t my business to tell you who to spend time with, but have you considered that – that talking to Togami might not be a very good idea?”

Naegi wasn’t entirely sure what she meant by that. “Well – we did actually talk earlier. In the library. And I thought we should – uh – talk more about it?”

Kirisu stared at him, eyebrows knit together like he was a difficult knot she was trying to untangle. “Are you saying that you and Togami already –”

“It – it wasn’t – I mean –” Naegi fell silent. After all, he couldn’t really claim it wasn’t what she was thinking, could he?

“I see.” Kirisu seemed to be staring right through him, her look was so intense. “Well. If you’re determined, I won’t try to stop you – but I would like to make a request.”

“Okay,” Naegi said, puzzled.

“If you do manage to get him alone, I’d like you to make a point of mentioning this conversation to him,” Kirisu said. “Especially if things – hmm. If they don’t go the way you’re hoping.”

“What?” Naegi blinked. He hadn’t really been sure what to expect of her, but that seemed like a weird thing for her to ask.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d humor me,” she said, giving him a small smile. “I really do wish you the best of luck, Naegi.”

“Thanks?”

“And I’ll be looking for you at breakfast tomorrow. Don’t disappoint me.” Kirisu gave him another odd look, then went back to her seat at the laundry room table, giving Naegi the distinct impression that they’d been having two very different conversations.

In the end, he decided that maybe Kirisu had a point – maybe talking to Togami right at this moment wasn’t the best option. Maybe he should give the other boy time to think, since he obviously seemed to want it. He could try to talk to Togami again when the heir was more open to being found.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Togami regains control of his mind after his brief fit of insanity.

Togami was fairly certain he’d lost his mind. Being locked in Hope’s Peak had clearly unhinged him. That was the only explanation he could think of for his actions the previous day. He’d tried to calm himself down by concentrating on a book, tucked in the back corner of the physics lab where the air purifier would block him from view, but the words kept swimming out of focus as he flashed back to that moment in the archive.

Makoto Naegi? What had he been thinking? It wasn’t even as though he could blame it on hormones or thinking with his dick, not when he’d been with someone as average and unextraordinary as Naegi. Boys like him came crawling out of the woodwork at any common high school, and none of them had ever been worth a passing glance.

Of course, none of them could win a vicious argument under life-and-death pressure, either. Naegi obviously had hidden depths, which was why Togami had let the boy spend time with him. Something about Naegi wasn’t as ordinary as he seemed, and Togami had wanted to understand what that was. That kind of contradiction could cause problems, especially in a situation like this one.

But none of that explained why he’d dragged Naegi into the archive to kiss him, or how the kiss had led to a wild mess of wanting that had consumed him so thoroughly. He had always prided himself on control, on icy logic and measured reactions. He’d thought he knew what his own response would be to any situation, but yesterday had proved him wrong.

And that wasn’t even the worst of it. He could almost – almost – accept that he found Naegi attractive enough for sex, if it hadn’t been for what had happened afterwards. Awash with endorphins and dizzy from pleasure, he’d chosen to hold Naegi close and kiss him with what he could only call affection. That wasn’t the dispassionate dismissal he should have used if he’d only wanted to satisfy a physical need – that had been the soft embrace of a lover.

It would have been understandable if he’d done it as some kind of trick, a way to lull Naegi into a false sense of trust in him – but he knew that such thoughts hadn’t entered his head. He’d wanted to wrap his arms around Naegi and feel the boy curl into him, to let his body give voice to some part of the contentment he’d felt.

And that was dangerous. Didn’t he know the situation here, with murder lingering in the air like a promise? Hadn’t he been the one to say that being around the others would only create the potential for disaster? Any connection to another person created a vulnerability that could be exploited.

A connection like the one he and Naegi had just forged.

He could feel it settling on him like a noose around his neck, the start of a force that could drag him to his doom. It could mean an opening for another killer to exploit, an opportunity for betrayal, or, worst of all, a moment of hesitation on his own part.
Would he still be able to commit a murder, knowing that successfully winning the game would lead to Naegi’s death? He thought he still could – but now there was a hint of doubt, where previously there’d been only certainty.

He slammed his book down, frustration exploding through him. Doubt? Uncertainty? Where had those thoughts even come from? If there was one thing he’d learned from winning his position as the Togami heir, it was that victory did not allow room for doubt.

He had to stop this connection, before it got any stronger. It was still new and weak now, so it didn’t fully have its hooks in him yet. If he could break the fragile beginnings of this bond, he’d have no reason left to hesitate when the time came for him to make his move in the game.

In most situations, he would have assumed that he’d need nothing more than his own force of will to cut off the connection on his own end. However, based on the intensity of his response to Naegi, he couldn’t trust himself to maintain the icy distance necessary to achieve that.

No, he would have to arrange the situation to leave himself no quarter, no hope of respite. If he really meant to win the killing game, he had to destroy any feelings Naegi had for him.

And so, after the final Monokuma announcement sounded for the night, he slipped silently through the dark dormitory halls and pressed the doorbell outside Naegi’s room.

Naegi opened the door, and the way his face brightened made Togami’s heart clench. He’d been the cause of the happiness on Naegi’s face, and he didn’t want to wipe it away.

Which only made it more imperative that he do so.

“We need to talk,” Togami said, letting the door lock behind him as he entered Naegi’s room.
Naegi finally gets a chance to talk to Togami, but they have different ideas about the conversation they need to have.

The biggest problem with the dorm room was its distinct lack of seating. Naegi hadn’t been able to figure out why he’d been given a table and desk, but no chairs. It seemed like a strange distribution of furniture.

Togami clearly noticed it too, pausing for a long moment at the bookcase as he surveyed the lack of options. If he wanted to talk, like he’d said he did, there was really only one choice.

He strode over and sat at the foot of the bed, as poised as if it were a throne. Naegi had to suppress a slightly envious sigh at the other boy’s complete confidence. He was nowhere near as assured, feeling a blush color his cheeks as he sat on the bed beside Togami. He had to struggle not to think about how he’d imagined Togami here, the daydreams so vivid they left ghostly sensations shivering on his skin.

“So what did you want to talk about?” Naegi asked to distract himself, when Togami didn’t seem to want to start the conversation.

Togami glanced over at him, pressure sizzling in the air between them as their gazes met – and then Togami’s eyes slid past him to the wall beyond, his face morphing into a scowl.

“I want to be sure that you don’t get any ideas about the mistake that happened yesterday.”

The bottom of Naegi’s chest plummeted down, leaving a hollow space where his heart hung frozen mid-beat. That – that was not what he’d thought Togami had come to say.

Had he really misjudged that badly? He’d be the first to admit he couldn’t always read people’s intentions, but he’d honestly thought there had been something between the two of them, something more than just attraction. Had it all been wishful thinking?

It must have been. There was no trace of the warmth he’d thought he’d seen yesterday in the icy mask of the boy beside him now. No wonder Togami had been avoiding him all day.

“Ohay.” Naegi hoped his voice didn’t sound as forlorn to Togami as it did in his own ears. “You don’t want it to lead to anything. I understand.”

“Lead to anything?” Togami’s scornful laugh sliced through Naegi like a knife. “I would prefer not to acknowledge that it happened at all.”

The hurt shouldn’t have been unexpected. Naegi knew what Togami was like. He should have seen this coming, shouldn’t have been shocked, and the tears prickling at the edges of his eyes had no business being there.

“I understand,” Naegi repeated, proud that he managed to say it without his voice cracking. “You don’t have to say it like that.”
“I want to be sure you haven’t gotten it in your head that this is some grand romance, and that you don’t try to gossip about it with your little friends.” The acid in Togami’s words could bite through solid steel.

“Well, I get it. And I won’t tell anyone.”

“Good.” An extra edge of cruelty curled onto Togami’s lips. “Maybe it will free up enough of your brainpower for you to be serious and think about where you are.”

Naegi frowned. He didn’t think Togami could mean anything as obvious as his room or Hope’s Peak. “What, you mean the killing game?”

“What else? In case you’ve forgotten, the game can only have one winner. The rest of you won’t make it out alive.”

That should have cut deeper than ever, hearing someone he liked speak so callously of letting all their friends die – but past that, anger came bubbling up, clearing a path through the hurt in his head for thoughts to flow more sensibly.

“I don’t believe that,” Naegi said. “I think there’s a way we can all make it out alive. We just have to trust each other and keep our faith in our friends, and no one else will have to die.”

“Really? And how did that work out in the last two trials?” Togami countered. “Remind me what your trust in Maizono got you.”

Naegi glared at him. “Leave her out of this.”

“Why should I? She understood. She might not have played the game well, but she knew she was a player in it.”

“She didn’t have to be. None of us have to be,” Naegi insisted, wishing he knew how to make Togami see it. “There’ll be a way out for us, if we just work together and refuse to give in.”

“That’s the sort of thinking that will get you killed,” Togami said.

“Well, you’re the one who said the rest of us wouldn’t make it out alive,” Naegi said, throwing Togami’s words back in his face like they were arguing in a trial.

Togami’s lips tightened. “You won’t. I’m going to win this game, and no meaningless connection is going to stand in my way.”

Connection? That sounded like an odd word for Togami to choose. Naegi frowned, ideas beginning to spin into new configurations in his head as he considered it.

“So that’s why you ignored me all day and came here tonight?”

“Obviously.”

Naegi eyed him for a moment to make sure, then let the contradiction fly. “But if it’s meaningless, why do you care if I tell anyone?”

“I – what?” Togami blinked, mask of composure ruffled for an instant.

“If it’s meaningless, other people knowing wouldn’t matter,” Naegi said. “Not if you think we’re all going to end up dead. Actually, if everyone knew, they’d think you had a weakness when you really didn’t. You’d be in a much better position then – if it really were meaningless.”
The barest hint of a flinch crossed Togami’s face. “Your interpretation is entirely wrong –”

“No. It isn’t.” Naegi was sure of it now. “You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by letting people believe something that isn’t true. The only way it would make sense for you to come here after curfew and tell me to keep everything a secret is if you had something to hide.” Naegi couldn’t help smiling a little. “You do feel a connection to me, and it isn’t meaningless.”

He could see it shake Togami, just like he’d been shaken in the second trial. Satisfaction thrummed through Naegi at that, seeing the cracks in the heir’s perfect poise.

Of course, it might not have been the best idea to do that now. He’d automatically fallen into the logical patterns he used in the trials, but those weren’t really appropriate for normal conversations. Arguing couldn’t be a very good way to get Togami to admit to feeling a connection – it would probably just annoy him. Someone so tightly controlled probably hated to have another person argue him into a corner. He could feel the weight of Togami’s eyes focusing in on him, sparking with unreadable emotion, probably preparing to storm out –

Togami lunged forward and crushed his mouth to Naegi’s. The force of it knocked Naegi onto his back, and Togami fell on top of him, not giving Naegi a chance to figure out what was happening. He couldn’t help but kiss back under the fevered assault, as impatient hands tried to force his jacket off his shoulders.

Well, if that was what they were doing, Naegi wasn’t going to be the only one who had clothes removed. He managed to stop Togami’s infuriating hands long enough to remove his tailored jacket, though made Togami’s throat vibrate with an irritated growl. That just left the weird crossed suspenders that Togami wore fastened across his chest. Naegi would have been hard-pressed to work out how to unfasten those things even without Togami’s mouth distracting him.

As it was, it took far too long for him to realize that the trick was to undo the central button holding the suspenders in place, and then unhook the clips at the back. Naegi tossed the two straps aside in relief, and then moved on to trying to unbutton Togami’s shirt. He’d been imagining what it would be like to have every bit of clothing off the other boy, and whatever else was going on, he wasn’t about to miss this chance. Togami seemed to have the same idea, unzipping Naegi’s hoodie and flinging it across the room like it personally offended him.

As much as Naegi had wanted to see this, he found his cheeks going red when he realized they were both naked. Togami really did look amazing, all long expanses of lean muscle and smooth skin. Naegi wasn’t exactly uncomfortable with his appearance, but he wasn’t the type people fantasized about, either. Togami had definitely mentioned that when listing all his mediocre points. He didn’t have anything to say on that score now, though, bearing down on Naegi like an oncoming missile. His hands blistered against Naegi’s skin like piles of smoldering coals, mouth searing his with furious challenge.

And it wasn’t what Naegi had wanted at all. Anger had gotten tangled up in it, anger and pain and all the horrible things Togami had said without taking back. The argument had morphed from words into something physical, and as good as it felt, Naegi couldn’t ignore the ugliness at the core of it.

So he wasn’t entirely surprised when Togami pressed his arms to the mattress and hissed into his ear, “You know I could kill you now.”

It should have been terrifying, hearing that phrase while vulnerable – but Naegi just felt irritated, and a little sad. “Seriously?”
Togami smirked down at him. “I told you, I’m not going to let anything distract me –”

“Not that. You seriously expect me to believe you’d do this now?” Naegi huffed out a sigh. “Fukawa knows what happened yesterday, and I’m pretty sure Kirigiri figured it out too. You’d have to have a really good explanation for why you shouldn’t be the first suspect.”

Togami’s grip went slack as Naegi’s words struck him, and Naegi took the opportunity to shake his hands free and wriggle out from under the larger boy. “That wouldn’t make you less dead.”

Naegi rolled his eyes. “Really? And what were you planning to use? I know you haven’t got any weapons on you now, so – what, you were going to strangle me? You’d leave bruises on my neck in the shape of your hands. Kirigiri wouldn’t even need to do an autopsy to work that one out. And that’s assuming I’d have stayed still and let you. You were literally on top of me – all I’d have to do is knee you in the balls.”

The onslaught of logic made Togami wince, but though he opened his mouth, no words came out. He just stared at Naegi like he’d never seen anything like him.

Naegi sighed again. “You know, you didn’t have to say that. If you’re really not interested, you could have just said you wanted to stop. It would be way more believable than the idea that you would try to kill someone with a stupid plan.”

“I didn’t want to.” Pink stained Togami’s cheeks as the words slipped out, that odd, indefinable look on his face growing more intense. Was he embarrassed at having the holes in his actions pointed out to him? Or did he just hate it that much that Naegi had the nerve to argue with him?

It didn’t matter. Naegi shook his head. “Yeah, I figured out that you didn’t want to have sex with me again, the death threat made that pretty clear –”

“Not that –” Togami clamped his mouth shut, pink blush blazing to a full scarlet.

Not that? What was that supposed to mean? Not what? What else was there that he hadn’t wanted to do? There were really only two possibilities that Naegi could think of.

“You didn’t want to kill me?” Naegi asked, frowning. “Or you didn’t want to stop?”

Togami didn’t move except for a faint twitch in his face, like he was trying to reassemble his cold mask but couldn’t quite work out how to do it.

It made a strange sort of sense, if Naegi tried to think about it from the other boy’s point of view. Togami’s touches had felt like the continuation of their argument, not like pleasure for its own sake, and that death threat could have been an attempt to use a power play to make a point. If there was one thing Naegi knew about Togami, it was that he hated losing – that he didn’t even accept it was possible for him to lose. So of course he’d be bothered by the way that Naegi had out-argued him, in that moment right before Togami had kissed him.

That had been kind of weird timing, now that Naegi thought about it.

And he’d just done it again, hadn’t he? He’d stabbed Togami through with unassailable logic, just like during the trials – except that these should have been even worse, since they were about Togami himself instead of just his arguments about another person. He would have expected Togami to get mad and storm out, not stay in Naegi’s bed, staring at him like he couldn’t tear his eyes away. He didn’t look like he was about to leave, either, not lying there with his face flushed and his breath too fast and –
Oh. It clicked in Naegi’s mind, then, everything coming together at last. Togami might act like he hated having Naegi outthink him, but apparently part of him didn’t hate it at all.

Part of Naegi really wanted to pretend nothing had happened, to lean forward and kiss the heir again, ignoring Togami’s words. He was certain Togami wouldn’t object, that they could carry on and try out some of the fantasies that had been running through his head all day. He really wanted that – couldn’t stand the thought of not having it, not when the other boy was so close.

But he didn’t want what they’d had a moment ago, either, full of an empty fire that would leave nothing but sordid ashes in its wake. It would only be worse if he let things go, leaving that death threat lingering between them to fester in the wounds their argument had left. If Naegi threw himself back into Togami’s arms now, no matter how good his intentions might be, he knew that it could only end badly. They had to deal with it, had to bleed out the poison, if there was going to be any path forward.

“I know you didn’t really want to kill me.”

And that was true. Naegi hadn’t actually believed for a second that Togami planned to murder him during sex. If he’d thought Togami was capable of that, he wouldn’t have wanted to touch the other boy in the first place. But that wasn’t the important question.

“Did you think you wanted to kill me?”

Togami glared at Naegi. “I wanted to win this game. Haven’t I been saying so from the start?”

Naegi shrugged. “It’s easy to say something you don’t mean. And I know you didn’t.”

“Oh? And what makes you so sure?”

A thousand little things said so, none of which Naegi could name with any precision. The way Togami tilted his head, the tone of his voice, the look in his eye, all the tiny parts that made up the single picture Naegi could interpret but not explain. There was only one way he knew how to say it.

“Because I trust you not to.”

Togami stared at him in disbelief. “You – trust me? And that’s all the reason you have?” He shook his head, lip curling with familiar disdain. “I expected better of you.”

“You trust me too, though,” Naegi said, before Togami could move away. “Or you wouldn’t be here at all.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “I don’t trust you,” he said. “I just know you aren’t capable of –”

He stopped short, and Naegi smiled.

“I don’t trust you,” Togami repeated, but this time doubt lay underneath his words.

And as he said it, an idea occurred to Naegi, born from the same set of instincts he’d used in the archive the previous day.

“That’s okay,” Naegi said, reaching down to the floor beside the bed to scoop up Togami’s discarded suspenders. “I’ll prove it to you.”

He leaned forward and clipped one suspender to the corner of the bed.

“What are you doing?” Togami demanded as Naegi seized his hand.
“Don’t move.” Naegi wrapped the edge of the strap around his writ.

Togami stared at his hand in disbelief. “Is this some kind of joke?”

“No.” Naegi began hooking the other strap to the opposite corner of the bed.

Togami tugged at his wrist and rolled his eyes. “This wouldn’t hold a fly. You’ve only clipped it down, I could pull it off –”

“You won’t,” Naegi interrupted. “Unless you want to leave.”

Togami stiffened, and for a moment Naegi thought he was considering doing just that. Maybe he’d misjudged things, maybe he really had been imagining the connection he’d thought they could share. But on the other hand –

“I know that if you really wanted to leave, you’d have done it already,” Naegi added, driving the point home as thoroughly as he could.

Togami’s breath shook a little as Naegi took away one of his arguments again – and he raised his wrist for Naegi to tie in place.

“And what am I supposed to do now?” Togami’s voice was a little deeper as he watched Naegi, pupils dilated.

Naegi settled himself on top of the heir, noting the cracks in the other boy’s attempt at disinterest. He leaned forward until his breath touched Togami’s face as he whispered, “Trust me.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Togami lets Naegi tie him to the bed.

Togami had regretted the death threat as soon as he’d spoken it. What purpose could a threat like that even serve? If he’d meant it, he should have done it without warning the other boy. If he hadn’t, he should have stayed quiet and let events take their course. He’d had Naegi naked beneath him, there should have been hundreds of other ways he could have made his point.

But there had been something wrong in the way they moved against one another. They argued so easily, it should have made sense for the angry words to turn into violent passion. He recognized the pattern, felt how it attracted the darker parts of his soul. It had driven him to kiss Naegi again, harsh and fierce – but while Naegi had kissed back, it hadn’t matched his vicious intent.

It had been impossible, intolerable that Naegi wouldn’t share his focus at a moment like that. He’d needed Naegi’s attention on him, matching the feelings simmering just below his skin, and he’d said the first thing he could think of to try to make it occur.

And now Naegi was – what, annoyed about it? Did he intend to take some kind of petty revenge? Togami didn’t see what Naegi thought he’d accomplish by binding his wrists. All Naegi was doing was limiting Togami’s ability to respond to him – that couldn’t be very interesting.

He flexed his wrists, and felt the bindings press against him in response. The fabric wrapped securely around his wrists where Naegi had tied it in place, but the clips attaching the straps to the bed would come off with only a moment’s pressure from him. That seemed like the opposite of what Naegi would need, if he intended to try and exact some kind of revenge.

Togami didn’t understand what Naegi was trying to do, and the uncertainty of it twisted in the pit of his stomach. That was all he felt – confused. There was no other reason for his stomach to flip and curl with nerves, not when he could stop this whenever he liked.

He looked up at Naegi, settled on top of him. Trust me – that was what the boy had whispered in his ear, but the words didn’t make sense. This had to be some kind of power game, one he shouldn’t be allowing. He should snap the clips off and –

Naegi leaned down and pressed his mouth to the hollow of Togami’s throat, and Togami forgot what the rest of his thought would have been. Whatever else Naegi was trying to accomplish, he still knew exactly the pressure of lips, the slide of tongue to make Togami shudder from it.

Heat pooled along his body everywhere Naegi lay against him, and under that warmth, some of the angry tension began to melt away. Naegi’s mouth wandered lower, tracing a line of kisses along Togami’s bare chest, until he found the nipple and closed his mouth over it.

Togami couldn’t stop his gasp as Naegi’s tongue swirled over the stiff peak. It felt amazing, too good to be allowed, not when Naegi hardly looked bothered at all. Togami’s hands twitched for freedom, aching to feel Naegi’s skin in turn, to make him equally vulnerable with pleasure.
But if he tried, Naegi would stop.

Or would he? Maybe he’d just wanted to see if Togami would *let* him fasten the straps in place. He wouldn’t really stop if Togami tried to touch him in return, would he? No, of course not. There wasn’t a teenage boy in existence who would *really* object to being touched. He started to tug at the restraints.

A hand settled on his elbow, and Togami realized Naegi was looking at him again. The other boy didn’t say anything, just stared at Togami with an intensity he could feel on his skin. His nerve endings all seemed to sit up and quiver under the scrutiny, entirely attuned to the fact that for once, he had all of Naegi’s undivided attention.

And that attention said that breaking the restraints would lead to the exact consequences Naegi had promised.

Togami stilled, and let his wrists relax against the bed. His hands had clenched into fists without his realizing it, and he slowly forced his fingers to uncurl.

Naegi smiled, like he’d been given a gift. “Thank you,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to Togami’s chest just above his heart.

Something bloomed in his chest below Naegi’s lips, soft and warm like the first rays of sunrise. Desire was part of it, tangled up with other things he couldn’t name – a rich, heady desire that throbbed through his blood like alcohol. He could feel it intoxicating him, and the need for more was a physical ache.

And even as the desire made itself known, he couldn’t escape the awareness of the restraints on his wrists, his own unspoken promise not to take what he wanted. His hands shook, but he left them in place. What other choice did he have? He could only hope that Naegi wouldn’t torment him long.

But Naegi, to his surprise, didn’t choose to torture him at all. He began kissing Togami’s chest again, his lips both slaking the desire and intensifying it. His hands traced wild dances along Togami’s sides, wandering up to his shoulders and down to his thighs. It was everything Togami wanted, and Naegi gave it to him freely.

It was too much to be possible. Togami craned his neck to look at Naegi, searching desperately for some hint of malice, but the boy seemed perfectly content to continue kissing his way along Togami’s ribs. He showed no sign of the plans Togami had half-expected when he’d realized Naegi meant to tie him up. He’d thought this would be a power game, where Naegi would use his inflamed need as a hostage to extract some measure of humiliation from him.

But instead, Naegi offered him pleasure, as open and honest as everything he did. He had every opportunity to be cruel, even the knowledge that Togami wouldn’t actually leave if he chose to tease and torment – but instead, Naegi had chosen to be kind.

He could have handled the cruelty. He would have understood the thoughts behind it and been able to push them aside. But the kindness….

The kindness left him undone.

Every touch Naegi gave him, every brush of lips or stroke of skin, all of it spiraled through him, washing away his conscious thoughts in the rising tide of need. He could hardly name all the things he needed, but it didn’t matter, Naegi seemed to know them all before he could try to ask. It sent his world spinning off its axis, gravity thrown out of balance and all rules gone askew, and the only
things left to anchor him to reality were the straps tied around his wrists.

Gentle hands slid up his quivering shoulders, one curling flush against his neck and the other threading into his sweaty hair. He looked up into Naegi's eyes, the boy's thumb tracing the line of his jaw, and his lips parted almost of their own accord.

Naegi leaned down and kissed him, slow and deliberate and maddening. He didn't think he could take it any longer –

And then he didn't have to. Naegi shifted against him, and the motion aligned their hips and brought their cocks together. His whole body shuddered at the contact, and he couldn't help but arch up against Naegi in a blind search for more.

Naegi didn't deny him, moving again and again to keep the friction going. Their bodies rocked against one another, rising and falling like the flow of tides, moving in a harmony that went beyond the need for speech. Togami would have gasped, would have moaned, would have said things that would make him blush to recall later – but Naegi's kiss muffled it, protecting him even from his own embarrassment. He'd let Naegi shape this moment, and Naegi had chosen to form a space free of any possible hurt. The only thing between them was pleasure, willingly given and freely shared, multiplying every time they moved against each other.

Togami remembered what Naegi had said, after fastening the straps in place – the words that had started all of it. They echoed in his head again, promise and plea rolled up into one phrase.

*Trust me.*

That was all he could hear as the motion of their bodies finally took him too far – or maybe it was the words themselves that brought him to a climax, shattering through him in a burst of brilliant light.

*Trust me.*

Naegi rocked against him a moment longer before he lost control as well, collapsing against Togami's chest as he came. It left them tangled together, boneless and breathless and shaken with what they'd shared. Togami found himself gazing into Naegi's eyes as his mind returned from the white haze of sensation, and he realized they were both smiling.

*Trust me.*

He was in so much trouble. And the worst part was that he no longer wanted to set himself free.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Togami wakes up in Naegi’s bed.

Chapter Notes

I realized today that I had a minor continuity error in the earlier chapters about Kirigiri’s location at this point in the story. I’ve revised the relevant lines in chapters 2 and 3 accordingly.

Togami didn’t know where he was at first, when he woke up in a room that didn’t contain his own rich furnishings. Then the sensations of warmth and comfort coalesced into the feeling of a body pressed against his side, an arm curled around his chest, legs tangled with his own. He looked down at Naegi, sleeping in his arms, and his heart skipped at the peaceful smile on the other boy’s face.

He was in too deep now, and his attempt to stop it had only made things worse. It might have worked if he’d tried it sooner, or maybe he’d never had a chance at all. It didn’t matter in the end, because he’d finally caught up to the knowledge that Naegi had apparently had all along.

He couldn’t kill Naegi. And it wasn’t just an issue of direct murder – he didn’t have it in him to let the boy die even as an indirect cause of his actions. Not to put too fine a point on it, his hands had been tied.

So he wouldn’t be killing anyone. It was almost a relief to acknowledge that to himself, to let go of the contradiction that had been plaguing him since Naegi had sparked his interest when he spoke up in that first trial. He wouldn’t be the blackened who let the others die so he could win the game.

But he had no intention of letting himself be a victim, either. Not him or Naegi. An outcome in which either of them ended up dead would be – less than optimal. And Byakuya Togami never accepted anything but the best.

An outcome where they both survived. Could it be possible? The other students all kept chattering on about it, but they were stupid and blind with denial. They only thought it because they were too frightened to face the reality of the situation.

Except that Naegi had trusted him, had known him before he’d known himself. If Naegi had been right in this, maybe he knew what he was talking about with the rest of it, too. Maybe there could be hope.

Unfortunately, hope in this case probably involved working with the rest of the group again. Togami grimaced, but he didn’t really see a way around it. Any attempt to defy the mastermind’s plan would fail if everyone didn’t commit to it fully, he’d seen that from the start. All it would take was one person deciding to chance things alone, and any attempt at working as a group would fall
apart.

But that only made it all the more imperative that he be part of whatever idiocy the other students got up to. He had to know who would be most susceptible to the inevitable lure of betrayal. After all, he was sure that there was no way Naegi could be convinced to abandon the rest of his so-called friends. When someone snapped, Naegi would be in the line of fire.

That would be unacceptable. If Togami wasn’t going to kill Naegi, no one else would be allowed to do so either. He ran his fingers through the boy’s soft hair, then down to let them rest along his neck. Naegi’s pulse beat strong and sure beneath his fingertips. It should stay that way.

Naegi stirred beneath his touch, burrowing closer against him with a sleepy little noise of contentment, and the movement set something fizzing beneath Togami’s ribs. He’d never expected to have anything like this, and the thoughts it inspired were too much to take, warm and soft and sweet.

He needed to know that Naegi would feel the same, that the same sentimental nonsense would fill his head, and so he tilted Naegi’s head up towards his to kiss him awake. Whatever else might cross the other boy’s mind today, Togami would have the satisfaction of knowing that this would be the first thing Naegi had thought about.

Junko propped her head on one hand and watched as Naegi woke up to Togami’s kisses. She had to admit, she hadn’t really seen this coming. With the look on Togami’s face when he’d approached Naegi’s door the previous night, she’d thought for sure he’d finally had murder in his sights.

It really was a shame. Of course all her friends were precious and she shouldn’t choose favorites, but she’d been rooting for Togami. After all, wouldn’t it be perfect if the person with the least to go back to in the outside world sacrificed the most to return there?

But that seemed to be off the table now, with the besotted way he’d been watching Naegi sleep. Of all the emotional ties that she’d thought might echo back from the memory erasure and cause problems, this had barely made her list. After all, it had taken Togami months to work out that he’d had a crush back when they’d been classmates. Who knew he’d manage to get his act together quicker this time around?

He’d certainly figured it out now, though. Ugh, pressing kisses down Naegi’s neck and running fingers through his sleep-mussed hair – it was all so – so –

So cute! Junko clasped her hands to her chest as a wave of glee rose in her. Who wouldn’t be pleased to see two of her darling friends so very happy together? She just loved them so much that she couldn’t keep their adorable new relationship all to herself.

She had to share it.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Togami’s morning goes downhill after he leaves Naegi’s room.

Togami left Naegi’s room before the morning Monokuma announcement could sound, returning across the hall to his own room. Staying in Naegi’s bed had been an attractive thought, but that would have meant leaving at some point during the day when the others were roaming around freely. Besides, he needed fresh clothes, after his had been crumpled on Naegi’s floor all night. He could feel the wrinkles irritating his skin.

The announcement came just as he closed his dorm room door behind him. Good, that meant the water would be back on.

Standing under the shower, letting water pour over him, Togami took the opportunity to check his body for marks. He hadn’t wanted to do it in front of Naegi – that would have felt too much like an admission of weakness, and who knew how the other boy would react to it. Togami wasn’t sure if it would have been worse if Naegi had been smug or apologetic, but he knew he didn’t want to see either.

He placed a hand over the bruise on his collarbone from the archive, knowing it was there even though he couldn’t see it. It would be fading now, and fortunately it would be easily hidden beneath his shirt in any case. He didn’t much care for the idea of the whole group knowing Naegi’s mark lingered on his neck. Bad enough Fukawa had seen it.

There was another mark on his stomach, one he hadn’t realized would remain. He touched the stark red marring his skin, remembering Naegi’s mouth moving on his body. This one, even more so than the other, was a private memento of what they’d shared, even clearer than if Naegi had drawn a heart on his skin. However bold it might look against his pale skin, no one else would see what it declared. It was a message from Naegi to him, and it pleased some part of him to know that this was something the rest of the world wouldn’t get to share. It was his.

Finally, a little nervous about what he would see, Togami let himself examine his wrists. He traced a finger over his skin where the restraint had been tied last night. It wasn’t obvious, but looking closely, he could detect a faint pink indentation circling each wrist like matching bracelets. It looked as though it would fade by the end of the day, though, so that didn’t seem like anything to worry about. He would just need to be careful not to let his sleeves ride up his arms if there were other people around.

Clean and satisfied that he hadn’t been visibly marked, Togami stepped out of the shower and headed over to select a new outfit for the day. The neatly-buttoned shirt, the tailored slacks, and –

He flushed as he picked up a new pair of suspenders. They hung innocuously in his hands, mere pieces of fabric, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the use Naegi had made of them the night before.

Slowly, clumsy in a way he would normally scorn, he slid the straps over his shoulders so that they crossed over his chest. His fingers stilled on the button that would hold them in place when he
remembered Naegi’s lips pressed to his skin just below it. He’d never been especially aware of the suspenders before, paying them no more attention than any other article of clothing, but now he couldn’t ignore the firm pressure of the straps wrapping around his torso.

He closed his eyes, taking a long breath to calm himself. These were just pieces of fabric, the same thing he wore every day. He refused to give in to weakness and take them off. He was not going to alter his outfit in an obvious way just because of a few vivid memories that wouldn’t stop replaying in his head. Even if no one else noticed, Naegi would — and he’d know why Togami couldn’t handle wearing the suspenders today.

No. Out of the question. Togami did his best to force the thoughts from his head, moving on with his preparations for the day. He fixed his hair, cleaned his glasses, and picked up yesterday’s clothing to move it to his laundry hamper.

His hands paused as yesterday’s suspenders fell into the container on top of the other clothes. There really wasn’t much point in putting those with the rest of the laundry, not when they’d been stretched and knotted in ways they’d never been meant for. They’d been ruined now, and washing them wouldn’t do anything to fix that. He plucked them out of the hamper. He might as well throw them away.

He tucked them into a drawer beside his bed. He would think about the best way to dispose of them later.

Finally he felt he had restored his appearance to his usual armor of wealth and privilege, and checked the clock. The whole group would probably still be having their ridiculous breakfast meeting. He could go in now for the last few minutes of it, and at least give the impression that he hadn’t deliberately chosen to attend. That would be a way to ease into it — he could build up his tolerance for them all gradually.

He opened the door — and saw Fukawa sitting on the ground outside his room, chin propped on her knees as she stared at his door.

Leaving his room to find Fukawa watching him wasn’t entirely out of the ordinary, but she usually lurked around the corner or spied through the crack in her door. He’d never left the room to find her sitting there so openly. For a moment he worried that this might be the serial killer personality — but no, her eyes were their normal color and she seemed capable of keeping her tongue in her mouth.

Well, whatever was going on with her, he didn’t have time to deal with her now. He turned to walk past without acknowledging her.

“You were in his room.”

The words stopped Togami in his tracks, and he looked down at the girl on the floor. Fukawa’s eyes bore into him with an almost physical force, and he had the strangest urge to take a step back away from her. He’d never felt the need to retreat when she stared at him normally, even when the amount of actual drool reached truly repulsive levels, but there was something about her current expression that he didn’t like.

He could have denied it, but that would involve getting into an argument with her about it. “My whereabouts are none of your concern,” he said instead, voice cold.

She didn’t blink, eyes on him like a snake. “You were in his room all night.”
Had she been watching? That was a disturbing thought. He really needed coffee before he could deal with her idiocy first thing in the morning.

“Go back in your room,” he told her, an order that had worked in the past. It wouldn’t keep her there indefinitely, but it would at least be long enough for him to get down the hall.

She stood, a slow unfolding of every muscle in her body as she stretched up to her full height – but she didn’t turn for her door. A chill trickled down Togami’s spine as she met his gaze.

“What were you doing in there?”

She bit out the words in a low voice, deeper than her normal tone, every word clipped and distinct. It made Togami wonder how fast he could unlock his dorm room door again, and what would happen if he wasn’t fast enough.

“Nothing you need to know about,” Togami snapped. “Stop talking.”

A slow, terrible smile curled its way across her lips.

“No.”

Icy fear flooded Togami’s veins as he realized exactly what he’d done. This girl was a crazed serial killer who targeted men she found attractive, and she’d only stayed her hand because she’d had romantic delusions about him – and he’d allowed those delusions to shatter. Suddenly it wasn’t at all comforting to know that this wasn’t the serial killer, not with the way her eyes seemed to burn through his clothes to blister his skin.

He opened his mouth to say something – and she stepped closer.

“Go on,” she said, and he couldn’t stop himself from taking a step backwards each time she advanced. “Order me to do something. Tell me what to do. Try to make me listen.”

“Leave me alone.” He said the command with all the force he could muster, all the pride and arrogance he could inject into the words.

She reached out and ran a hand down his chest. He jerked back like she’d scalded him, slimy revulsion curdling in his stomach. She laughed, high and wild and shaky, sweat beginning to bead its way down her face.

“I thought you were untouchable.” Her shoulders heaved as she spoke, breath coming so fast it rocked her whole body. “I thought you were perfect and beautiful and so high above me that I would crawl in filth if you told me to do it.” Her eyes scorched him above the horrifying specter of her smile. “But now I can see the truth.” Her hand snaked forward to grip his wrist, locking around the faint line where the restraints had been. “You’re just as dirty as me.”

Togami froze, wondering if this was it. He probably couldn’t make it to the cafeteria even if he ran, but maybe if he shouted it would get someone’s attention. Surely at least one of that lot would leave their stupid breakfast meeting to see what had happened before Fukawa could do whatever horrible thing she was planning. He tensed, preparing to tear away and scream, when –

*Ding dong bing bong.*

“Attention, students! Please stop what you are doing and gather in the gymnasium. It’s time for a very special announcement!”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Monokuma would like to make an announcement.

Togami would never have thought he’d be relieved to hear Monokuma’s voice echoing through the halls, but at this particular moment, whatever the mastermind had planned was the lesser of two evils. He took advantage of the distraction to twist his arm out of Fukawa’s grip and hurried in the direction of the stairs. The rest of the students poured out of the cafeteria as he passed, and he let himself be swept into the middle of the group. Even being stuck between Yamada and Hagakure was preferable to being where Fukawa could get at him again.

As they all entered the gymnasium, something brushed his arm, and he flinched – but it wasn’t Fukawa. Naegi stood beside him, close enough that their elbows touched. He glanced sideways up at Togami with a small twist of a smile, and the knot of fear that had formed in Togami’s stomach when Fukawa had grabbed him eased a little.

The comfort didn’t last, not when Monokuma came bouncing out to his seat on the stage with a laugh.

“Welcome, everyone! It’s time for a very important school announcement about a key feature of your student life here at Hope’s Peak Academy.”

“So it’s this again?” Kirigiri asked, her eyes fixed on the bear. “You’re going to try to spur us on with another motive?”

“What? Motive?” Monokuma tilted his head like he was taken aback. “No, no, no, this is just a routine announcement from your headmaster, keeping you all abreast of the important happenings here.”

“Ah, so you are saying there is something new in the school?” Celeste asked, tilting her head so that her curls swayed. “Something else to further enrich our lives here, perhaps?”

“Maybe it will,” Monokuma said brightly, drawing out the words too long. “This assembly is to inform all of you that there are now cameras placed throughout the school to film your every move.”

There was a moment of confused silence.

“But haven’t those cameras been there the whole time?” Asahina asked.

“Yeah, since the first day,” Hagakure agreed. “They’d be pretty hard to miss.”

“Well, I just wanted to make sure everyone knew about them,” Monokuma said. “After all, it wouldn’t be fair if someone didn’t notice they were being filmed, right? Right?”

“How could anyone fail to recall that we are under constant surveillance?” Ogami said, crossing her arms.
Monokuma laughed in response. Togami was starting to get a very bad feeling about this.

Kirigiri frowned. “Are you saying that one of us forgot about the surveillance cameras and did something we shouldn’t have done?”

“Well, it’s a little hard to explain.” Monokuma paused. “Maybe it’s better if I show you!”

A large white sheet unrolled over the wooden back of the stage, and images from the surveillance cameras began playing across it.

Togami saw flashes of himself kissing Naegi against the archive door, dropping to his knees in front of the other boy, falling on his back with Naegi on top of him. He heard himself gasping and moaning and dear god begging, his voice nearly unrecognizable to his own ears.

The other students were turning to stare, and Togami realized in a rush that he and Naegi were still standing with their arms pressed together. It wasn’t a particular intimate pose, but with all their eyes turned on him it felt like he might as well have laid his heart open for all of them to see. He jerked away from Naegi, both of them blushing dark red.

“This isn’t funny!” Naegi shouted up at Monokuma. “Turn that off!”

“What? You don’t like it?” Monokuma asked. “Oh, I see. Maybe you’d rather watch something else!”

And then the images switched to the night before. Togami only got a glimpse of the projection of Naegi fastening his wrists to the corners of the bed before he slammed his eyes closed, sick horror roiling in his stomach. He couldn’t watch that moment put on display for the whole group to see, like some kind of sordid trophy.

“That isn’t what I meant!” Naegi sounded genuinely furious. “Turn it off!”

Togami could still hear his own breathless voice filling the room, so Monokuma had obviously ignored Naegi’s demand.

Then there came the sound of sharp footsteps and a crash.

Togami’s eyes flew open. Naegi wouldn’t have done anything stupid, would he? Not when they’d all seen Enoshima attacked by spears in this very room.

He hadn’t been quite that stupid, but it looked like he’d come close. From the look of things, Naegi had apparently stormed up to the stage and yanked the white sheet down from the wall. It didn’t stop the images, but at least they were almost impossible to see against the dark brown wood of the stage’s usual background.

“Oh, my, how dashing.” Monokuma grinned. “What do you think, Togami – did it make your heart skip a beat?”

Togami glared at the robotic bear, cheeks and neck burning. “Shut up.”

“Aw, what’s that? You didn’t like my show?” Monokuma laughed gleefully.

“So wait,” Asahina said, slowly looking from Togami to Naegi. “Those videos – were they real?”

“Of course!” Monokuma replied, not giving either boy a chance to speak. “My security cameras don’t lie!”
“I see, I see, so that’s how it is,” Yamada said, rubbing his chin. “The allure of opposites, the rise of forbidden passion – we are witnessing the birth of the fabled yaoi!”

Togami wondered what would happen if he just turned and walked out. Would Monokuma throw spears at him? Maybe the risk would be worth it.

“So was that it?” Kirigiri asked, her arms crossed as she stared unblinkingly at Monokuma. However annoying Togami might find that girl, he had to admit she at least knew how to focus. “Was that the only reason you called us here?”

“Of course that’s not all” Monokuma said, as though the very idea were shocking. “I called you here to celebrate. After all, two of you have finally given up on returning to the outside world!”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ogami asked, eyes narrowing.

“Eh? Isn’t it obvious?” Monokuma tilted his head. “Everyone knows that high school relationships fall apart out in the real world – so if they’re dating, they won’t want to graduate! So let’s give a great big round of applause for their decision to stay here, where they can be together forever!”

A series of popping explosions near the ceiling made everyone jump – but all that happened was a shower of confetti fluttered down around them. Most of it centered around Togami, tiny pink and red hearts drifting onto his shoulders and catching in his hair no matter how angrily he tried to brush them away.

“Are you trying to make some sort of point?” Togami bit out, shoulders shaking so hard that the confetti landing there bounced right off again. “Or is this just an exercise in humiliation?”

“Aw, are you embarrassed?” Monokuma cackled. “Maybe you need Naegi to kiss you and make it better!”

Someone laughed. One of those useless, spineless, pathetic idiots standing around him actually laughed. Togami thought it sounded like Hagakure, but it was hard to be certain through the red hot rage rising in him. He spun for the door, the very air of the gym choking in his throat until he was sure he couldn’t breathe if he stayed in that room another second.

“Wait – Togami, wait, hold on!”

Naegi’s voice cut through the red haze, and Togami found himself pausing at the threshold as a hand reached out to touch his arm. He looked over his shoulder to see Naegi standing there, concern filling his face.

And from behind him, the eyes of the rest of the group bore down on him like the rush of a tidal wave.

“Leave me alone.” Togami snatched his arm away from Naegi’s touch and bolted for the hall, letting the door slam shut behind him.
Naegi deals with the aftermath of Monokuma's announcement.

Naegi wondered if he should have run after Togami. He’d tried to stop the other boy from leaving the gym on instinct, just because he couldn’t stand to see the hurt and humiliation written in the stiff line of Togami’s shoulders and the flush coloring his skin dull red. He’d wanted to tell Togami that it would be okay, that it didn’t have to matter – but the look in Togami’s eyes when he’d shaken Naegi’s hand off his arm had stopped the words in his throat. And then, before Naegi could gather his thoughts enough to decide what to do, Togami had been gone, door closing in Naegi’s face.

He wanted to follow Togami out of the gym, to find him and make sure everything would be okay, but he didn’t know where the other boy had gone. So instead, he let himself be swept along with the others as they made their way back up towards the cafeteria, where they’d had to abandon their breakfast half-eaten.

Naegi didn’t feel like he had much of an appetite anymore, though. He sat in front of a cup of tea that had gone cold, staring down at it without really registering what he was looking at. All he could see was Togami’s face when he’d told Naegi to leave him alone.

He pushed the cup away from him, unable to stand the idea of drinking the stale liquid. With the sourness in his stomach from the assembly that morning, he felt like he might never eat anything again.

Someone settled in the seat across from him. Naegi looked up with a burst of hope – but no, it was just Celeste, hands clasped beneath her chin as she studied him.

“Do you want something?” he asked, when she didn’t say anything.

She smiled. “Merely to say that I hope your charming little romance is able to overcome this obstacle soon.”

Naegi stared at her, puzzled. “You do?”

“Certainly. Why should I not be pleased at something that makes my companions content in our new home?” Celeste leaned forward. “If you require advice, please do not hesitate to ask me.”

“Advice?” Naegi wasn’t sure what she meant. Did she think he needed romantic advice? Well, with the way Togami had run off from him, maybe he did.

“Oh, yes. While your first attempt does appear to have been successful, mistakes can be quite easily made in such situations. And while I personally would not be bothered, I’m sure you would not wish to damage your new servant irrevocably, would you?”

“Servant?” Naegi stared at her, confused. What was she talking about?

“I did notice that you appeared to have acquired quite a lovely rose whip from the school store
several days ago,” Celeste said, her eyes glittering. “Do let me know if you need assistance in the development of an appropriate technique.”

“What are you —” And then Naegi got it, and his face flooded red. “Oh – no, no, I’m good! No advice needed!”

“If you’re certain.” Celeste stood, giving him a sweet smile. “I will be waiting if you change your mind, hmm?”

And here Naegi had thought that he couldn’t possibly feel any more awkward about everything that had happened this morning.

Apparently Celeste’s question had broken the ice, because after that the rest of the group drifted closer, curiosity getting the better of them. Naegi flushed as he thought about what they must be wondering.

Asahina was the first one to ask, taking the seat immediately beside Naegi and turning it to face him. “So – you and Togami, huh?”

“Well, yeah.” Naegi shrugged uncomfortably under the weight of everyone’s stares. Under normal circumstances, he wouldn’t have minded letting his friends know – but Monokuma’s cruel exposure of them made it feel like he was admitting to something shameful. He didn’t want shame mixed in with how he felt about Togami.

“I thought you and Kirigiri were going to be a thing, though?”

“H-huh?” Naegi stared at Asahina’s innocently curious expression. “No, I don’t – I mean, she’s not – we aren’t –”

“Perhaps she believed so as well, and has gone off to demand the right to duel for Master Makoto Naegi’s hand,” Yamada suggested.

“I think it is unlikely that either Kirigiri or Togami would duel anyone,” Ogami said.

“She appeared to be heading in the direction of the laundry room again after the assembly,” Celeste said. “I assume she intends to spend the day there again.” She gave Naegi a sharp smile. “If you and your boyfriend wish for time alone, she is unlikely to interrupt you.”

“Boyfriend?” Naegi bit his lip. “I – well, I don’t know if I’d go that far.”

“Huh? Of course you’re boyfriends. What else would you be?” Asahina asked, tilting her head in confusion.

“We haven’t really had a chance to talk about it or anything,” Naegi said, staring down at his hands. Admitting that felt like a rock in the pit of his stomach, but he didn’t want to lie about it.

“You haven’t? How long has it been going on?” Ogami asked, frowning.

“Just a couple days.” Naegi sighed. It felt like it was longer, but realistically, he knew it had been less than forty-eight hours since Togami had kissed him for the first time.

“And you’ve already gotten that far with him?” Asahina’s jaw dropped. “You’re definitely boyfriends.”

Naegi’s ears went red, but he didn’t say anything. He didn’t want to deny it again, but pretending
would only make it worse if Monokuma’s show drove Togami to end things. And as Togami’s angry leave me alone! echoed in his head again, he was starting to think that might be how things turned out.

He had to look away from the girls at that, not able to cope with Asahina’s cheerful certainty and Ogami’s somewhat bemused support. And when he looked across the room, he realized that Fukawa had joined them in the cafeteria. She’d sat on the opposite side of the room from the rest of them, as far away as she could get without pressing into the wall. She didn’t even have the pretense of food in front of her as she sat – she just stared directly at Naegi without a break, her gaze not even flickering when someone walked between the two of them.

A faint, secretive smile spread across her lips as she realized Naegi was looking at her. He didn’t feel very cheerful, but it seemed like it would be rude not to smile back now that she’d seen him. She jolted back in her chair like he’d slapped her instead of smiling, but that wasn’t too unusual.

He wasn’t really sure why Fukawa was sitting in the cafeteria with the rest of them, anyway. She didn’t usually join them, preferring to trail after Togami unless he specifically told her not to do so. Maybe he’d told her to go away, too – although that made Naegi’s heart sink a little, thinking that Togami had apparently spoken to him the same way he addressed his stalker.

Naegi shoved away from the table and got to his feet, not feeling up to answering any more questions about what he and Togami had been doing. “I need to go,” he said, not really to anyone in particular.

Asahina nodded understandingly. “Good luck!”

Naegi knew she was trying to be nice, so he made himself smile back at her before he left – but as soon as he left the cafeteria, the smile dropped off his face and his shoulders drooped. What was he supposed to do now?

He could go try to find Togami, but he’d seen yesterday that Togami was much too good at hiding to be found. Besides, Togami had made it pretty clear he didn’t want Naegi around. Leave me alone – there wasn’t much room for misinterpretation in that. If Togami needed some time to himself after that horror show, it would be really unfair of Naegi to go force his presence on the other boy, just because he selfishly wanted to be near him.

And it was really starting to dawn on Naegi just how much he wanted to be near Togami. He’d felt nothing but the pressure of eyes on him since leaving the gym, but none of them had been the gaze that he wanted. When Togami’s eyes were on him, he could feel the other boy’s impossibly high standards stretching around him – and it made him want to do more, be more in response. He wanted to see what he could become, in the challenge of Togami’s eyes – what the two of them could become together. He’d had the feeling it could be something really great.

Something that Monokuma had deliberately and maliciously tried to shatter before it could really start.

He sighed and turned to head towards his room. Maybe resting for a while would make him feel better.

“Naegi, wait. Come here.”

He paused and looked over to see Kirigiri standing in the door of the laundry room, arms crossed and looking serious. He changed direction and trudged over to her, not feeling at all up to his usual brisk pace. “Did you need something?”
“I wanted to talk to you,” she said. “About the assembly this morning.”

Naegi stared at her in surprise. “Not you, too.”

“I don’t mean that I want to gossip. I’m really not interested in what you and Togami do alone together, as long as you’re both alive at the end of it,” she said. “But Naegi, I want you to be careful.”

He frowned. “I am careful.”

A faint smile crossed her lips as she shook her head. “You really aren’t. And after this morning, you’ll need to be.”

“I don’t understand.”

Kirigiri sighed. “Do you really think the mastermind called that assembly solely to humiliate you? Oh, I’m sure that was part of their plan, but I don’t believe that was their true intention. The mastermind is trying to goad us into acting again, and they’ve just painted a target on your back.”

“Me?” A sudden chill slithered through him, making him shiver. “No, I – I don’t see how that would make me a target. Not unless you’re trying to say that Togami would – because he wouldn’t. I know he wouldn’t.”

She shrugged. “You may actually be right about that one, but Togami isn’t the only person here.”

Naegi shook his head. “No one else would do anything either. Why would they? All that happened is that Monokuma showed a bunch of embarrassing videos. It was pretty bad, but I don’t see how it would anyone want to commit murder.”

“Maybe,” Kirigiri said. “But the mastermind showed us those videos for a reason. Try to keep that in mind.”
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Naegi wants to talk to Togami. Togami doesn't want to talk to Naegi.

Naegi hadn’t known it was possible for a day to feel as long as that one did. He felt like he’d been blocked to a standstill on everything that mattered. He was waiting for Togami to be ready to talk to him – waiting for Alter Ego to finish processing the data Fujisaki had left for them – waiting to see if anything came of Kirigiri’s warning about the mastermind’s plan. Even spending time with the others didn’t distract him.

“Do not move your arm that way,” Ogami said, as she took Naegi through what she called a simple training exercise. “I explained to you in our last training session that you could damage your shoulder if you continue doing so.”


“Hmm.” Ogami frowned at him. “I do not mean to suggest that I am displeased to have company, but is there perhaps somewhere else you would rather be right now?”

Naegi couldn’t stop his mind from flashing to Togami – but he’d promised himself he’d give the other boy time to cool off first. “No,” he said. “No, I’ll pay attention, really.”

Ogami didn’t look convinced, but she didn’t make Naegi leave, either. To make up for his lapse in concentration, he threw himself even more fervently into her training than he had before. The resulting ache in his muscles was almost enough to make him forget all the worries circling around his head.

But when he returned to his room for the night, it all came rushing back. Naegi flopped down onto his bed, staring blankly up at the ceiling. He’d really hoped that Togami would come and find him at some point during the day – he’d made a point of letting several people know he’d be in the gym with Ogami – but he hadn’t seen so much as a glimpse of the heir.

Of course, now that nighttime was approaching, Naegi supposed that he would know where Togami would be for at least some part of the day. With the rule forbidding sleeping outside the dorms, Togami would have to return to his dorm room at some point during the night.

Theoretically, Naegi could just wait for that, watching Togami’s door for the moment he returned – but the thought smacked of stalking.

Besides, he didn’t want to force Togami to talk to him. He wanted Togami to choose to talk to him, of his own free will.

But that didn’t mean he had to keep waiting indefinitely, did it? He didn’t want to compel, but he could ask.

Naegi got up and reached for the notebook beside his bed, pulling out a sheet of paper. He considered for a moment, then began writing.

“I’d like to talk to you. I know what happened earlier today was awful, but we don’t have to let it
He paused and bit the edge of the pen, wondering if it would be overly pushy to add any of the other things he wanted to say. I missed you, I wanted to see you – that all sounded clingy. I hope you’re okay, I’ve been worrying about you – that sounded patronizing and would just make Togami annoyed.

No, it was probably better to say the rest of it in person. Naegi sighed, scribbling his name across the bottom before folding the paper and slipping into the empty hallway.

He told himself that he didn’t really expect an answer when he pushed Togami’s doorbell, but he couldn’t help feeling a little disappointed when the boy didn’t answer. Knowing Togami’s attitude towards the curfew, he probably wouldn’t return to his room until much later at night. Well, it had been worth a try.

Naegi knelt and slid the letter under the door, where Togami wouldn’t be able to miss it whenever he came back to his room. Hopefully it would be enough, and Togami wouldn’t keep him waiting long.

His doorbell didn’t sound at all during the night, but that was fine. Naegi had been sleeping – or at least trying to sleep – and it wouldn’t have been the best moment for the conversation they needed to have. He wouldn’t have minded if Togami had woken him up in the middle of the night just to see him, but it wasn’t like Togami knew that. So it was fine.

It was less fine when Naegi looked at the empty space beside his door and realized that Togami hadn’t even bothered to reply to his message.

Maybe silence was his answer. Maybe Togami was telling him that there was nothing to talk about.

Naegi tried not to let it show as he dragged himself into the cafeteria for their morning meeting, but the sympathetic looks everyone sent him said that he hadn’t been very successful.

“Here, you look like you need this more than me.” Asahina set one of her donuts in front of Naegi. “It’s got a chocolate filling.”

“Uh, thanks.” Naegi couldn’t quite bring himself to tell her that his stomach churned so much at the thought of Togami cutting all contact that he didn’t think he could eat anything, let alone a sugar-laden pastry. He took a small bite as she watched, but it tasted more like sawdust than a treat. “It’s great.”

Asahina’s face fell a little. She looked like she wanted to say something else, but she just shook her head and patted his shoulder, then retreated to sit with Ogami. The two girls bent their heads and whispered together, sending Naegi occasional sideways glances. He bent his head over a cup of tea and wished they wouldn’t.

A rustle came from the seat across from him, and Naegi looked up to see Hagakure sitting there. “You know, I can do fortune telling sessions on a specific topics, if you want.”

“Oh, yeah?” Naegi didn’t think that sounded particularly appealing, but it would be rude to say so.

Hagakure nodded. “Relationships are a pretty popular topic, when people need advice. I could even give you an extra discount for heartbreak, if you want.”

Naegi stared at him for a long moment. “I think I’m good.”
Heartbreak, Hagakure had said. So they all thought that Togami had broken things off, too. They were all pitying him.

He got up and left the cafeteria, walking blindly across the hall towards the laundry room. Kirigiri looked up when he entered, her eyebrows coming together in a hint of a frown.

“I don’t have time to talk to you right now,” she told him. Of course she didn’t – she needed to listen for Alter Ego’s screams.

“That’s okay,” Naegi said. “Can I stay if I’m quiet?”

Kirigiri eyed him for a moment, and then her expression softened a little. “Of course.”

Naegi sat beside her at the table and watched the laundry machines spin, trying not to think about anything. It didn’t work very well.

What if it wasn’t just Monokuma’s humiliating show that was keeping Togami from talking to him? After all, it wasn’t like they’d really discussed what was happening between them. Naegi had thought he’d felt the start of something real between them after that night, when Togami had admitted he trusted him and they’d slept in each other’s arms – but maybe it hadn’t been what he’d thought. Trust didn’t mean they automatically had a relationship.

It was entirely possible that Togami had never intended to make this into something more serious than what they’d already had. He might have been upset not just because of the awful way Monokuma had outed them, but because he’d never wanted anyone else to know about it in the first place. He’d actually said that he didn’t want Naegi to tell anyone, hadn’t he? Maybe he’d planned to keep it as nothing more than a dirty secret.

Naegi thought he might be sick. He liked Togami, and he’d tried to show him the second time they’d slept together. It was one thing to consider that first time nothing more than sex, but hadn’t the other time meant more? Maybe he was the only one who had thought so.

He couldn’t judge anymore – he didn’t know what to believe. He needed an outside opinion.

“What if he doesn’t want to talk to me?”

Kirigiri looked up from where she’d been flipping through a magazine at the table. “What?”

“You know,” Naegi said, waving a hand to encompass the whole situation. “With – everything.”

“You mean your encounters with Togami.” She grimaced. “I’m not an expert about these matters.”

“I’m not asking you to be an expert,” Naegi said. “I’m just asking – well – if you think I’ve been stupid.”

“Forgetting about the security cameras wasn’t terribly intelligent,” Kirigiri said with a faint smile. “But I don’t think that’s what you meant.” She sighed, tugging on her braid as she considered it. “As for the rest of it – well, you really need to talk to Togami about that. He’s the only one who can give you a real answer. I can’t, and neither can your thoughts.”

“What if he doesn’t want to talk to me?” Naegi didn’t mean for the words to sound so plaintive.

“Then that will tell you something, too.” Kirigiri sighed. “Naegi, I understand that you’re unhappy right now, but please try to remember that I’m in here for a reason. You did say you would be quiet.”
“Oh – right. You’re right.” Naegi shook his head and stood up. “Sorry, I’ll go.”

She nodded. “I think that would be best.”

Naegi left the laundry room, but he couldn’t quite face the thought of going and talking to one of his other friends for the rest of the day – not when whoever he picked wouldn’t be the person he really wanted to spend time with. He headed back to his room and let himself fall backwards onto the bed.

He would have sworn that he’d spend the whole time staring at the ceiling and moping, but apparently his body had other ideas. Naegi only realized he’d fallen asleep when a strange sound near his door jolted him awake. What could that have been? It had sounded almost like rustling.

Naegi dragged himself off the bed to go look – and he saw a folded note that had been shoved under his door.

All of his energy returned in an instant as he dove for it and shook it open.

“I’m willing to talk if you are. I’ll be in my room.”

And there was Togami’s signature, dark and clear on the paper. Naegi didn’t even mind that the note itself was terse and unromantic – the fact that it was here at all spoke volumes.

He didn’t hesitate. Seconds after finishing the letter, Naegi was out his door and pressing the doorbell to Togami’s room.
Naegi and Togami talk.

The seconds Naegi stood outside Togami’s door felt like they lasted for hours. Had he misunderstood? Had Togami changed his mind and left again, or decided not to talk after all, or –

The door opened, and Naegi couldn’t help smiling to see Togami there.

“Well? Don’t just stand out there.” Togami jerked his head towards the room.

Naegi entered, looking around at the furnishings in surprise. He knew some of the other students had more in their rooms than his barebones set up, but he hadn’t expected to see a red carpet stretching across the floor. He tried not to grin, but didn’t quite succeed. “You – uh, I see you’ve been decorating.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “It was like that when I got here.”

“If you say so.”

Togami crossed over to the chair at his table – why did his room come with a chair when Naegi’s didn’t? – and sat, looking at Naegi expectantly. After pondering a moment, Naegi decided to boost himself up onto the low bookcase next to the table. Sitting on top of it actually gave him a couple inches on Togami, which was a nice change for once.

“You wanted to talk?” Togami prompted, once Naegi was settled.

“Well – yeah.”

“Well? You know what I want to talk about. Monokuma’s show yesterday!”

“About?”

Naegi stared at him. “You know what I want to talk about. Monokuma’s show yesterday!”

“It was unpleasant and embarrassing. What is there to talk about?”

Of all the reactions Naegi had thought he might get, he hadn’t expected this matter-of-fact abruptness, and he didn’t quite know how to respond to it. “I guess that covers it pretty well.”

“Good.” Togami nodded decisively. “I personally would like nothing more than to pretend it never happened. I can only hope the rest of those idiots will have the basic decency to ignore it as well.”

“Right. Ignore it.” Naegi looked down at his hands, staring at them like they’d suddenly become unfamiliar. “I guess I’ll do that too, if that’s what you want.”

“Obviously. I’d think you’d want the same.”
“Yeah.” Naegi wished he hadn’t seen the note at all, that he’d been able to put this off just a little longer. He sighed and stood, turning towards the door.

“What are you doing?” Togami asked, sounding startled.

“Well, I was going to leave,” Naegi said. “Since you said you just wanted to pretend it never happened.”

Togami stared at him like he was speaking a foreign language. “What does that have to do with you leaving?”

“Well – if you’re just going to ignore everything that happened, you can’t really do that if I’m here, can you?” Naegi said.

“Ignore everything?” Togami frowned, narrowing his eyes. “Are you saying that you think that repulsive show could actually force me to change my mind?”

Naegi blinked. “Uh – well –”

Togami stood and advanced on him. “You think that I would be that easily defeated? That a few videos shown to a handful of acquaintances could deter me?” He bore down, pushing Naegi back onto the bookshelf again, leaning so close that his breath brushed Naegi’s cheek. “You think I would let that bear keep me from something I want?”

Naegi’s heart pounded against his chest, going mad with the awareness that Togami stood little more than an inch away. Any movement would bring them close enough to touch, and it was all he could do to stop himself from leaning forward.

“Does that mean I’m something you want?” he asked, looking straight into Togami’s eyes.

Togami smirked – and leaned forward, pressing his whole body against Naegi’s as he brought their lips together. Naegi surged into the touch, tilting his head back and parting his lips. He’d thought over the past couple days that maybe he’d just imagined the spark, maybe it hadn’t been as amazing as he remembered – but no, with Togami’s mouth hungry against his, with strong hands curling around his back and cradling his head, he knew he hadn’t imagined anything.

With electric heat coursing through him from Togami’s hands and lips, Naegi couldn’t stop himself from reaching out to touch the heir in return. He slid one hand up into Togami’s hair, treading his fingers through until the neat blond strands had become as wild as Naegi’s own hair. His other hand managed to untuck Togami’s shirt enough to trail directly over the skin of his stomach.

His thumb grazed over an unexpectedly rough patch, and Togami growled low in his throat. The sound was familiar – and Naegi remembered hearing it before as he sucked on that very spot until a mark appeared. He traced the spot again, deliberately, and was rewarded when Togami ground their bodies together.

That felt good – too good, enough that it was worrying. There was something he was forgetting, something he couldn’t quite remember, but it was so hard to think when Togami touched him, just like it had been those other times, when –

“The cameras!” Naegi jerked away, nearly toppling backwards off the bookcase in his haste to get untangled.

Togami caught his elbows to balance him, looking annoyed. “Don’t tell me you forgot about them.”
“Well – yeah, for a minute there,” Naegi admitted. “But so did you!”

“I didn’t forget. I made the decision to ignore them.” Togami might have said it in his most condescending tones, but it was a little hard to believe that act with his hair mussed and his clothing askew. He made a tempting picture, and Naegi really just wanted to lean forward again and continue where they’d left off.

“But what if the mastermind is watching again?” Naegi sent the camera a nervous look. “What if Monokuma shows it to everyone again?”

Togami didn’t look very happy at the suggestion, but he shrugged. “Then he does. I told you, I won’t be scared off.”

Naegi narrowed his eyes. “Will you run off and hide for days again?”

Togami glared at him. “That’s different. I wasn’t hiding, I was avoiding the situation.”

“And me.”

“No, not you.” Togami started to lift a hand, like he wanted to touch Naegi’s cheek, but he quickly let it drop before it could get that far.

“What else is there?” Naegi asked, puzzled. “Everyone else?”

“In a manner of speaking.” Togami grimaced. “Tell me, Naegi – has Fukawa said anything to you in the past couple days?”

“Fukawa?” That question seemed to come out of nowhere. Naegi frowned. “No – no, I don’t think she’s been too quiet every time I’ve seen her.”

“Good.” Togami looked at Naegi and sighed. “I would suggest that you take measures to avoid being alone with her for the foreseeable future.”

“What do you mean?” Naegi didn’t quite know how to take that statement. “Do you think she’s jealous?”

“Something like that,” Togami said sourly. “I shouldn’t really have to spell this out, but don’t go anywhere alone with her.”

Naegi would have protested being told to treat one of his friends in such a way – but then he remembered Fukawa watching him from across the cafeteria, strange look in her eyes. Maybe Togami had a point.

“I can try to do that for a while,” Naegi said instead, shrugging.

“Good.” A hint of relief came into Togami’s expression. “Then –”

The doorbell rang, cutting off whatever he’d been about to say. Togami shot the door an annoyed glare.

“Aren’t you going to try to answer it?” Naegi asked.

“They’ll go away eventually.” Togami leaned his forehead against Naegi’s. “You’re finally a reasonable height when you sit like this.”

“My height is –” The rest of Naegi’s objection was drowned out by the doorbell again, louder than
“How long do you think eventually will take?” Naegi asked. Togami scowled.

The doorbell sounded again, a long unrelenting series of chimes, like whoever was outside had shoved their finger against the button without letting up.

Togami huffed out an angry sigh, tore himself from Naegi’s arms, and stormed over to throw the door open. “What?”

Hagakure took a step backwards. “Oh, uh, hey, you really are here! I thought maybe the room was empty after all.”

“If you thought the room was empty, why did you keep ringing the bell instead of finding something more useful to do with your time?” Togami demanded.

“Because Kirigiri said – I mean, because of an important matter of personal hygiene,” Hagakure corrected himself.

“Hygiene?” Naegi asked, frowned. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I wanted to make a suggestion,” Hagakure said, the sudden odd note to his words suggesting that he was reciting them rather than saying them. “I would like to suggest that we all go to the bathhouse and enjoy a quiet, peaceful bath. One that has everyone together.”

“Everyone?” Naegi glanced over at Togami, only to see the other boy looking far more serious than he’d expected.

“Very well,” Togami said, much to Naegi’s shock. “Personal hygiene is very important, after all.” He headed out of the room at a brisk pace, leaving Naegi and Hagakure to trail behind him.

What was he thinking? Naegi couldn’t tell. Togami never seemed to like spending time with the other members of the group, so why would he –

And then it hit him. The bathhouse. Alter Ego.

Naegi ran to catch up with Togami just as he entered the bathhouse. He really hoped he was wrong – but he didn’t think he was.
Naegi knew his worst fears had been confirmed when they entered the bathhouse to see Yamada and Ishimaru face to face, screaming at one another.

“How could you dare to lay hands upon such an innocent angel?”

“Admit to your crime and return my bro to me!”

Togami ignored them both and strode over to Kirigiri, standing by the lockers with her arms crossed. “What the hell is going on in here?”

Kirigiri looked past Togami, and nodded when she caught sight of Naegi. “That’s everyone, then. Good.”

Naegi looked around, and sure enough, all the remaining students were gathered in the changing room. “What’s going on?”

“This monster –”

“That wretch –”

“Shut up, both of you.” Kirigiri’s voice sliced through their fury, stopping it cold. She looked over at Naegi and Togami. “As everyone who arrived when Hagakure first summoned them already knows, Alter Ego has gone missing.”

“Missing?” Naegi turned to the locker, and sure enough, it stood horribly empty. “How?”

Togami understood more quickly, turning to survey the rest of the group with narrowed eyes. “Someone must have taken it, that’s how.”

“And who else could it be but that demon, who preys upon the sweet and pure with his filthy hands!” Yamada shrieked, gesturing towards Ishimaru.

“You would pin your transgression on me?” Ishimaru roared, clenching his fists. “Your depravity multiplies by the second!”

“It isn’t either of you,” Kirigiri said. “I told Alter Ego to scream if either of you or anyone else that he didn’t recognize entered the room. I didn’t hear anything all day, but when I checked the locker this evening, it was gone.”

“So it wasn’t them, but it wasn’t the mastermind, either?” Asahina asked. “But there’s no one else, right?”

“You’re ignoring the obvious possibility,” Togami snapped, scowling around the room. “There
could be a traitor among us.”

The pronouncement chilled the air, and Naegi shivered in the suddenly icy atmosphere. “What do you mean, a traitor?”

“Someone working for the mastermind,” Togami said, as if it should be obvious. “Kirigiri, Ogami, Asahina, Hagakure, Fukawa, Celeste, you, or me – any one of us could have taken Alter Ego. Any of us could be a traitor.”

“Oh, my. You would include your lover in the list of possibilities?” Celeste raised a shocked hand to her lips with a slightly exaggerated gasp. “How very dreadful.”

Togami glared at her. “Any of us would have had the opportunity.”

“Wait, hold on,” Naegi said, frowning. “Sure, we could have, but – but why would we? Alter Ego was working on getting us out of here! Why would any of us want to start working with the mastermind instead of leaving?”

“I’m not talking about a new development,” Togami said. “I mean that there has been a traitor in our midst from the very beginning, helping the mastermind run the game from within.”

Naegi stared at Togami, the cold calculation on the heir’s face a stark return to the person who had so confidently declared he would allow them all to die. “You can’t mean that.”

“Of course I do. I’ve considered it a possibility from the start. It would be the most logical move for the mastermind to make, considering that there are obviously ways for us to collaborate that they can’t monitor through cameras alone.”

“But then – you’re saying that one of us did something like that? One of our friends has been working against us from the beginning?” Naegi shook his head. “No. That’s – that’s unthinkable!”

“No, it’s exactly what you need to think.” Togami looked around the room. “It’s what we all need to think. Someone here is not on our side.”

“Our side?” Celeste gave him a sweet smile. “I thought you wished to win the game. Did you not call us enemies? The power of love is truly astonishing if it can enact such a transformation.”

Togami glared at her. “Shut up.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Yamada’s shoulders slumped with dejection. “It doesn’t matter if we’re enemies, or if there’s a traitor. Just save her – please, save her. Anyone, please. I’m begging you, just – just let me see her smiling face again.”

“Agreed,” Ishimaru said, tears streaming down his face. “If it can save Bro – if it means he doesn’t have to die again – then traitors and the rest of it don’t matter.”

“So you’re saying you’ll give up?” Togami turned on them. “You’d let the traitor win so easily? Do you intend to turn on us as well?”

“Of course they wouldn’t!” Naegi said, stepping between Togami and the other two boys. “They wouldn’t turn on us. No one here would! We don’t even know for sure if there’s a traitor or not!”

“Don’t we?” Togami raised his eyebrows. “Only one of the eight of us could have taken Alter Ego from this room. The only one who benefits from taking Alter Ego before it could complete its analysis would be the mastermind. What other explanation do you suggest?”
“I don’t know, but there has to be one!” Naegi looked around the room, at the faces of the people he’d come to consider friends. “You can’t really think one of us would work for the mastermind.”

“I can,” Togami said coldly. “I do.”

Naegi stared at Togami in shock, unable to think of words that could cut through the other boy’s icy demeanor. This was the boy he’d met that first day in the entrance hall, who’d sneered and condescended to them all. Naegi looked into Togami’s eyes, hoping to find a glimpse of the boy who gave him toe-curling kisses and who spent the night sleeping in his arms – but all he could see were sharp accusations and dark suspicions.

But before Naegi could come up with a response, bells rang through the intercoms, heralding Monokuma’s nighttime announcement.

“It’s already that late?” Asahina asked, startled.

“It seems so,” Celeste said. “Unfortunately, we shall have to postpone the continuation of our discussion until morning.”

“The discussion can wait,” Kirigiri said. “Our priority now needs to be to recover Alter Ego. It’s unlikely the thief would have destroyed it, so we can assume that it is still somewhere in the school. In the morning, we can organize a search to find it.”

“The morning? You would leave her in the clutches of a thief for the entire night?” Yamada demanded.

“Unusual activity at night will attract the mastermind’s attention,” Kirigiri said calmly. “Celeste is right – we should observe the curfew as we usually do. The morning will be less risky.” She looked over at Naegi. “Don’t you agree?”

“Well, yeah, we don’t want to rush so much that the mastermind catches us.” Naegi sighed, feeling a twinge of sympathy at Yamada’s and Ishimaru’s crushed expressions. “I know you’re both worried, but it will be better if we wait till morning.”

“Then let us return and rest until morning,” Celeste said. “We will begin our search for Alter Ego then.”

“And we’ll resume our discussion of the traitor,” Togami added. “We can’t afford to leave this threat alone.”

Togami’s words lingered as they all headed back towards the dorms, evident in everyone’s lowered heads and refusal to let eyes meet. Naegi could feel the distrust taking root again, destroying the fragile hope the group had formed around the possibility of escape Alter Ego had offered them. The chance for freedom gone – a traitor lurking among their friends – despair seemed to lurk at every turn.

Naegi hesitated outside his door as the others all headed back into their rooms. Togami had gone to his door as well, but he leaned on the doorframe instead of unlocking it, eyes on Naegi. “So?”

“What?” Naegi asked, frowning.

“Your room or mine?” Togami elaborated.

Naegi stared at him. “Are you serious?”
Togami shrugged. “I don’t particularly care, but if you have a preference –”

“You honestly think that we can just go back and take up where we left off like nothing happened?” Naegi asked in disbelief. “After that?”

“Why not?”

“Because you just accused one of us of being a traitor, that’s why not!” Naegi said. “Are we just supposed to ignore that?”

“No, we’re just tabling the discussion until morning.” Togami frowned at him. “You’re upset about it.”

“Of course I’m upset! What did you think would happen?”

Togami sighed. “I don’t really suspect you, of course. You’d never be able to lie convincingly enough to pull it off. Does that make you feel better?”

“No!” Naegi thought that might actually make it worse. If Togami really didn’t consider him a possible traitor, then that meant it wasn’t just about logic – it was about the fact that Togami trusted him. Togami believed in him, but not in the others, and so he’d made accusations that broke the bonds the rest of the group had shared.

Togami drew back, shutters closing over the warmth that had been in his eyes. “I see.”

“Look – you don’t really believe it, do you?” Naegi asked, desperately searching Togami’s expression for some hint of hesitation. “You don’t really think one of us would work against the others?”

“I didn’t think you were the type to deny the truth,” Togami said, crossing his arms. “Maybe you’re not the person I thought you were.”

Naegi stared at Togami, but no matter how he tried, he couldn’t see any softness at all. “Maybe you aren’t, either.”

He turned into his room, and shut and locked the door behind him, leaving Togami behind.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Naegi wonders if he made a mistake.

Naegi could barely sleep that night, tossing in his bed as the events of the day kept running through his mind. Alter Ego was gone – had been taken from them. The terrible reality of their current situation was all the worse now that they’d had a chance for hope snatched away from them. This was the way the mastermind operated, there was no doubt about that.

But did that really mean that whoever had taken Alter Ego was working for the mastermind? Could there really be a traitor among them? Naegi didn’t see how he could believe it. How could he doubt his friends? Looking at their faces and wondering if they were lying, if every move could be meant to deceive – no, he couldn’t live like that. Those first few days had been that way, and they’d been too awful to remember. He wouldn’t go back to that painful doubt.

But what was the alternative? Togami’s points had been good ones, Naegi had to admit that. It would make a horrible sort of sense for a traitor to be among them. He didn’t believe it, couldn’t accept that it was true – but he couldn’t get the idea out of his head, either. He could see why someone might be tempted to believe it.

Maybe he’d been too hard on Togami. Naegi rolled over again and buried his face in his pillow, trying to erase the image of Togami’s eyes going cold as he drew away. It had been awful to see him that way – but everything about this killing game was awful. And Togami never shied away from the cruel realities of the situation. It shouldn’t have been a shock that he would zero in on the worst case scenario and fling it in everyone’s faces. That was what he’d been doing since the beginning, and it was unreasonable to expect him to be different all of a sudden.

Had he been expecting that? Had he thought that Togami would start being nice to everyone now? That he’d have an entire personality shift and be friendly towards the others?

On the other hand, he’d stopped saying he was going to win the game. He’d gone to the group meeting without hesitating, and he’d shared his conclusions with the others instead of keeping them to himself. Even Celeste had pointed out that he talked like he was on their side now.

But if he was on their side, why would he want them all to doubt one another?

It was an impossible question, and Naegi didn’t know how to answer it. Maybe he shouldn’t have stormed into his room and abandoned Togami in the hall. He could at least have asked for an explanation. It hadn’t been fair not to hear him out, especially not when it seemed like maybe Togami really had been trying after all.

He would ask in the morning, Naegi decided. He needed to hear what Togami had to say. And with that decision made, sleep finally came a little more easily.

He woke tangled in the sheets, like even asleep he’d been unable to find real rest. He never felt like he slept well here at this school, always waking up more tired than he’d gone to sleep. How could anyone rest in an atmosphere like this one? The only exception had been the night he and Togami
had spent together, curled in quiet warmth, with affirmations of trust to keep away the doubts. He remembered the soft way Togami had kissed him awake, the lack of tension in his posture, and he thought the other boy must have felt the same. Was that why Togami had tried to ask him back to his room again last night?

There was no point in speculating about it, though. He needed to ask. And more than that, he needed to head to the cafeteria so the group could begin planning their search for Alter Ego. Naegi sighed and dragged himself out of bed, preparing to face another day.

When he left his room, he hesitated. Instead of heading immediately towards the cafeteria, Naegi walked across the hall first and tried the doorbell outside Togami’s door. They didn’t have time to talk for real right now, not if they were going to make it to the breakfast meeting on time, but maybe he could at least ask if Togami would want to have the conversation at all. If he could make a start on repairing what was between them, at least that would be one less awful weight on his shoulders.

But Togami didn’t answer the door, even when Naegi waited and tried the bell again. Naegi sighed. He must have missed his chance to catch Togami alone before he went to the meeting.

But when Naegi reached the cafeteria, Togami wasn’t among the handful of other students waiting there. Only Kirigiri, Asahina, Ogami, and Hagakure stood around the tables, checking the clock from time to time.

“Is this it?” Naegi asked, looking at the others.

“It seems that way,” Kirigiri said. “I’ve been here since the Monokuma announcement, and no one else has arrived.”

“Shouldn’t Yamada and Ishimaru be here, though?” Asahina asked, glancing up at the clock again. “I mean, they were real excited about starting to search, right?”

“Yeah, I would have thought they’d be the first ones here.” Naegi looked around, trying not to think about who else hadn’t joined them. “You don’t think –”

“It’s too early to jump to conclusions,” Ogami said. “They may simply have been detained. Let us wait a little longer.”

As the minutes ticked away, Naegi considered going back to try ringing Togami’s doorbell again – but the one time he stood up to leave, Kirigiri pinned him with such a piercing look that he immediately sank back down to his seat. Maybe she was worried he wouldn’t come back if he left.

It didn’t really matter, though. Naegi knew it wouldn’t help anything to ring the doorbell again. Either Togami was there and had decided to ignore the bell, or he’d left and gone off to sit by himself again, the way he had before.

Or he hadn’t answered because he couldn’t, because he –

No. Naegi refused to think about that possibility, or to acknowledge the icy dread that had begun coiling in his stomach when he’d walked into the cafeteria and hadn’t seen Togami there. After all, Togami wasn’t the only one missing. With so many people gone, it didn’t have to mean anything terrible had happened.

If he thought it hard enough, Naegi could almost make himself believe that.

Finally, Asahina huffed out a frustrated sigh. “It’s eight o’clock. Why haven’t they shown up yet?”
Kirigiri’s lips tightened. “Something must have happened.”

Naegi froze, staring at her in horror. She didn’t really mean –

“We need to track down all the missing people,” Kirigiri declared. “We’ll cover more ground if we split up.”

Naegi tried his best to fight back the fear as he headed down to the first floor, where Kirigiri had assigned him to search. There was no point in worrying about it, not yet. He just needed to focus on looking around here, that was all. If he just did that, everything would be okay. He’d probably just open this classroom door and see Togami sitting at one of the desks with a book, looking grouchy about being interrupted.

But the first classroom was empty, and the second. As he headed over to the A/V room, Naegi couldn’t stop anxiety from pounding at his chest. Togami was good at avoiding people, he’d proved that time and again – but was he good enough to dodge an entire group of people combing the school? And would he really avoid them all when he’d implied that he’d join them all for the breakfast meeting at the search?

Naegi didn’t see anyone in the A/V room, either, but it was hard to tell with just a glance. He walked along the rows, holding his breath as he checked the floor between the rows of consoles, terrified of what he might see. But when he reached the other end of the room and confirmed the floor was clear, he allowed himself a small sigh of relief. Maybe he hadn’t had a reason to be afraid.

And then he heard the door slam behind him.

Naegi spun, hoping that maybe it would be Togami. Maybe everything would be okay and he’d been silly to worry –

“Oh, Naegi.” Fukawa stared at him, leaning with her back against the door. “I think we should talk about my White Knight.”
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Fukawa has a chat with Naegi - whether Naegi wants to talk to her or not.

*Be careful, Kirigiri* had said. *The mastermind has painted a target on your back.*

*Don’t go anywhere alone with Fukawa,* Togami had said.

As Naegi stared at Fukawa, blocking the only door out of the room, he was starting to think he should have paid a little more attention to those warnings. He normally wouldn’t be frightened of her, not when she had her usual personality instead of the red-eyed laughing serial killer’s – but there was something in her eyes now that made him want to back away.

But did he really want to run from her? He’d considered her a friend until a few days ago, even though he wasn’t sure whether she felt the same way about him, and friends weren’t supposed to run from one another.

They weren’t supposed to lock each other up, either.

Naegi pushed that thought away and did his best to smile at Fukawa. “You want to talk about Togami? Well, uh, I haven’t really seen him today. Sorry.”

She didn’t move from her place in front of the door. “You sent him away.”

“I did what?” Naegi didn’t remember doing anything like that.

“Last night,” Fukawa said, her eyes glinting from behind her glasses. “He offered himself up to you right there in the hall, where anyone could hear.”

“Oh – you were there for that?” Naegi hadn’t thought any of the rest of the group had still been around to hear the end of his argument with Togami.

“I heard *e-everything.*” Fukawa began to smile, a flush creeping up her neck and across her face as she took a step towards him. “I heard him beg for you to spend just one more night with him – that you could have him anywhere, even right there in the middle of the hall, as long as you gave him what he needed just one more time.”

Naegi’s mouth fell open. “That’s – uh, that’s not exactly –”

“And you refused him,” she went on, sweat beading across her forehead and trickling down her heated cheeks as she advanced. “You denied him what he wanted. You left him alone with his filthy cravings unfulfilled, gave him no choice but to return to his room and try to reach a pale mockery of satisfaction with the limitations of his own shameful fingers, grasping and –”

“That’s *not* what happened!” Naegi turned scarlet as he tried to banish that image of Togami from his mind.

“N-no?” Fukawa asked, halfway down the aisle towards him now. “Then why did my perfectly
dressed White Knight come to the bathhouse last night with his shirt untucked and his hair wild?”

“Uh – well –” Naegi didn’t have an explanation for that one. He’d kind of hoped everyone else had had other things to worry about.

“You d-did that to him. You drove him to the brink, promised him release and then scorned him.”

“Look, I don’t really think this is any of your business,” Naegi said, trying to pretend that his cheeks weren’t on fire with an embarrassed blush.

“You touched him.” She was close enough now that he could hear her breath coming heavily, her shoulders heaving with it. “You put your hands all over him. You knocked my White Knight off his pedestal into the muck, and anyone can touch him now. Even me.”

Naegi didn’t like the way she said that – like something had happened. “Wait, what do you mean by that? Where is he?”

“I don’t know. Somewhere else.” She leaned forward, eyes gleaming, and Naegi couldn’t help leaning away until his back hit the wall. “I was looking for you.”

Naegi was really starting to get nervous now. She’d been looking for him when Togami was an option? “Why, exactly?”

“To see what he sees.”

Fukawa’s hands hit the wall on either side of Naegi’s head, and whatever it was she was trying to see, she was looking from only a few inches away.

Naegi gulped. “Look, I understand that you’re – uh – not very happy about what happened between Togami and me, but can we talk about it another time? I’m supposed to be searching this floor, and –”

A panicked scream from above them cut him off. “Someone! Come quick!”

“That was Asahina!” Was she all right? Had she found something? A new, stronger set of fears knocked his concern about Fukawa aside. “We have to go find her!” He tried to duck under Fukawa’s arm to move towards the door.

Fukawa blocked him. “We’re not done talking –”

“We don’t have time for this!” Naegi snapped, out of patience with whatever game Fukawa was playing. If she wanted to bother him, that was one thing – but stopping him from helping Asahina when she could be in trouble was something else. “Move! Now!”

Fukawa’s eyes went wide at the order, and she jerked back like he’d struck her heart, hands flying back from the wall to clutch at her chest. Naegi didn’t have time to worry about her now, though, not when he had to find Asahina. He ran out of the A/V room and up to the third floor where Asahina had been searching.

“What happened? Are you all right?” he asked, as soon as he caught sight of her standing in the hall.

“It’s awful!” Asahina’s shoulders trembled as she gestured back down the hall. “I checked the rec room, and – and –” She took an unsteady step in the direction of the stairs. “I need to get the others!”
Before Naegi could stop her, she’d bolted for the lower floors.

The rec room? Naegi could see the door standing open, and as he approached, the dread returned to his stomach, stronger than ever. He thought he might be sick as he steeled himself to look inside. If it was who he thought –

Celeste stood in the middle of the rec room, horribly battered and barely able to stay on her feet. Naegi’s fears about who else it could have been fell to the back of his mind in the wake of new worries for his injured friend. “Celeste? What happened?”

As Asahina returned with Ogami and Hagakure, Celeste explained. Her story was almost too bizarre to understand, with a mysterious man attacking her and dragging Yamada away – but with the Justice Hammer 1 lying there on the ground and the photograph she’d produced from the camera, what else could any of them think? Was an attack by a robotic assailant really any stranger than being trapped in a school by a robotic bear?

“You’re saying this individual headed down to the second floor?” Ogami demanded. “But that’s where Kirigiri was meant to search. She could be in danger!”

As they ran down to the second floor, Fukawa met them on the stairs coming up, her eyes tracking on Naegi as soon as he was in her line of sight. Her flush had receded, and she looked more or less like her normal self. “What’s going on up here?”

“We’re looking for Kirigiri and Yamada,” Naegi told her. “Have you seen them?”

“I haven’t seen anything,” Fukawa said, shaking her head. “Not since you ran from me in the A/V room.”

“They have to be here somewhere,” Asahina said. “Let’s keep looking!”

Ogami cocked her head. “I think I hear something – coming from the library?”

When they ran to the library and flung the door open, they found Yamada just staggering to his feet, looking even worse than Celeste. Justice Hammer 2 lay on the ground nearby.

“He hit me,” Yamada gasped, blood streaming down his face. “That guy – Robo Justice. He hit me!”

His story might have been absurd, but it did match Celeste’s, even down to the photograph.

“We need to get him down to the nurse’s office,” Celeste said, concern evident on her face as she looked at Yamada’s wounds. “His injuries need to be treated without delay.”

Yamada had to lean on Ogami’s arm to make it down the steps as they all escorted him to the nurse’s office.

“Robo Justice attacked me on the third floor while I was searching for Alter Ego,” Yamada explained, settling weakly on one of the beds. “And then he dragged me to the library and hit me with Justice Hammer 2. It must have been thirty or forty minutes ago.”

“So we all would have been in the cafeteria together,” Asahina said, frowning. “Sakura, Kirigiri, Naegi, Hagakure, and me.”

“And Kirigiri wouldn’t let Naegi leave,” Fukawa added.
Ogami gave her a strange look. “How do you know that?”

“I was watching, obviously,” Fukawa said. “And I saw that you,” her gaze snapped towards Asahina, “ate five donuts while you were waiting. Is that how you get those things so big – by loading them down with fat?”

“Eh?” Asahina looked taken aback by the sudden accusation.

Naegi frowned. So the five of them had been together, with Fukawa watching, while Celeste and Yamada had been attacked. They’d all been together, meaning that the only people without alibis for the attacks were Ishimaru – and Togami.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Robo Justice strikes, leaving the students wondering what could be happening - and who could be behind it.

“Why would anyone run around attacking people wearing a weird costume like that?” Asahina asked as they all left Yamada in the nurse’s office.

“That doesn’t matter,” Ogami said. “Right now, we must focus on finding this individual before any other attacks occur.”

Suddenly, Celeste gasped, looking to the right. “A shadow – there was a shadow, moving around at the top of the stairs!”

Ogami clenched her fists. “To the second floor, then!”

But when they raced up the stairs, no mysterious strangers were in sight. “Let’s split up,” Asahina suggested, and they scattered in all directions.

Naegi had only just opened the door to a classroom when he heard a shriek from the third floor – was it Celeste? What could she have found? Before he knew it he was out the door, up the stairs, meeting with the others as they all converged on Celeste where she stood shaking and terrified in the middle of the third floor hall.

“I saw him!” she cried. “The costumed man – he was here, but he ran off when I screamed.” She gestured further down the hallway, away from the stairs.

“Then he must still be here,” Naegi said, hope rising in him. Maybe they could find the mysterious attacker and stop him now, before any other attacks could happen. “Come on, let’s –”

A scream rang through the halls from below them, agonized and afraid.

“Was that Yamada?” Ogami’s eyes widened.

“He’s still in the nurse’s office – alone,” Naegi realized. “We have to get down there!”

“But the stranger – we can’t just let him escape,” Celeste protested. “We must split into two groups – that is the only way to capture the stranger and protect Yamada.”

“I will track down this assailant,” Ogami declared, fury rising off her like electricity.

“Then let us leave the stranger’s capture to you, Fukawa, and Hagakure,” Celeste said. “Asahina, Naegi, please accompany me to the nurse’s office.”

“All right, let’s go. Everyone be careful,” Naegi told the others, before following Celeste back to the first floor.

They didn’t hear anything else as they ran downstairs – no screams, no sounds of struggle, no
footsteps fleeing from the scene of a crime. That meant it would be all right, didn’t it? That had to mean it would be okay, that everyone would be safe –

But when they opened the door to the nurse’s office, the blood-splattered scene before them proved that wasn’t true. Not when Yamada lay sprawled on the ground in a pool of his own blood, another Justice Hammer beside him.

“No,” Asahina gasped, hands flying to her mouth. “No way!”

Ding dong, ding dong.

Naegi couldn’t tear his eyes away from the awful scene as Monokuma’s body discovery announcement played. Not again – it couldn’t be this again, not when just a few days ago they’d thought they had a real chance to fight back against the mastermind with Alter Ego’s data. There couldn’t be another murder among them now.

“He has been murdered by that stranger,” Celeste said, grief clear on her face as she looked away from Yamada’s body. “Robo Justice, as Yamada called him. He must have done this.”

“What?” Naegi blinked. “But wasn’t he on the third floor? We didn’t see him on the stairs going down. Did he teleport?”

Celeste shook her head. “That doesn’t matter now. What matters is finding the others.”

But Asahina shook her head, pale even under her tan. “I – I don’t think I can leave.”

An unexpected burst of compassion softened Celeste’s expression. “Then I shall not leave you alone.” She looked over. “Naegi, if you would…”

“Right, I’ll bring the others here!” Naegi left and hurried back to the third floor. Celeste had seen Robo Justice running further in, away from the stairs, and the only place he could think of was the physics room. The main room itself was empty, but when he checked the back room –

“No, not again!” Naegi’s mouth dropped open in horror at the sight. Ishimaru lay fallen in another pool of blood, and beside him Fukawa stretched across the floor. “Not three of them!”

“Well, actually, Fukawa just fainted when she saw the blood,” Hagakure said. “She seems okay, but she just won’t wake up. But Ishimaru – well –”

“What did you mean, three of them?” Ogami asked. “Did something else happen?”

“When we got to the nurse’s office and found Yamada, he was already –” Naegi broke off and shook his head. “I came to get you guys and bring you down there.”

“Then we should hurry!” Ogami raced for the door.

But just as they exited the physics room, they met a frightened Celeste running towards them. “It’s gone,” she said, even paler than usual. “Yamada’s body – it has disappeared!”

It sounded impossible – but when they returned to the nurse’s office, Yamada’s corpse was nowhere to be found.

Asahina’s face had gone gray, and she sat trembling on one of the beds. “We only left for a minute to go to the bathroom,” she said. “And then – when we got back, Yamada was –”

“Only the culprit could have moved his body.” Celeste looked away, like she was unable to bear
the sight. “They must truly be enjoying the sight of us now, terrified and confused, wondering if we will die just like those guys.”

“But how can a body just disappear like that?” Hagakure asked. “Was it the aliens? Did they think that two murders at once was too many?”

“Two murders?” Asahina echoed blankly.

“We found Ishimaru in the physics equipment room,” Ogami told her. The words forced Naegi to recall the nightmarish sight of Ishimaru laid out on the floor, next to –

“Fukawa!” Horror struck Naegi as he realized that the girl wasn’t with them. “You guys – we left her back upstairs!”

Celeste’s hand flew to her mouth. “You left someone at the scene of the crime?”

“Well, she fainted when she saw the blood, so it couldn’t be helped,” Hagakure said, shrugging.

“We have to hurry back, before something else happens!” Naegi said, rushing for the door. No matter how exhausted and out of breath they all were from running up and down the stairs, they raced back to the third floor one more time, making their way to the equipment room.

“Thank goodness!” Naegi breathed in relief when he spotted her still lying there on the ground. She was exactly where they’d left her –

But Ishimaru’s body wasn’t.

“Are we hallucinating?” Ogami asked, staring at the empty space where the corpse had been.

Naegi shook his head slowly. “No – no, he was here. Someone must have moved him.”

“Then he really is dead?” Asahina’s shoulders began to shake as tears filled her eyes. “We’re all going to die now, aren’t we? The culprit won’t stop till they’ve killed all of us!”

“Not if we all stay together until we find the culprit,” Naegi said. “People have only gotten attacked when they went off alone, right?”

“But we aren’t all together!” Asahina protested. “Kirigiri and Togami are still missing!”

At her words, all Naegi’s fears came rushing back to him. He’d been forced to see two horrible murder scenes already today, and it was all too easy to imagine another. He could see Kirigiri laid out on the floor, blood tangled in her long hair, or – oh god, he thought he might be sick – or Togami, eyes blank and unseeing behind glasses covered in red.

“That is true, they are the only ones who remain unaccounted for,” Celeste said slowly. “The rest of us have been together in groups all morning.”

“No, Kirigiri was with us in the cafeteria at breakfast, while we waited to see if the others would appear,” Ogami said. “She only disappeared after we left to search the school.”

“I see,” Celeste said thoughtfully. “Then that settles it, does it not?”

“Huh? Settles what?” Naegi asked, a chill of apprehension snaking down his spine.

“There is only one person left without an alibi during all of the attacks,” Celeste explained, clasping her hands. “The suspicious individual we are looking for can be none other than…
Togami."

The words seemed to sound from far away, just barely audible through the loud rushing sound that filled Naegi’s ears. “No,” he heard himself saying, in a voice too stricken to be his own. “No, it can’t be him. He wouldn’t do something this bizarre.”

The others turned towards him, and to Naegi’s horror he recognized the looks on their faces as pity. “No,” he repeated. “There’s some other explanation. There has to be!”

“If you can think of one, please let us know without delay,” Celeste said.

But Naegi’s mind had gone blank. With what little they knew at this point, he didn’t have enough information to come up with an alternate theory. All he knew was that there had to be one. Togami wouldn’t turn on them so suddenly, wouldn’t lose it enough to put on a robot costume and attack people with painted hammers. He couldn’t believe it of the boy who had trusted him enough to be restrained, enough to sleep in his arms despite the threat of murder hanging ever present in the air.

Could he believe it of the boy who had so easily accused one of the group of being a traitor? The boy whose eyes had gone cold when they’d argued last night in the hall?

“We don’t know what really happened,” Naegi insisted, shaking the doubts from his head. “We’re still just guessing. We need to figure out what happened to the bodies, and we have to find Togami, and Kirigiri, too. Until we know where everyone is, we can’t say we know what happened. Not for sure.”

“Then since our time to investigate before the trial will be limited, let us split up to search the school,” Celeste suggested.


“I do not believe that will be a concern,” Celeste said. “After all, the school regulations prohibit more than two murders at once, do they not?”

Which meant the others were safe. Wherever Togami and Kirigiri were, they were at least alive. It didn’t make Naegi feel much better to know that, though.

“Then let us begin,” Ogami said. And with a few last sympathetic looks in Naegi’s direction, the others filed out.

Naegi clenched his fists, looking down at the remnants of the pool of blood on the floor, remembering how Ishimaru’s body had lain there. He didn’t believe Togami could have done something like that – not so soon after what the two of them had shared. However suspicious the heir might look, Naegi was going to find evidence of another explanation and prove Togami’s innocence to everyone.

Even to himself.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Naegi hunts for the truth, but he doesn't like what he finds.

Naegi didn’t really know where to start looking for the bodies, not when he felt like he’d already spent the entire morning searching the school for one thing or another already. Still, he couldn’t give up now, not with all their lives on the line. They would need evidence to discuss during the looming class trial, and how could they talk about anything if they didn’t even have the bodies?

Naegi poked his head into the art room first, but Asahina and Ogami were already in there, checking behind the desks and opening cabinets. He crossed the room to try the handle to the repository, since it didn’t look like they’d gotten that far yet – but no, it was locked. He sighed and headed out to try the second floor instead.

But there was nothing – no trace of bodies, no missing people, just empty room after empty room, no matter how many doors he opened. With every failure, Naegi felt nausea churn a little more in his stomach. What if he couldn’t find anything? There would be evidence somewhere, he was sure of that much – but what if he couldn’t find it in time?

It was almost a relief when Naegi exited a classroom to find Celeste hurrying towards him again. “We’ve found something,” she called.

Naegi’s face lit up with hope. “Togami?”

“Ah – no, I’m afraid he is still missing,” she said. “But I found Yamada’s and Ishimaru’s bodies. They were hidden in the repository.”

“What?” Naegi blinked. Was that why the door had been locked?

“Indeed. Please hurry and join us upstairs,” Celeste urged him, before hurrying towards the stairs herself.

Naegi followed after her, reaching the art room at the same time that Ogami, Asahina, and Hagakure did. The others held back, nervous looks on their faces, but there was no time to hesitate. Naegi reached for the door and pushed it open –

– revealing the bloody bodies of their friends yet again.

*Ding dong, ding dong.*

It didn’t get any easier to see the bodies and hear that mocking announcement a second time. No, it was worse this time, the stench of blood stronger than ever, enough to make him gag.

“And here we are!”

Naegi jumped as Monokuma appeared, obscenely cheerful in the midst of all the blood and death.

“It’s time for the next Monokuma File! I was going to hand them out when you found the bodies
the first time, but I thought something like this might happen. It was really hard to resist, but turns out I was right!"

Naegi caught the file that Monokuma flung at his head.

“Be sure to investigate this one with all your mental might, okay?” Monokuma said, sending a grin directly to Naegi that sent chills down his spine. “You wouldn’t want to make any stupid mistakes, would you? Well, not any more than the ones you’ve already made!”

With wild laughter spiraling out of control, Monokuma vanished again.

“How can he say it like that?” Asahina demanded. “They’re dead – they’re never coming back! It’s too awful!”

She collapsed to her knees at Yamada’s side, cradling the boy’s head in her lap. Tears fell from her eyes onto Yamada’s face – and he opened his eyes.

“Wh-where am I?”

“What?” Naegi stared in shock. This was almost more unbelievable than the reality of death around them. “He’s alive again?”

“Cold,” Yamada rasped out, his words faint and shaky. “So cold. Is winter coming?”

“Yamada!” Asahina’s fingers clutched at his shoulder, desperate hope rising in her face. “Wake up – you’ve got to wake up!”

“That’s right… I remember now.” He raised a quivering hand a few inches into the air, as though reaching for something the rest of them couldn’t see. “Hope’s Peak. I remember… everything. Before I’d met you all… I’d met you all.”

“He has lost the use of his faculties,” Celeste whispered, hanging her head in sorrow. “He is speaking only nonsense.”

“Who did this?” Asahina begged. “Who tried to kill you?”

“Who…?” Yamada’s voice grew weaker. “I remember… their name. Their name… T…”

But as he tried to mouth that final word, his breath shuddered in his lips, and stopped, his hand falling back to the floor. And this time, no matter how many of Asahina’s tears fell onto his face, Yamada’s eyes didn’t open again.

“Well, I guess we don’t have to investigate anymore, do we?” Hagakure asked.

Naegi stared at him. “What are you talking about? We still don’t know what happened!”

“He just told us, didn’t he?” Hagakure said.

“The name he tried to say,” Ogami said slowly, “began with a T. Only one student has a name that begins with a T.”

“What?” Naegi looked around the room, but all the others were nodding, as though this actually made sense. “No, that’s not – he must have been trying to say something else!”

“The evidence is not in your favor, it seems,” Celeste said with a pitying sigh.
“I won’t forgive him,” Asahina snarled, struggling to her feet. “If this is true, I will never, ever forgive him. To kill two of our friends…!”

“He wouldn’t –”

“He said he would!” Asahina sent Naegi a vicious glare. “At the beginning, he said he’d win the game and kill us all, remember?”

“He changed his mind!” Naegi protested. “I know he did!”

“How, because he slept with you?” Asahina said. “All that proves is that you can’t see what’s really going on!”

“Perhaps it was his ploy from the start,” Celeste mused, looking off into the distance. “After identifying Naegi as one of the primary threats during the class trials, Togami might have taken steps to neutralize his ability to act as an effective adversary.”

“What?” Naegi’s stomach plummeted, leaving a sick void swirling through him. “No, I –”

“Do you deny that you are emotionally compromised?” Celeste asked, leaning forward to pin him with her eerie red gaze. “After the proof Monokuma showed us of your relationship with Togami, how can we trust anything you say about him now?”

Naegi felt as though the world was tilting on its axis, throwing everything he thought he knew off balance. That – that couldn’t be true, could it? He and Togami had had a connection, starting from the moment when Togami had kissed him.

Togami had kissed him – had dragged him to the archive, had approached him again that second time, had begun nearly everything that had happened between them.

Naegi thought he might throw up. Had it all been a lie, from that first kiss on? Was it possible that the whole time he had been falling for Togami, the other boy had been manipulating him?

It was like realizing the truth about Maizono all over again – except that she’d never actually gone so far in her deception. So much of what she’d said and done had been a lie, but in the end the fact that she had cared about him had been true. But now, if everyone was right about Togami, he’d never cared at all. He’d probably been laughing behind Naegi’s back at how easy he’d been to deceive.

It made a horrible sort of sense, when Naegi thought about it like that. How everything had happened so fast, why Togami had changed his mind about working with the group. It would be a cold, merciless sort of plan – but hadn’t Togami been merciless when he’d used the secret Fukawa confided in him to frame her? With the things Togami had done already, Naegi wasn’t sure he could rule out emotional manipulation.

But even taking that all into account, there was still one thing that didn’t make sense.

“Maybe I am emotionally invested,” Naegi said, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t think straight. And even if Togami would – would do all – this,” it was hard to get the words out, but he forced his way through them, “I don’t think he’d wear that weird suit while he did it.”

The others exchanged glances, suspicion softening a little as they considered it. “I guess it doesn’t really seem like something he’d do,” Asahina said slowly.

“He does seem fond of theatrics, based on his interference with Fujisaki,” Ogami said. “But it is
true, I would not expect something quite so… colorful from him.”

“Unless that’s why he did it!” Hagakure said, rubbing his chin. “What if he decided to become Robo Justice because he knew no one would believe it was him?”

“Taking a plan to such extremes might be a winning strategy,” Celeste said. “Can you truly say the Ultimate Affluent Progeny would take half measures in anything he does?”

The words shook at the fragile faith Naegi had been trying to rebuild. What was he supposed to do? Which version of Togami should he believe in, the one who had held him and trusted him – or the one who had betrayed Fukawa and said he’d watch them all die?

“Maybe I’m wrong.” Naegi hated to say the words, but he couldn’t help it. “I don’t so – I don’t want to be – but if I am, I want to know. So I’m going to find Togami, and the truth. Whatever it is.”

With that, Naegi turned and walked out the door, leaving the rest of the group behind.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Togami has no idea what's going on.

The first thing Togami realized when he regained consciousness was that he didn’t know where he was. The tiny, confined space was dark, and something cold and metallic wrapped around his entire body, constricting his movements.

What the hell had happened? He remembered arguing with Naegi, ending with the other boy storming into his room, and then – what? He hadn’t gone back to his room, but he couldn’t remember what it was that he’d done instead.

Whatever it was, it had obviously been a poor decision. He’d been focused on his argument with Naegi, distracted by the wretched feelings that wouldn’t get out of his head, and he’d let his guard down enough that someone had managed to attack him.

At least they hadn’t killed him immediately – just imprisoned him. Togami tried to test the metal around him, checking for weak points. Could he get out of it?

It didn’t seem like he could. Every time he tried to turn or bend, either the metal wrapped around him wouldn’t cooperate or he ran into the edges of the space where he’d been confined.

Where had the kidnapper put him? There couldn’t be that many out of the way places where he could be hidden for long. Togami considered the different areas of the school. There were really only two options, from what he could recall – either the cabinet in the rec room or the locker near the pool. Togami scowled. While people did go to both areas, neither was very frequently used. It could potentially be a long wait for someone to find him.

Unless that someone was the person who had kidnapped him. Togami was under no illusions that this might have happened for some innocent reason. There was only one possible reason that he would have been taken out of commission.

This was a trap. One of the other students had finally chosen to make a move in the killing game, and they had settled on him as part of their plan. He doubted he would be a victim at this point – he would probably be dead already, if that was the culprit’s intent. No, if he was alive but imprisoned, there had to be a different goal.

He was being framed.

A dark grin curled across Togami’s face. So one of the others thought they could take him on, was that it? They’d seen Monokuma’s videos and decided that he’d be an easy mark? Well, he’d have to show them just how thoroughly mistaken they were. They wouldn’t be able to keep him in here forever, not if he was meant to take the fall for their crime during the trial – and that would give him the opportunity to turn the tables on them.

Which one had it been, though? That was the real question, and Togami didn’t have enough information to decide at this point. He wouldn’t mind facing off against Kirigiri, but he suspected
that if this were her scheme, she wouldn’t have left him alive. But the others –

*Ding dong, ding dong.*

Even through the metal container, Togami heard the body discovery announcement playing. So the game had begun again. The culprit had gotten far enough with the execution of their plan to go through with a murder – and he was stuck here, trapped and unable to investigate. He didn’t even know who –

*Who had been killed?*

The question struck Togami like being plunged into cold water, ice chilling him down to the bone. Someone had kidnapped him, presumably with the intent of framing him for murder. Who would people be most likely to claim he’d killed?

Naegi’s face flickered before Togami’s eyes, and he couldn’t breathe.

The body discovery announcement had already sounded. Whoever the victim had been, they were already dead.

Togami closed his eyes and forced shaky breaths of air in and out of his frozen lungs. Worrying about what might have happened was pointless. Someone would have to arrive to let him out of here soon enough, so that he could participate in the trial, and he would find out who the victim had been then. There was no reason to assume the worst. After all, wasn’t it just as believable that he would try to kill his psychotic stalker?

Unless Fukawa was the one who had done it. She’d clearly gone off the deep end – well, further off than she’d already been. And if someone was going to tie him up and leave him in a closet, Fukawa did rank fairly highly on his list of suspects. It was easy to imagine her doing this.

And even easier to imagine her going after Naegi. The boy still believed everyone here was his friend – he probably would have gone trustingly off to his doom, just because she asked him. Togami had a sharp, stabbing vision of Naegi crucified with scissors, blood smeared across the wall around him, and his stomach heaved at the idea. The image seemed utterly, viscerally wrong, an affront to the entire universe. Naegi deserved far better than dying alone and betrayed.

He wanted to believe it couldn’t be true – but he knew it was a real possibility. Naegi would be the perfect victim, and thanks to Monokuma’s videos, it would be easy enough to convince the others that Togami been the one to do it.

*Ding dong, ding dong.*

Togami jolted out of the downward spiral of his thoughts at the sound of the bells ringing again. Was it time for the trial already, or –

Another body discovery announcement played.

He frowned. A second announcement – did that mean a second body? There were two victims? The rules did allow for a maximum of two killings, so it wasn’t out of the question. If that was the case, it meant this was the most coldblooded killer they’d faced yet. In any other circumstances, he would be enjoying the challenge this promised.

But now, with the fear of who the victim could be, he couldn’t think of it as a challenge. He couldn’t bring himself to care if the trial was a little more interesting, not when Naegi might be one of the victims. Was this how the others felt every time – this sick, sinking feeling that something
precious had been stolen and could never be retrieved? If so, Togami wanted no part of it. If he thought it might have stopped the horrible ache in his chest, he would have torn his heart out without a second thought.

*Click clack.*

Togami froze. Had that been a noise? He thought he’d heard something, but it was difficult to tell through the metal. He concentrated, trying to stay as still as he could.

*Click clack.*

There it was again. It sounded almost like – footsteps? Yes, like the step of heels on a hard floor. Someone was here.

Togami banged his arm against the edge of the container, sending a resounding clang through the air as metal clashed with metal. Whoever it was would have to hear that, no matter how much the metal container muffled the noise.

There was a long pause – too long for comfort – and then the door to the container cracked open, letting in a few rays of light. Togami squinted in the sudden brightness, hoping against hope that maybe his assumptions had been wrong, maybe it would be Naegi who rescued him –

“What is this supposed to be?” Kirigiri asked, crossing her arms.

Togami glowered at her, even though she probably couldn’t see it through the metal wrapped around him. He never liked seeing the irritating girl, and this time was even worse than normal, since she’d had the nerve not to be Naegi. “Don’t just stand there, help me out of this thing.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “*Togami*?”

“Obviously.”

She didn’t move to help him, because of course she wouldn’t. “How long have you been in there?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea. I was unconscious for part of it, so it may have been since last night.”

Togami hesitated. He hated the idea of asking Kirigiri for anything – but he had to know. “I heard the body discovery announcements while I was locked in there. Do you know who was killed?”

Before she could respond, more footsteps sounded from outside Togami’s line of vision. “Kirigiri, is that you?” That was Asahina’s voice. “Is that – oh! You found him!”

“Apparently,” Kirigiri said, a faintly amused smile on her lips as she eyed Togami.

“Right. I knew it! I’ll go find the others!” Asahina’s footsteps ran off into the distance again.

Kirigiri didn’t say anything as the other girl left, but the look on her face grew from a faint smile to a full smirk. Togami didn’t like either expression. If she wasn’t going to answer his question, the least she could do was help him get this thing off him.

Maybe he could get it off himself, now that he wasn’t in the locker anymore. He shrugged his shoulders and twisted – but no. The thing was stuck on tightly. There was no way to pry it off.

“What are you doing?” she asked, watching his attempts.

“Trying to get this thing off me,” Togami growled back.
“You can’t get it off yourself?”

“If I could, I would have done it already!”

She looked at him a moment longer, then shrugged. “There’s a clasp in the back. Hold on.”

Once she finally deigned to undo the clasp, she was able to help Togami get the contraption off him. He shook himself free – and finally got a good look at the thing he’d been wearing. It was a cartoonish robot suit, painted with offensively garish colors. His lip curled at the sight. Apparently the culprit hadn’t been content with framing him – they’d wanted to humiliate him, too.

But that didn’t matter. It was just a stupid suit, and he could worry about why the culprit had used it later. Right now, there was another answer he needed. He turned back to Kirigiri.

“You didn’t answer my question. The body discovery announcements – whose were they?”

But she shook her head. “I don’t know. I wasn’t there for either discovery, and I haven’t seen everyone yet.”

He glared at her. “Don’t play games with me! Is Naegi alive?”

She tilted her head and studied him, like he was a specimen under a microscope. “It would bother you, wouldn’t it? If it were him?”

That question didn’t even deserve the courtesy of an answer. Would it bother him? Would it rip out the piece of his heart that Naegi had gotten his hooks into? He had no intention of telling her.

But then – then the door from the changing room opened, and –

The purest relief Togami had ever felt bloomed on his face when he saw Naegi walk into the room, alive and unharmed and so perfectly whole it made his heart ache again. He wanted to run across the room and snatch the boy into his arms, to reassure himself that Naegi was alive and safe and that whatever else had happened, it wouldn’t be Naegi’s death they had to investigate. The only thing holding him back was Kirigiri’s gaze on him, watching and silently judging the way she always did. Togami had to content himself with looking at Naegi, drinking in the sight of the boy as he stood in the changing room door.

A smile had spread across Naegi’s face when he’d seen Togami, like it was an automatic reaction. That made Togami feel better about his own expression – at least he wasn’t the only one visibly vulnerable.

But then the smile on Naegi’s face faded. Why was he doing that? Togami didn’t quite understand. Naegi looked over to the side, and his gaze fell on the bizarre robot suit, focusing like he recognized it. When he looked back to Togami, it took a moment for Togami to understand the emotion in Naegi’s eyes.

He looked betrayed.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to argue for his innocence as the class trial approaches.

Togami wasn’t sure what to think as the other students arrived and approached this side of the pool. For all that Naegi had gotten there first, his steps had been slow, faltering, like he didn’t want to reach the conversation that would happen when he reached the other side. He didn’t look at Togami again, not after that first moment, but Togami could read his pain anyway.

Did he really believe it? Naegi had known Togami wouldn’t kill him – he’d known it before Togami had understood it himself, and pinned him with the words like a mortal blow. Didn’t he understand that it went beyond the immediacy of murdering him directly? Did he honestly think that Togami could kill someone else, knowing what the inevitable result of success would be?

Togami scowled at Naegi, something going tight and cold in his chest at the way Naegi wouldn’t even look at him. He should have known better than that, no matter how good the culprit’s frame job had been. Naegi had blind faith in everyone else, to the point where he hadn’t even been able to consider the perfectly reasonable idea that they might have a traitor in their midst. Why had he chosen to doubt Togami now, when he was actually innocent?

The evidence compiled against him must have been very convincing. But not enough. Togami’s frown deepened. He wouldn’t let it be good enough.

The others spilled into the room after Naegi, overtaking him as they hurried towards the side of the pool where Togami stood with Kirigiri. He saw Asahina again, Ogami hanging at her back, Hagakure, and Fukawa – that left Ishimaru and Yamada as the victims. Those seemed like odd choices – why them? The two who had made such fools of themselves over Alter Ego last night – could it be a coincidence?

Asahina reached them first, glaring at Togami with a fury that seemed almost personal. “So it’s true, isn’t it? The one who wore that costume and went around attacking people – it was you, wasn’t it, Togami?”

“Is that what happened? Someone attacked people with that monstrosity on?” Togami raised his eyebrows at her. “Well, it wasn’t me.”

“Don’t lie to us!” Asahina clenched her fists. “I saw you wearing that suit!”

“Yes, because someone knocked me unconscious and put me in it,” Togami said. “I’ve been stuck in that locker ever since I woke up.”

“Oh, really? Is that so?” Celeste tilted her head. “But in that case, how do you explain the blueprints for the suit that Hagakure and I found in your room, hmm?”

“Yeah, it’s true, we found all kinds of papers and materials and boxes all over your room,” Hagakure agreed, nodding. “There’s no mistaking those, right?”

“And the dimensions on the blueprints suggest that the suit would need to be quite a close fit.”
Celeste bent down and peered at the suit more closely, then looked back at Togami with a sharp smile. “It looks like it would be quite difficult for anyone other than you to wear this costume.”

Togami wasn’t surprised to hear that, not with how tightly it had been fitted to him. It did bring up some worrying questions about just how the culprit had gotten it so well-fitted, though.

“Are you sure it was him?” Naegi’s voice was low, his eyes locked on the suit instead of Togami. “I mean, none of the rest of us saw him in it, right? And it would cover his face, so you couldn’t be sure.”

“Oh, it was definitely him!” Asahina said, turning to glare at Naegi. “I’ll show you it had to be him, here!”

Asahina seized the pieces of the robot suit and began trying to strap them on. “Look, see how loose it is?” she said, as some of the pieces wouldn’t stay on while others could barely close. “How did you even walk in this thing? I can’t see my feet, I can’t bend at the waist, I can’t even figure out how to get the stupid clasp fastened.”

“That’s because it’s in the back,” Kirigiri said, watching with her arms crossed. With her usual blank expression, she almost looked disinterested. “You can’t reach it with the suit on. I had to undo it for Togami before he could take it off.”

Asahina stripped the suit back off and let it collapse to the ground in disgust. “So there – it’s obvious no one but Togami could fit into this dumb costume,” she said to Naegi. “So are you finally going to stop defending him now or what?”

Defending him? Togami’s gaze went to Naegi before he could stop it, and he saw that the other boy was pale, eyes rimmed with red. So Naegi had been defending him to the others?

“He’s the only one without an alibi, and he’s the only one who could fit in the suit!” Asahina continued. “There’s nothing more to say about it – Togami killed them!”

That statement caught Togami’s attention. “The only one without an alibi?” He frowned, looking around the group. “That can’t be right.”

“It is true,” Ogami said. “All the rest of us can account for our whereabouts during at least one of the key events during the murder. You are the only one who was missing for the entire event.”

“Maybe I am, but since I know I didn’t do it, there must be some other explanation,” Togami snapped.

“What would that be?” Celeste asked. “How could someone else have done this?”

“How should I know? I’ve been unconscious and locked up,” Togami said. “You’re the ones who know the facts. Why don’t you try using your brains for once to figure it out?”

Not that any of them would. It was probably expecting too much of them to think anything through logically. The only ones who knew how to use their brains were himself, the obnoxious Kirigiri, and –

“What if it wasn’t someone else?” Naegi didn’t take his eyes off the suit as his words pierced through the conversation. “Or – not just one someone else. What if it was two people working together?”

At the words, the tightness gripping Togami’s chest eased a little, like fresh air blowing into a still
room. Maybe Naegi hadn’t entirely fallen into the culprit’s trap, after all.

“What, you mean an accomplice, like Monokuma was talking about during the first trial?” Asahina asked. “But didn’t he say the accomplice wouldn’t get anything out of it? So no one would be stupid enough to go along with it!”

An accomplice – yes, that sounded like it might make sense, if one of the reasons they all suspected him was that he had no alibi. It would explain why the culprit had gone to such lengths to make sure he would be out of the way during the murders. It didn’t really explain the stupid robot suit, but Togami wasn’t sure anything could justify that.

“You are speaking from your emotions, not from logic,” Celeste told Naegi. “You simply do not wish to believe that you were deceived.”

Naegi’s eyes moved towards Togami at those words, but the instant their gazes met he jerked away again. Togami frowned. That wasn’t like Naegi. Something was wrong here, something more than just the culprit’s attempt at framing him. Naegi had trusted him before now, even if he’d been angry. Had Togami’s accusations about the traitor shaken him that thoroughly – or had something else happened?

Well, whatever it was, Togami knew he didn’t have time to deal with it now. The body discovery announcement had been too long ago. The class trial had to be looming, and the way it looked now, most of those idiots were all too ready to fall into the killer’s trap.

“Argue about it during the trial,” Togami said, glaring at them. “This is the time to focus on finding evidence.”

“We already have all the evidence, though,” Hagakure objected. “Everyone knows you did it, right? So you might as well just give up.”

“If you want to dig your own grave with your failure to act, go ahead,” Togami snapped. “I have evidence to find.”

“Then we’d better get back to guard duty before you can try anything!” Asahina said, clenching her fists. “Come on, Sakura!” She and Ogami headed out, with Asahina casting suspicious looks back over her shoulder in case Togami tried to follow.

Not that he would, when he didn’t even know where they were heading. He was flying blind into this one – he hadn’t even received the Monokuma File, since he must have still been locked in the closet whenever the information had been distributed. If he was going to prove his innocence, he would need answers, and quickly.

Who could he ask, though? Hagakure wasn’t even an option. Frankly he didn’t trust Celeste not to lie to him for her own amusement. Fukawa – no, he wasn’t going near her, not after the way she’d reacted when he last tried to tell her to do something. Kirigiri probably wouldn’t tell him anything, if she even knew – she’d said she hadn’t been there for part of what had happened.

Really, there was only one person in the group who was worth asking. And however upset Naegi might be, Togami didn’t think he’d ignore a request for information. Naegi would play fair at the trials, if nothing else. Togami turned towards the other boy.

“Naegi, do you have a second?” Kirigiri spoke before Togami got the chance. Togami glared at her, but of course she didn’t react. “I’d like your help on the investigation. I got a late start, so I’ll need to make up some ground.”
“Huh?” Naegi looked at Kirigiri, and Togami’s expression darkened at the way a little of the shadow in Naegi’s expression faded as he spoke to the girl. “Well – sure, I don’t mind helping. But later, will you tell me where you went? We were all worried when you disappeared.”

Kirigiri had disappeared during the investigation? Now *that* was interesting information. She was always one of the nosier ones, poking her head into every aspect of the cases and even going so far as to manhandle the corpses. What had she been doing, if not investigating? Could this all have been her scheme after all? Or was it possible that she, the mysterious loner who hadn’t even revealed her talent, had disappeared for some other reason?

“No,” Kirigiri answered Naegi, her voice flat and almost bored. “Anyway, I need your help.”

And of course, Naegi gave in to her request. “Okay.”

Letting Naegi go off alone with Kirigiri when she sounded so suspicious seemed like a spectacularly bad idea. “I’ll go with you, as well,” Togami told them.

Kirigiri gave him a considering look. “All right. Then let’s get started. The bodies first, I think. Where are they?”

“In the repository,” Naegi said, starting for the door.

“Tell us what else you’ve learned on the way there,” Togami said. It wouldn’t be as good as getting the information firsthand, but Naegi always seemed to find something useful when he investigated. It would certainly be better than nothing.

By the time they reached the repository, Naegi had finished going over most of the events of the murder. Togami almost had to admire the careful way the culprit had crafted the alibi situation – whoever had done it, they’d managed the timing very carefully. It really was too bad for them that he was going to destroy them.

As expected, Kirigiri made a beeline for the dead bodies as soon as they entered the repository. Togami grimaced. Yes, they were short on time, but did she really need to be so offputtingly eager about it?

Rather than watch her, Togami decided to do something more productive. He looked at Naegi. “You got a Monokuma File, didn’t you?”

Naegi jumped at being addressed, looking up into Togami’s eyes. Togami’s hands itched to reach out and brush Naegi’s hair out of his eyes, to wipe away the unhappiness and make him smile again – but this wasn’t the time.

“Well? Show me the file,” Togami prompted, before he could get any more distracted than he already was.

“All right.” Naegi passed it over, their fingers brushing as he did. Togami couldn’t help smiling a little – but Naegi jerked away. He looked away from Togami and headed over to Kirigiri instead, falling into a quiet conversation with her.

Togami flipped open the Monokuma File and scanned it – the little information that was there, anyway. Only two sentences? That might be all right for the people who had been present for the events, but it certainly wasn’t helpful for the rest of them.

Although that assumed that the Monokuma File was intended to be helpful. Togami had noticed it last time, as well – the file left out relevant facts. In the second investigation, the file hadn’t
mentioned the real location where Fujisaki had died, or that he’d been concealing his gender, even though both of those things would have been included in a more legitimate autopsy report. So that meant that if a lot of the information that the others knew had been left out of the file, including the times and locations of the murders, then…

*Ding dong, bing bong.*

“Are you excited? Are you pumped?” Monokuma’s voice rang out from the televisions. “It’s time for the class trial to begin!”
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

The class trial begins, and Togami tries to figure out how to prove his innocence.

Walking down to the trial ground, Togami let the others outpace him as he tried to buy himself a few more seconds of time to think. He knew he’d be able to figure this out if he just had the facts in front of him, but Monokuma had sounded the class trial bells before he had a chance. He scowled at the thought. That bear had deliberately created a scenario where he had less information than the others, putting him at a disadvantage when he would need to defend himself. That flagrant disregard for the rules of the game was almost more of an annoyance than the murder set-up.

At least the set-up had been moderately clever, from what Togami had been able to gather about it. Whoever had done it couldn’t be quite as stupid as they seemed. But which of them could it have been? That was the real question, the part he couldn’t work out just yet.

Naegi’s idea about accomplices had some merit to it, since that was clearly the only way to get around the alibi issue. But that still didn’t explain the who.

He looked ahead, eyes narrowed, to where Asahina and Ogami were walking close together. Those two had certainly clicked fast, and for some reason, Ogami went mad at the slightest hint of a threat to Asahina. Would she take it far enough to assist Asahina in a killing, knowing that it would mean her own death if they got away with it?

Or there was the possibility that someone had been tricked into it. Lord knew Hagakure was stupid enough to fall for anything. It would be no trick at all to get him to help with a murder. Unless – was it possible that Hagakure’s idiocy was all an act to hide some dark intent? It seemed unlikely, since Hagakure’s stupidity predated Monokuma’s announcement of the killing game, but Togami supposed he couldn’t rule it out entirely.

Could Fukawa have been the one? Togami was of two minds on that idea. On one hand, she was certainly the person most likely to choose to target him. Someone had knocked him out and stuck him in that locker, and the thought of Fukawa being the one to manhandle his unconscious body made him shudder. On the other hand, he was fairly sure that if she’d done so, he wouldn’t have woken up alone. Besides, if she were really going to target him, she wouldn’t bother with the elaborate trap – she’d go straight for the scissors.

Celeste was the last possibility, even though she did frequently profess her desire to stay in the school forever rather than kill. There was always something insincere in everything the Ultimate Gambler said, and Togami had never been able to get a good read on her. She seemed like she might be clever, and no gambler as successful as she’d been could be entirely stupid – but she had gone along with several wrong ideas during the past trials, when being wrong would have fatal consequences. Togami couldn’t be sure, not with what he knew of her.

By the time he reached the red door, he still didn’t have an answer. Well, he’d just have to figure it out on the trial grounds.

When Togami pushed the door open and entered the waiting room outside the elevator, all eyes
turned to him. The atmosphere felt different this time than at the previous two trials – the air nearly crackled with the electric stares of the other students. Asahina’s bubbling fury, Fukawa’s dark eyes, Celeste’s sharp smile, they all came together in a whirl of accusation.

But he didn’t really care what any of them thought of him at this point, not until the trial began in earnest. Togami ignored the others and looked at the only one of the group whose opinion mattered.

Naegi’s eyes were fixed on him, but with such an intensely inward focus that Togami wasn’t sure the boy was actually seeing him. His lips moved faintly, a whisper of words only to himself. Togami thought he could see Naegi form the phrase “have to…” but he couldn’t tell what the rest of it might mean, or what Naegi thought he had to do.

Before Togami could decide whether to approach Naegi and ask him, Monokuma’s voice echoed from all around the room. “Hello!” “Hello!” “Hello!”

Two Monokumas burst forth, side by side – as if one of that thing wasn’t enough.

“Whoa – two Monokumas?” Hagakure gasped, jumping back.

“Nope, still just the one and only me,” Monokuma said. “You only think I’ve multiplied because of an illusion! I’m just moving so fast that you think there’s more than one of me! Can you tell which one is the real Monokuma?”

“Can we just get on the elevator?” Kirigiri asked, her bored tone appropriate for once.

“Aw, tough crowd.” Both Monokumas took on a sad pose, like Kirigiri had hurt their feelings. “You’re not playing along.” “along…” “along…”

So they had time for this stupidity, but not for him to have a real investigation? Togami glared at both bears. “We’re not here to play with you!”

“Aw, fine.” One of the Monokumas vanished. “Then if everyone’s ready to go, please board the pain train – er, the elevator.”

Was that bear even capable of speaking without a stupid joke? Togami scowled and strode into the elevator as soon as the doors opened. Time to get this over with.

After riding down in silence, the elevator doors opened on walls of a pale sky blue, dozens of hanging moons, and heavy brocade curtains over false windows. It seemed like a bizarre choice for a trial, like a parody of the night sky, but who knew why the mastermind decorated the way they did.

He took his place at the podiums, ignoring Monokuma’s repetitive explanation of the class trials. Really, if anyone could forget the rules of the trial at this point, they deserved what they got.

Apparently, the others had equally little patience with it.

“We already know who did it!” Asahina snapped, cutting Monokuma off mid-sentence.

“It was Togami,” Celeste added. “He is the only one to lack an alibi, and he was found in the suit. We found the blueprints and parts to build it in his room.” She pulled out a box of papers and crafting supplies for the rest of the group to see. “The evidence is quite compelling.”

“You only think it’s compelling because it’s a set up,” Togami said, crossing his arms. “I was
knocked unconscious last night, and when I woke up this morning, I was in that suit.”

“So you say,” Celeste said. “But you haven’t provided any evidence to prove your claims.”

“Why would I be stupid enough to commit a murder without crafting a reasonable alibi for myself?” Togami countered.

Celeste shrugged. “Perhaps whatever you were planning failed, and you are now trying to salvage it.” She leaned forward. “Maybe you are not as smart as you think you are.”

“That’s for sure,” Asahina said. “You told us you were going to kill someone right at the start. Of course we’d suspect you!”

“I’d intended to do it in such a way that I wouldn’t look suspicious,” Togami said, rolling his eyes. “My plans would not have involved wearing something as eye-catching as that monstrosity. Just looking at it makes my eyes hurt. Why would I inflict it on myself willingly?”

Asahina clenched her fists. “So you admit you were planning to kill someone!”

Togami curled his lip. “Don’t act so high and mighty. Everyone in this room has at least considered it, even if you didn’t decide to go through with it. I was just the only one with the nerve to be honest about it.”

“Until your oh-so-sudden change of heart, that is,” Celeste said, tilting her head with a deceptively innocent smile. “You changed your mind most conveniently, did you not? You found a reason to give up on committing any murders, mere days before you became a suspect.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that the timing suggests that you deliberately manipulated Naegi into a love affair to make yourself appear innocent,” Celeste said. She shook her head sadly. “And the poor boy has fallen right into your trap, even going so far as to try to defend you in the face of your crimes.”

The words made Togami’s eyes snap over, around the circle – and he saw Naegi’s face crumple. The sight knocked the air out of Togami, like Celeste had punched him in the stomach. That was what Naegi thought had happened? Togami might have done that with someone else, if he’d deemed it necessary – but he hadn’t been able to fake anything with Naegi. The boy pulled honesty from him without even trying, like iron to a magnet. Did he really not realize how he’d affected Togami, even in the short time they’d had together?

“I don’t see how it’s relevant to dissect anyone’s love life,” Kirigiri said, looking irritated with the digression. “The facts of the case are the same whether or not Togami and Naegi are involved.”

“Yes, the evidence does stand even without that aspect,” Ogami agreed. “The question of alibis is difficult to put aside.”

“And the blueprints,” Hagakure added, pointing to the papers Celeste had produced. “I totally saw them, right there in your room! How’d they get there if you didn’t build that suit?”

“Obviously someone else put them there,” Togami said, rolling his eyes. “They could easily have used my room key after knocking me out.”

“Then how come it has your notes all over it?” Hagakure grabbed one of the papers and waved it triumphantly. “Look, it’s right here in your own handwriting –”
“No! That’s wrong!”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Naegi finally joins in the trial arguments.

Everyone stopped mid-argument when Naegi shouted, slamming his hands down. His shoulders shook as he gripped the edge of the podium, but his face burned with a determination made all the fiercer by the red rimming his eyes. Even in the middle of the trial ground, under fire from the rest of the students, it set an answering fire blazing in Togami’s chest to see Naegi like that.

“That’s not Togami’s handwriting,” Naegi said, his voice strong and clear in the silent room. “Here, take a look at this.” He reached into his pocket and produced a folded paper – one that Togami recognized as the note he’d slipped under Naegi’s door the previous night. “Togami gave me this note, and it’s obviously different from the writing on the blueprints.”

“How do we know that Togami really wrote that?” Asahina asked, squinting at it.

“You don’t have to take my word for it.” Naegi looked over, and his eyes saw right through to Togami’s soul. “You can write something now, in front of everyone, and we can compare.”

“Here, use this.” Kirigiri tossed a notebook and pen at him.

Togami paused, then wrote “You’re all idiots” in his distinctively bold handwriting. He made a point to write as quickly as possible, to deflect any accusations that he could have forged the handwriting on the note. He held up the notebook for everyone to see.

“You see? The writing doesn’t match at all,” Naegi said. “So Togami couldn’t have been the one who made those blueprints, no matter where you found them.”

“Unless he disguised his handwriting when creating the blueprints,” Celeste pointed out.

“No, the differences are bigger than that,” Ogami said, looking from one paper to the other.

“And why would he bother to disguise his handwriting if he was going to leave the blueprints in his own room?” Naegi added.

“Wait, so – you’re serious about this?” Asahina asked, a puzzled frown replacing her fury. “You aren’t just lovesick and confused? You really think Togami didn’t do it?”

“It’s not just him,” Kirigiri spoke up. “I don’t believe that Togami is the killer, either.”

“You, too?” Asahina’s frown deepened. “Then was it someone else in the Robo Justice suit after all?”

“Well, no,” Naegi said. “Only Togami could have fit in that suit, we saw that when we were all out by the pool.”

“So then how can you claim it wasn’t him who committed the murders?” Celeste asked.
“Because of the way the bodies were moved,” Kirigiri said. “Naegi, you were there for this part of it. Tell the others what happened?”

“Me?” Naegi blinked. “Um – all right. Well, the bodies must’ve been moved with the dolly and the tarp we found in the repository, right? Before we found the bodies, those things had been in the equipment room, where we found Ishimaru’s body the first time.”

“Precisely,” Kirigiri said, with a sharp nod. “And what did we all see when we examined the suit?”

“That whoever was wearing it couldn’t bend over or see their feet!” Naegi answered without missing a beat. “So the person in the Robo Justice suit wouldn’t have been able to operate the dolly to move Ishimaru’s body!”

Kirigiri smiled faintly back at Naegi in the face of his excitement. Togami scowled. They worked together seamlessly, didn’t they?

“Couldn’t they have just taken off the suit to move the body, though?” Hagakure asked, frowning.

“No, I don’t think so,” Naegi said. “Kirigiri told us she had to help Togami get it off, remember? And Asahina couldn’t get it fastened when she tried it on.”

“That’s true,” Ogami said slowly. “It would be impossible to put the suit on or take it off without help.”

“Believe me, if I could have gotten that ghastly thing off on my own, I would have,” Togami said, grimacing. “I certainly wouldn’t have let you all see me wearing it.”

“It wouldn’t make sense if he was the killer,” Naegi said, a smile spreading across his face, “but it makes perfect sense if someone else wanted us to think he was the killer.”

“That’s just what you want to think!”

The words came from Fukawa, the first thing she’d said since the trial began. Her dark stare in Naegi’s direction, glinting behind her glasses, sent chills down Togami’s spine.

“You only believe it because my White Knight deceived us all,” she went on, braids flying around her as she leaned forward. “He made us think he’d fallen, but it was all nothing more than a ploy. He never changed! Everything he did was just to make you trust him.”

Togami opened his mouth to tell her to shut up – and hesitated. The last set of orders he’d given her had ended poorly. Who knew what would happen if he told her to do something now?

“That’s not it!” Naegi didn’t have any qualms about arguing with her, though. “Weren’t you listening?”

“Oh, I was listening to you blabber, all right,” Fukawa said. “And do you know what I didn’t hear you explain? Celeste’s photo of Yamada getting dragged away by Robo Justice! And then Yamada even said Robo Justice was the one who attacked him! So whatever else you say, it just proves that he succeeded in deceiving you. He isn’t what you thought – he’s just been using you to try to win!”

“What it means,” Kirigiri interrupted, “is that this case is far from a simple series of events. We’re faced with contradictions at every turn.” She crossed her arms and surveyed them all. “There’s no need for us to rush to decide on the killer. We should be sure to consider every possibility. I think that the only way to move forward is to consider each murder as a separate situation.” She thought
for a moment. “Let’s start with what happened to Ishimaru.”

“Wait, but shouldn’t we start by talking about Yamada?” Asahina asked. “He got attacked first, didn’t he? The Justice Hammers proved it.”

“No, they don’t,” Naegi said. “We can’t just assume the hammers were used in the same order as the numbers. And when I saw Ishimaru’s wristwatch, it had broken just after six o’clock.”

“It must have broken when he got attacked by the killer,” Kirigiri added. “After all, the rest of us saw it working when he told us how late Naegi and Togami were last night, near ten – which means the attack must have occurred around six this morning.”

“That’s before Yamada’s attack,” Naegi said. “It’s even before Celeste got attacked at seven. We were mistaken about the order of the attacks because of the numbering on the Justice Hammers.”

Togami nodded, seeing the pieces come together. “That’s why the killer numbered the hammers and had them increase in size – to encourage us to make that wrong assumption.”

“And that means that none of us has an alibi for Ishimaru’s death,” Kirigiri went on.

“But it doesn’t change the facts about Yamada’s death,” Ogami pointed out. “All our alibis hold true for that one.”

“Yeah, we heard him scream and everything,” Asahina said. “Everyone was together then except for Togami and Kirigiri.”

“And there is also the matter of when the bodies disappeared,” Celeste said. “When Yamada’s body vanished, Asahina and I were together in the bathroom, while the others were in the equipment room. And when Ishimaru’s body disappeared, we were all in the nurse’s office. Only Togami and Kirigiri had the opportunity to move the bodies during these times.”

Togami looked at Kirigiri for a moment, wondering – but no, this was still part of the culprit’s trap. Everything about the alibis had been arranged too exactly, and he’d be a fool to let it distract him. Her disappearance still raised questions, but those could wait until the trial was finished.

“We shouldn’t be thinking about the who right now,” Kirigiri said, echoing Togami’s own thoughts. “We need to focus on the how.”

“That’s right,” Naegi said, tapping a finger against his chin. “Someone dragged Yamada’s body out of the nurse’s office during the minute that Celeste and Asahina were gone. We have to figure out how they did it.”

And then Togami saw it, in a flash of clarity, and he could have kicked himself for missing something so obvious.

Kirigiri smirked. “What if I told you the dead body moved on its own?”

Hagakure went pale and clutched at his hair. “No, not another ghost!”

Togami glowered at him. Trust Hagakure to drag the discussion into idiocy whenever possible. “That’s not what she meant. She’s implying that Yamada wasn’t actually dead at that point, and simply left the nurse’s office by walking out on his own.”

“I knew my White Knight wouldn’t give up without a fight!” Fukawa clasped her hands to her chest and gazed at him, her smile tilting crazily. “He’s still spinning a web of lies to ensnare us, to
“drag us down into the pits of hell.”

“Indeed,” Celeste agreed. “We all heard the body discover announcement when Yamada’s body was found in the nurse’s office, did we not?”

“But that was the same time Ishimaru’s body was found in the equipment room,” Naegi said. “We don’t know for sure which body the announcement was for. But we did hear a second announcement – later on, when we rediscovered the bodies in the repository.”

“What do you say, Monokuma?” Togami turned to the robot bear sitting over them all on his throne. “Do you replay the announcement for multiple discoveries?”

“Well, it’s a very sensitive issue,” Monokuma said. “All I can tell you is that the body discovery announcement is only broadcast when three or more people discover a body for the first time.”

“So that means that finding the same body a second time wouldn’t result in another announcement,” Togami said. “In fact, it means that if Yamada was dead in the nurse’s office, you should have heard two announcements at the same time, instead of one then and another later.”

“And it’s not just that,” Naegi added, as soon as Togami had finished. “I have another reason for thinking Yamada was still alive in the nurse’s office. When we found him there, we all saw the blood on his glasses – but later, in the repository, his glasses were clean again. I even found a glasses cleaning cloth in the nurse’s office trash can, covered in blood.” Naegi produced a bloody rag, and even from across the circle it was obvious that the thing had one of Yamada’s stupid anime characters on it.

“So if Yamada was still alive in the nurse’s office, the disappearance of Ishimaru’s body is easily explained,” Kirigiri said, taking up the thread from Naegi without a pause. “He must have moved the body himself while the rest of you went down to the nurse’s office.”

“And that would explain how the repository door got locked,” Naegi said. “Asahina and I both found that door locked, but it only locks from the inside. Yamada must have done it while he was storing Ishimaru’s body in there, while we were searching the school.”

“So Yamada wasn’t just a victim in this case – he was one of the assailants,” Kirigiri concluded, a faint smile on her lips as she finally paused the wall of arguments, giving the others in the group a chance to speak.

“Then – you think he took part in the murders?” Ogami asked, stunned.

“Absolutely. There’s even more evidence to prove it,” Kirigiri said. “The single biggest fact pointing to his involvement has yet to be revealed.”

Naegi nodded. “You mean the note Yamada had hidden, right?” He pulled it out and held it up for them all to see. “Look, it says to meet the writer in the equipment room at six o’clock – that’s the same time and place that Ishimaru was attacked. The killer must have used this to lure Ishimaru out of his room.”

“But you just said Yamada had the note, not Ishimaru,” Asahina protested.

“Because he probably stole it from Ishimaru’s corpse,” Naegi said. “We also found this scrap of paper clutched in Ishimaru’s hand.” He pulled it out and put it next to the note, showing everyone how the torn lines on the two papers fit together perfectly.

“And if Yamada knew the note was important enough to try to take it, then he must have been an
accomplice in the murder,” Kirigiri said.

“But – wait, then who killed Yamada?” Asahina asked.

“Whoever did it could only have killed him after Ishimaru’s body disappeared, but before we rediscovered the bodies,” Ogami said slowly. “That was when we had split up to search for the bodies – meaning that none of us have alibis for that time period.”

“So after Yamada moved Ishimaru’s body to the repository, someone else killed him,” Kirigiri said. “That person can only be the true culprit in this case – the one who was working with Yamada, but then betrayed him.”

“Which is e-e-exactly the sort of thing my White Knight would do!” Fukawa said, clenching her fists. “He’d only pretend to work with one of you – he wouldn’t really join forces with anyone!”

“That is a fair assessment,” Celeste said. “But I do not see why you all seem to believe that anyone would work together in the first place. We discussed this already, did we not? An accomplice has no chance of benefitting from a crime, since only a single blackened can graduate from a murder.”

“But there were two murders,” Naegi said. “So isn’t it at least plausible that there could be two killers?”

“With two murders, there could be one blackened per death,” Kirigiri said. “That opens the possibility of mutual benefit from cooperation – two killers who could also act as each other’s accomplices.”

“Everything occurred seamlessly to make us all think there was only one person killing multiple people, but that was just part of the killer’s plan,” Naegi said.

“Which means that everything was set up perfectly to allow the true culprit to betray and murder Yamada,” Togami said. “The betrayal must have been part of the plan from the beginning.”

“Didn’t I s-say so?” Fukawa said, a half-smile twisting her face.

Togami scowled at her. “Are you suggesting that I’m arguing now to foil my own plan? Be serious.”

Fukawa jerked back. “But – no, it has to be you. Everything would make s-sense if it were you!”

“No, it doesn’t!” Naegi insisted, leaning forward with his eyes flashing – and even in the middle of the trial, seeing Naegi so fierce in his defense sent a rush of unexpected warmth through Togami. “Everything the killer did was designed to deflect suspicion away from them and onto Togami. At this point, he should be the only one we don’t suspect!”

“Then who was it?” Ogami asked, frowning as she thought. “If it wasn’t Togami, then who was the one pulling Yamada’s strings?”

All eyes moved around the circle, each of them studying the others as they wondered. But with the way the case had played out, there was only one choice left. Togami let his gaze turn to the culprit, seeing that Kirigiri did the same. They were obviously of the same mind on this question.

But it was Naegi who finally raised a hand to make it definite as he pointed at Celeste. “You’re the only one!”
Celeste didn’t flinch as all eyes turned to her. “Oh, really? So I’m the suspicious individual now? I really do hate this kind of joke.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her as she smiled innocently. So she was the one who had done it – who had tried to frame him for her crime. He’d wondered who she really was, underneath the constant gothic persona she wore. Well, now he knew – and he intended to leave her elegant cloak of lies in shreds by the time he was done making her pay.

“A joke?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “I don’t think you have anything to laugh about. There’s proof that you and Yamada were working together – the behavior we saw throughout the investigation only from the two of you.”

“You mean the Robo Justice suit, don’t you?” Naegi said. “In the whole investigation, Celeste and Yamada were the only ones to see him.”

“Exactly.” Togami couldn’t help but smile across the circle at Naegi. “If I’d been there for the events themselves, I would have caught it sooner. All accounts of anyone seeing the costumed individual came from one of you. Now that we’ve proved Yamada’s involvement in the case, his account is suspect – and that means your claims are equally suspicious.”

“Because Celeste was the one who saw a shape on the stairs after we left the nurse’s office!” Naegi’s words were addressed to the whole circle, but his eyes never left Togami’s. “And then later, we only went to the third floor because she screamed.”

“And that was the signal for her partner to get to work,” Togami said. “Back in the nurse’s office, Yamada screamed himself, creating a scenario where you would all have to divide into two groups to address both problems – and where you would discover both bodies at the same time.”

Naegi nodded. “Celeste was even the one who suggested that we split up in the first place. And it’s not just that – in the nurse’s office, she was the first one to say that Yamada had been murdered, even though we know now he wasn’t actually dead at that point.”

“She wanted to control your reactions and ensure none of you doubted the apparent murder,” Togami agreed. “Since any investigation of the body at that point would have revealed her ruse. Each piece isn’t much by itself, but put together and the picture looks very ugly indeed.” He broke his gaze away from Naegi’s to turn and smirk at Celeste. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“No, I would not.” Celeste’s smile didn’t falter. “You may claim it looks however you wish, but it is only your word that this is anything more than a series of coincidences.”

“No, it’s more than that,” Naegi said, drawing her attention from Togami to him. “There’s one thing you said that coincidence can’t explain away. When Yamada’s body disappeared and we all went back to the nurse’s office, you said that we were all wondering if we’d die just like ‘those
guys’ – but at that point, no one had told you about Ishimaru’s death yet. We didn’t even meet you until we were back in the hall, so you couldn’t have seen the body, either.”

“And at that point, Kirigiri had disappeared as well,” Togami added, bringing Celeste’s head swinging back towards him. “So if that is what you said, you would have had no reason to assume it was another male who had died, when it could just as easily have been her.”

“Can you explain it, Celeste?” Naegi asked, leaning forward over his podium. “Do you have some other explanation?”

Celeste’s gaze darted from Naegi to Togami and back again before she clasped her hands with her most unyieldingly innocent smile yet. “You both have such vivid imaginations. But I do not have to explain anything – it is the two of you who must explain the photo I took of the costumed villain dragging Yamada away. After all, this is definitive evidence, is it not? Much more convincing than your fanciful tales.”

Togami frowned, looking at the photo again. He knew he hadn’t dragged Yamada anywhere, and they’d already established no one but him could wear that ridiculous costume. The idea of a second identical costume made for someone else was too nonsensical to even consider – they would have turned it up if it existed. He looked across the circle at Naegi – but the other boy’s face was equally blank.

“Are we sure that’s really a picture of the suspect dragging Yamada away?”

Kirigiri’s words cut through the stalemate, drawing their attention to her. She tapped one gloved finger against her chin as she thought, apparently unmoved by their gazes.

“There is nothing else this picture could show,” Celeste said flatly.

“I think there is,” Kirigiri said. “It could just as easily be a picture of Yamada dragging the suspect. With the costume covering the suspect’s face, there is no way to judge what they’re doing from the photo alone – or if they’re even conscious.”

“That’s right,” Naegi said. “Because the suit couldn’t bend at the waist, the person inside would have to stand upright like that even if they were knocked out.”

“Quite a strange design flaw,” Togami said. “Well, strange unless that was part of your plan all along – to build a costume specifically designed to make the person inside it look guilty.” He smirked. “I suppose this is checkmate.”

Celeste jerked back away from her podium, a thin trickle of sweat visible on her cheek as her eyes darted around the trio facing her from the circle. Togami drank in the look on her face with satisfaction – yes, there it was, the crack in her perfect façade.

But then, as if it had never happened, her usual smile snapped back into place, and she raised a graceful hand to her lips to cover a laugh. It started as a delicate sound, like tinkling bells, but then it didn’t stop, spiraling out into wild peals of hysterics until she slammed her hand down on the podium and screamed.

“Don’t make me laugh, you idiot! What do you mean, checkmate?” Her voice had changed entirely, rough and sharp and lacking any of her usual elegance. “You want to call me guilty? Have you already forgotten about what Yamada said when he was dying? We asked who had attacked him, and he didn’t start to say Celestia Ludenberg, did he? No, the name he tried to say began with a T! In other words, Byakuya Togami!”
Togami rolled his eyes. “A letter isn’t a name. He could have been trying to say anything.”

“No, I’m pretty sure he was trying to say a name,” Asahina said, shaking her head.

“But that doesn’t mean he was trying to say Togami,” Kirigiri said. “After all, Yamada always referred to everyone by their full names, not just by their last names.”

“Then are you suggesting that he was trying to accuse Toko Fukawa?” Ogami asked, puzzled.

“M-me?” Fukawa jerked back, sending a poisonous glare around the room. “Of course you’d all think–”

“No one thinks that,” Naegi reassured her. “Because there’s one other person he could have meant – one person whose real name we still don’t know.” He pinned his gaze on Celeste. “You never actually told us your real name.”

“Oh, really? Then open you earholes up real wide and listen!” Celeste’s voice shook with rage as she tried and failed to maintain her calm demeanor. “My name is Celestia Ludenberg! It’s the truth, and none of you have any way to contradict me!”

“Maybe we don’t, but your e-handbook does,” Naegi said. “It shows the owner’s name when you turn it on, right? So if we just look at Celeste’s e-handbook, we can see what her real name is.” His expression turned pleading. “Come on, Celeste – can’t you tell us the truth about what happened?”

Celeste glared at him. “I refuse to cooperate! Even put in check, it is not in my nature to give up! Until the game’s over, you never know what might happen!”

“Fine.” Naegi’s eyes blazed with determination. “Then let me go over the whole case, from beginning to end, and shed light on all your crimes.”

Naegi’s summation ran through all the details of the case, missing nothing, as relentless as the rising tide. Togami smiled, listening to Naegi call on proof after proof of his innocence, watching each piece of evidence slam home into Celeste like a bullet. Her gothic poise lay shattered around her like broken glass, leaving her exposed for the liar and murderer she was. And even as her world fell apart around her, Naegi didn’t stop, an avenging angel wielding weapons of pure truth. Nothing could have torn Togami’s eyes away from him in that moment.

“And the villain behind it all is Celeste!” Naegi concluded, pointing across the circle. “Sorry, you lose!”

“I lost?” Celeste drew back. “When was the last time I was forced to utter those words?”

“Then you admit you’re the killer?” Naegi pressed.

“Heh. Listen to you.” Her elegant poise returned, but it settled unsteadily on her shoulders now that they’d seen what was beneath. “I, Celestia Ludenberg –” But then she stopped, and something fell away from her face as she stared off into nothing. “Actually, no.” Her voice had changed, the exotic accent disappearing to leave only plain, ordinary words. “No. Taeko Yasuhiro is fine.”

“Taeko?” A smile curled across Togami’s lips at that final admission. “So you’ve finally accepted it.”

Celeste shrugged. “Once I’ve lost, I don’t like things to drag on.” She looked up to the throne at the head of the circle. “Okay, Monokuma. I’m ready to begin – or no, I suppose this is the end, isn’t it?”
Celeste explains the motive behind her murders, and the third class trial comes to a close.

There wasn’t much of a choice as they all reached for their voting levers – not when Celeste had admitted her guilt in that final moment. Togami didn’t hesitate to select Celeste from the options, and from the speed with which the vote concluded, no one else had had many doubts either.

Celeste watched the flashing lights settle on her image with an explosion of multicolored confetti. “So I lost. Well, that sucks.”

“Your biggest mistake was trying to frame me instead of someone more believable,” Togami told her. “No one capable of using their brains would really think that I would wear something as ludicrous as that costume if I were going to kill someone. Your ploy was flawed from the start.”

“Was it?” She shrugged. “Framing you meant that you missed most of the investigation, and it left Naegi emotionally unbalanced. When I told Yamada what kind of disguise we would need, I didn’t expect him to make something like… that. I guess trying to work with someone else was a mistake, after all.”

“But how did you get Yamada to agree to commit murder?” Kirigiri asked. “Did you use…?”

“Ah, of course you would figure it out.” Celeste smiled at Kirigiri. “For those of you who are still left, I’ll avoid mentioning it by name, but yes. I used the one thing that both Yamada and Ishimaru were obsessed with.”

The plan Celeste explained to them certainly did highlight her talent for lying – but on the other hand, fooling someone like Yamada wouldn’t exactly have been difficult. Togami wasn’t inclined to give Celeste any credit at all, not after everything she’d put them through – and especially not since one of her lies had apparently been to try to undermine Naegi’s faith in him.

“And Yamada believed the lies wholeheartedly, right up to the moment of his death,” Celeste finished, idly twisting a curl around her finger.

“How can human life mean so little to you?” Asahina demanded, her outrage clear.

Celeste looked puzzled. “But that’s a non-issue. I simply did everything in my power to win.”

“But you sound like Togami!” Hagakure accused.

But before Togami could sneer at this statement as it deserved, Celeste looked sharply over at Hagakure, with more animation than she’d shown since she’d admitted her name. “Oh? I sound like him, is that it? Do I sound lovesick and brainwashed into remaining here forever? Do I sound like my resolve to leave has been broken?”
Togami stared at her. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t you know? But Monokuma spelled it out for us during that assembly.” Without her gothic façade, Celeste’s red stare was somehow even more unsettling as it landed on Togami. “By connecting yourself to Naegi, you lost the will to graduate. Having a strong attachment to any of the others forces a player to bow out of the game – even someone like you, who started out so determined to win. Mere days, and your resolve was gone.”

“My resolve is perfectly intact,” Togami gritted out. “I’ve just refocused it on a more appropriate goal.”

“And is that how you would have viewed it when we began the killing game?” Celeste countered. “You changed. Your interaction with another player turned you into something that your original self would find unrecognizable and repellant – and it happened without your knowing.”

“Then it’s just that you were upset about that?” Asahina asked in disbelief. “You decided to murder two people because Togami and Naegi started dating?”

“Not because it happened to them,” Celeste said calmly. “Because I didn’t want it to happen to me. When Monokuma made that announcement, I could see the threat facing us all – the one that Togami succumbed to. The more time I spent around all of you, the greater the chance that one of you might affect me enough to break my own resolve and force me to give up on the one thing that matters most to me right now. You see, from the moment our new life here began, my only thought has been escape.”

“But you’ve been telling us about how we should all just accept living here!” Hagakure protested.

“Obviously that was a lie!” Celeste snarled, fury smashing through her forced calmness as she glared. “I couldn’t take it! I hated it here more than anyone else! I wanted to get out! Every day was fresh torture! Do you have any idea what it was like to realize that one of you could make me accept it? That every agonizing second in this pit dragged me closer to staying here for good? I couldn’t accept that – not when a life here would mean giving up on my dream forever.”

“We all have dreams, you know,” Ogami said. “Things we want that we can’t do in here.”

“But if you won’t kill for them, then there is something else that you value more,” Celeste said, her mask slipping on again as she smiled. “And I will not place a higher value on anything than on my dream – not after risking my life time and again in the underground world of gambling just for a chance to achieve it.”

“What dream are you talking about?” Asahina asked. “What could be worth it?”

“To live in a European castle.” Celeste smiled sweetly. As she elaborated on her warped plan to create a gothic castle filled with vampire cosplayers, any trace of sympathy evaporated off the other students’ faces.

“I would never have had the chance to make it a reality from within these walls,” she said at last. “But it seems my dream has been scattered to the winds. Still, I pursued my dream to the very end, so I don’t have any regrets.”

“But you didn’t have to take it so far!” The words seemed to catch in Naegi’s throat, and when Togami looked over at him, he saw that the other boy looked crushed at Celeste’s explanation. “If – if all you really wanted was to get out, then – then if we’d just worked together –”

“Do you really believe that?” Celeste looked at Naegi, seeming almost puzzled by his misery.
“Well, perhaps you do. But I have lived my life as a gambler, you see, and I play by a gambler’s rules.” She leaned forward. “You can win against the other players, but you can never beat the house. I think nothing of sacrificing other people for my own ends. That is how different our values are. There is simply no room for understanding.”

“How can you be so calm about it?” Asahina asked. “You’re about to die! Aren’t you scared?”

Celeste looked at her. “My ability to lie is unrivaled. It’s not just others – I can even deceive my own emotions. So I don’t fear death. Kill me however you like.”

But when she tried to smile, the expression shook on her face, a weak mockery of her words. So she was afraid after all. Togami narrowed his eyes at her, remembering those moments in the locker after he’d heard the first body discovery announcement when bone-deep terror for Naegi’s wellbeing struck him. What she felt now had to be exponentially worse than what she’d inflicted on him, not the worry over a possibility, but the dread of an approaching certainty. Good.

“You all done then?” Monokuma’s cheerful voice rang out. “Good, then let’s get rolling!”

“Then I’ll let you hold on to this.” Celeste passed a key over to Kirigiri. “I don’t know if it will give you the hope you’re looking for. I didn’t believe it would, but maybe –” She stopped and shook her head. “Well, it doesn’t matter. Take care, everyone.”

“Let’s give it everything we’ve got!” Monokuma said, not giving anyone else a chance to answer. “It’s punishment time!”

The chains shot out of the wall to lock around Celeste’s neck and haul her away. On the wall across the room, the elaborate creamy curtains on one of the false windows fell away to reveal a real window, looking out on a gothic castle courtyard.

Not wanting to get closer, but knowing Monokuma would force them to watch, the remaining students slowly stepped away from their podiums and made their way to the window. Togami started to seek out Naegi as he went, only to find that the other boy was already at his side, standing just close enough for their arms to brush together. That wasn’t enough, though, not after all this. Togami didn’t draw attention by looking away from the window, but he quietly let his hand slip over so his fingers could interlock with Naegi’s. And as a stake rose up in the middle of the courtyard, revealing Celeste tied to it, Naegi gripped his hand in return.

Junko leaned back in her chair and grinned as her firetruck smashed Celeste to pieces. Now that was what she called a job well done – or should it be medium rare, since the flames hadn’t had a chance to burn? Hah, Celeste would have hated that pun, wouldn’t she? Too bad there wasn’t enough of her left to make faces about it now.

Now, how were her precious classmates taking it? The shock of death could be so brutal. Junko switched her control from the castle to the Monokuma on the trial grounds, basking in the horrified expressions before her. Asahina looked like she was going to be sick, poor dear, and Ogami was too caught up in her hypocritical fury to notice. And –

Oh. Oh, dear. What was that? Junko tilted the Monokuma’s head, trying to move the camera to get a better look.

Standing in the center of the group, Naegi certainly looked just as horrorstricken as she’d expected, eyes trembling and shoulders quivering like he might burst into an adorable mess of tears. It was all perfectly appropriate for a kind boy who’d just seen one of his dear friends die painfully. And next
to him, Togami stood cold and aloof, only the faintest hint of creases around his eyes and mouth suggesting that he’d seen anything appalling – again, just how he ought to look.

The part that made Junko frown was the way their hands clasped together, a tiny instance of strength in the middle of despair.

It was sweet. It was a touching reaffirmation of their feelings for each other.

It was *boring*.

Junko drummed her fingers on the console, all her delight for her darling classmates draining away. Everything she’d done before, the embarrassing assemblies and heart-shaped confetti – it all sounded so tedious now. Who cared if the boys were staring at each other like googly-eyed sheep?

It was time for a new approach.

Chapter End Notes

So the third class trial is over, but the story itself is not. I do intend to keep going through the end of the game, with more changes as everything has more and more of an impact.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

The students deal with the aftermath of the third class trial.

Through Celeste’s entire execution and Monokuma’s subsequent taunts, Togami couldn’t bring himself to let go of Naegi’s hand. The whole group could see – and judging by a few glances in that direction, they had – but he hardly cared what they thought about it at this point. Not when the warm pressure on his hand gave him a physical reminder that they’d survived another trial intact, and that Naegi was alive and beside him.

It could so easily have gone another way. Not that they could have lost, of course – once they were all arrayed against her on the trial ground, Celeste hadn’t had a chance. But if she’d chosen to let things play out differently – if she’d actually gone to the furthest extreme of making it look like he’d just been using Naegi –

The thought still made him shiver. Their position in this school really was precarious, wasn’t it? He’d known that something could happen at any point, but now the realization truly hit home. One of the others could still turn against them – and while an intelligent person wouldn’t try something too similar to Celeste’s attempt, some of the remaining students could hardly be accused of intelligence.

He would have to start taking further precautions. Disappearing on his own might have been a reasonable thing to do when it was only his own safety he needed to worry about, but it had become a poor move now that Naegi was a factor. It wasn’t just last night, when he’d been distracted enough for the killers to grab him – by separating himself from Naegi, he’d created a weakness between them that Celeste had been able to exploit.

The connection between Naegi and himself meant that he had to consider them a unit in his calculations. He had to take himself into account as part of a pair, not as an individual. It was a new way of thinking, one that felt strange to him after so many years of working on his own – but he would just have to learn to do it. He was not going to leave himself vulnerable again.

And one of the things that meant was that he needed to resolve his argument with Naegi. He hadn’t changed his mind about there being a traitor amongst them – if anything, the events of this trial left him more convinced of it than ever – and he still doubted he could convince Naegi to doubt one of the other students, not without definitive proof. But there had to be some kind of middle ground, didn’t there? There had to be some way that they could just agree to leave the issue alone until he could find the evidence he needed to convince Naegi.

But it wasn’t just the argument. If they were a unit, that meant that whatever was happening between them couldn’t be left to stand on its own. Even if Naegi had fought for Togami throughout the whole trial, part of the reason he’d needed to do it was that they had left holes in everything they’d shared. Anything that they left vague or undefined between them was a potential target, and any point where their connection was weak was a point where someone could try to shatter it. Togami had no intention of allowing anything like that to happen, not again. He needed to make Naegi understand that, as well.
Finally, Monokuma stopped his blathering and disappeared, leaving the rest of the students as alone as they ever got in the presence of the security cameras.

“Hey, Kirigiri?” Naegi asked, turning a little away from Togami to face the girl. “What was that key that Celeste gave you?”

Kirigiri smiled, touching the pocket where she’d stowed the key. “It’s most likely the key to one of the dressing room lockers.”

Togami nodded. “So Celeste probably hid it in there.”

“Well, then we’d better go check,” Ogami said.

They left the trial ground to pile into the elevator, and frankly Togami was glad to leave the overwrought room of gothic midnight behind for good. But when they approached the dressing room, Kirigiri stopped.

“I’m going to go on alone from here. Everyone else go to the dining hall. I’ll check in with you later.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her, his suspicions about her disappearance resurfacing now that the trial had ended. “Why exactly are you going alone?”

“Do you even have to ask?” Her eyes flickered towards the surveillance cameras, quickly enough that only the most observant person could catch it.

“That’s not what I meant,” Togami snapped. As if she thought that he of all people would forget that the cameras watched their every move. “Why you? There’s still the risk of a spy, you know.”

He knew Naegi wouldn’t like hearing that – but it had to be said. Kirigiri might be an asset in the trials, but in the rest of the school, she couldn’t be trusted. Anyone who went to the lengths she took to remain mysterious had a reason to remain an unknown quantity. That would be the safest identity for a traitor to assume – one that involved revealing as little as possible about the past. And with his suspicions about her, Togami knew he wouldn’t trust anything she reported about whether Alter Ego was there or not.

But then Naegi’s hand slipped out of his. “Then I’ll go, too.” And Naegi actually walked away from him to stand beside Kirigiri.

“What?” Togami stared at Naegi, his hand feeling unexpectedly cold and empty now that Naegi had let it go. “You?”

“You’ll believe it if we both say the same thing, right?” Naegi said.

The others all nodded, as if their opinions mattered at all. Togami looked from Naegi to Kirigiri and back again. Don’t go with her, he wanted to say. Don’t trust her, don’t be alone with her. Stay with me where I can make sure you’re safe.

But he knew Naegi wouldn’t – not without a fight, anyway. And a noisy, attention-getting fight was one thing they couldn’t afford to have right now.

“Do whatever you want,” Togami said, turning and heading towards the cafeteria. At least if he walked away first, he wouldn’t have to see Naegi go off with Kirigiri.

“Thank you, Togami,” he heard Naegi say behind him.
It wasn’t much, but – well, hadn’t he just realized that fighting only left them open to attack? So before he disappeared through the cafeteria doors, he glanced back just once over his shoulder, caught Naegi’s eye, and lifted the hand Naegi had been holding in a brief wave. The bright smile Naegi sent him in return proved it had been the right decision.

In the dining hall, Togami quickly claimed one of the smaller tables for himself, leaving the others to congregate around the larger table. As they all drifted in and settled down to wait, though, their eyes kept sliding towards him, presumably when they thought he wasn’t looking. Togami scowled down at the table and pretended he didn’t notice. Waiting for something – what a pointless waste of time, and he didn’t even have a book to try to keep the boredom away. Maybe he should try to go up to the library instead –

Footsteps sounded across the room, and Togami looked up to see Asahina approaching him. “What do you want?”

“Well, I wanted to talk to you.” She clasped her hands, looking rather dejected. “Or – I guess I wanted to apologize to you. I guess some of the things we said about you weren’t true after all.”

“No, they weren’t,” Togami said coldly. “You were entirely drawn in to Celeste’s web of lies, and if it had been left to you, we’d all be dead and she would have won.”

Asahina drooped at his words. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.” She bit her lip, and seemed to muster some scraps of determination. So then, this would be what she’d actually come here to say, not that joke of an apology. “Uh, Togami? Since you’re not the culprit, does that mean you’re really going to be on our side now?”

Togami rolled his eyes. “Ugh. Don’t say it like that, you’ll make me ill.”

“Well, it’s true?” Asahina pressed. Togami looked behind her, and he could see that Hagakure, Ogami, and Fukawa were all listening in without a pretense of doing anything else. “Everything about Naegi making you not want to kill us anymore – that was for real?”

“Killing the rest of you still wouldn’t bother me,” Togami said, raising his voice a little so the eavesdroppers could get it clearly as well.

“That’s a lie.” The words came from Fukawa, a low rumble that rolled across the room. “Nothing but a filthy lie.” She looked up and her eyes found his, and Togami found himself leaning back in his chair at the intensity of her gaze. “Celeste was right. You can’t kill any of us anymore. You gave up.”

Togami didn’t really want to encourage her by addressing her directly, but he couldn’t let that stand. “I’ve done nothing of the sort. If you’d bothered to think about it, you’d see that. I’ve switched my sights to the greater target, that’s all. Instead of trying to defeat you lot, I intend to bring down the mastermind.”

“Really?” Fukawa laughed, dry and brittle, and her shoulders shook with it till it looked like she might fall to pieces. “You think y-y-you can do that? Because my White Knight could have, but you?” She shot to her feet so fast that her chair crashed to the floor behind her, splintering to pieces as it hit the ground. “You’re just another stupid boy.”

And with that, she headed for the door and left, braids streaming behind her.

Togami huffed out a sigh as soon as she was gone. “Good riddance.”

Asahina turned to him in disbelief. “You haven’t changed much, have you?” She shook her head. “I
hope you’re nicer to Naegi.”

Togami didn’t bother to answer, and eventually Asahina shrugged and went back to her seat between Ogami and Hagakure.

Togami tried not to watch the clock, but it was hard not to keep track of the minutes that slipped away. What were Kirigiri and Naegi doing in that dressing room? How much could an AI stored on a laptop possibly have to say to them?

He just hoped it hadn’t been a mistake, letting Naegi go off with Kirigiri alone. He didn’t think she’d do anything to him, not when they all knew perfectly well that he’d been alone with her – but there were things she could try other than physical harm. She could tell him lies, try to trick him – and Naegi was so nice that he would believe her until he had hard evidence that he shouldn’t.

Togami had just started considering whether he ought to go check on them when finally – finally – the dining hall door opened, and Kirigiri entered.

And then the door swung shut again behind her, and she crossed calmly to take a seat like she hadn’t expected anything else.

Togami stared blankly at the closed door for a moment, then strode over to Kirigiri and slammed his hands down on either side of the chair. “Where the hell is Naegi? What did you do to him?”
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Naegi has disappeared after going off with Kirigiri, and Togami tries not to worry about it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kirigiri didn’t bat an eye at Togami’s snarl, even though he was mere inches from her face. “I haven’t done anything to Naegi. He left to take care of something else, that’s all.”

“Oh, really? Then what was it?” Togami demanded. “Why wouldn’t he come back?”

“You’ll have to ask him about that.” Kirigiri dropped her eyes to his hands. “You can move back now.”

Togami briefly considered shoving her chair backwards and sending the coolly confident girl sprawling across the floor – but that wouldn’t achieve anything. Being petty was only worth it when the victim would react, and he knew she wouldn’t. He took his hands off the chair and took a single step back.

“Good,” Kirigiri said. “Now –”

“When will he be coming back?”

She shot him an irritated glance. “Later on, I expect.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“What it sounds like,” she said. “Do you want to know what we found or not? The nighttime announcement will be coming any minute.”

The two needs for knowledge warred in Togami’s head for a moment as he considered her. “The whole point of having a second person along was that he’d be able to verify what you tell us.”

“And he will,” Kirigiri said. “Later.”

Togami scowled. He didn’t like that answer at all – but the nighttime curfew would start soon. If he wanted to hear what Kirigiri had to say tonight, this would be his only chance. And Naegi was always very scrupulous about obeying the group’s self-imposed curfew – even if he’d gone off somewhere, he’d return to meet them in the dining hall before the announcement sounded.

Though it didn’t do Kirigiri any favors in terms of Togami’s suspicions that Naegi just happened to be gone when she would be revealing information about Alter Ego, even after the objections to that scenario. Still, he’d definitely verify everything she said with Naegi later, point by point, and if she’d lied about anything – well, that would be the proof he needed about her.

“Fine,” he said at last, claiming one of the other chairs at the main table. “Get on with it, then.”
“As I was saying,” Kirigiri said, looking over at the rest of the group. “Everything turned out to be just where we’d expect. Nothing was out of place at all.”

So Alter Ego was safe after all, then – at least if Kirigiri could be trusted on the matter. Togami nodded, willing to accept the information for the moment. There had always been the possibility that Celeste had actually destroyed the laptop and was only directing them to its broken pieces, but it seemed she hadn’t been quite that vindictive. Rather surprising, actually. If it had been Togami, he rather thought that he would have smashed the computer, knowing that anyone who used it again would only be doing so if he lost and got killed.

_Ding dong, ding dong._

The bells for the nighttime announcement played. Togami looked back at the dining hall door, frowning. Nighttime, and Naegi still hadn’t returned?

“The dining hall is off-limits now, right?” Asahina stood up. “We should get back to the dorms, then.”

Togami hesitated as the others headed for the door - but he was probably just being ridiculous. Now that the curfew had officially begun, Naegi would presumably return directly to the dorms instead of the dining hall tonight, when he came back from wherever he’d been. In fact, he might have realized the time and headed back to the dorms already.

But when they all made it back to their own rooms, it didn’t seem that way. Togami tried the doorbell at Naegi’s door once – twice – a third time, longer than either of the others – but there was no response. Naegi wouldn’t ignore the doorbell, Togami was sure of that. So that meant he hadn’t returned yet.

Fear trickled slowly but steadily towards Togami’s heart, along with the bitter realization that his first instinct had been right after all. He shouldn’t have let Naegi go off alone with Kirigiri after all. She’d caused this. Wherever Naegi had decided to go off to without telling anyone, it was her doing.

Togami thought about going and trying the bell at Kirigiri’s door instead – but she’d probably just stonewall him again. He had no leverage to use against her, that was the problem. He wanted information from her, but she had no reason to give it.

Where could Naegi be? If Togami could just think of some idea, then he could go and look – but he couldn’t very well scour the entire school by himself at night. And leaving meant risking that he would miss the moment Naegi returned.

Togami sighed, leaning against the wall outside Naegi’s door. Was it possible he was just overreacting? Maybe there was a perfectly reasonable explanation for where Naegi had gone, and he’d feel like an idiot once he heard it. Maybe he was just tired and overwrought from the day’s trial, and he was exaggerating the dangers.

He didn’t believe any of that, of course, but there was some small comfort in thinking about how things might turn out okay. It was better than dwelling on the alternative, at any rate.

 Maybe he’d be better off returning to his own room to wait there. Then at least he wouldn’t feel so exposed standing there in the middle of the hallway. If he left his door open, he’d be able to see if Naegi returned. He’d have to be careful not to fall asleep that way, of course, but he didn’t think he’d be able to get much rest until he knew what had happened.
He was just about to turn and head for his room when he heard a faint scuffling from the other side of the floor. He paused, looking over in that direction, but it didn’t look like there was anything out of place. But – no, there it was again, a little louder this time, like it was coming closer.

Togami slipped around the corner that led to the storage room, keeping a careful eye on all the doors that led into the main hall as the noise slowly got a little nearer. It sounded like it was coming from the hallway to the rest of the first floor, if he judged correctly. He narrowed his eyes at the gate that barred the hall – just as a small figure stumbled closer, steadying himself against the wall. Another faltering step brought the person into the light enough for Togami to recognize Naegi. The boy leaned heavily against the wall, staring at the gate like it presented an insurmountable obstacle.

Before Naegi could make a move towards it, Togami had the gate open and stood in front of him. “What happened to you?”

Now that he was closer, Togami could see a thousand details that all said he’d been right to worry. Naegi looked disheveled, dirt smudged on his face and a film of dust and grime clinging to his clothes. Scrapes marked his palms, and there was a tear along one sleeve of his jacket. And his hair – what had happened to make it lie so disturbingly flat?

Togami raised a hand to touch the place where Naegi’s usually fluffy hair had been matted to the back of his head – and just as he’d feared, his fingers came away bloody. “Ow.” Naegi winced, leaning away. “Don’t – that still hurts.”

“I’m sure it does,” Togami said grimly. He looked around the hallway, peering back into the darkness. He didn’t see anything – but that didn’t mean there was nothing there. “Come on, you need to get back and rest.”

Naegi nodded unsteadily. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”

Togami definitely didn’t trust Naegi to walk on his own in this state. He slid an arm around Naegi’s shoulders, taking on as much of the boy’s weight as he could as they made the long trek across the hall to where the dorms were. Naegi shook with every step like he was drawing on his last reserves of strength, even with the support.

How far had Naegi already been forced to drag himself in this condition? Togami thought of Naegi trying to navigate the dark, empty halls of the school by himself, hurt and suffering from a head injury, and for a moment white hot rage clouded his vision. What if Naegi had been too badly injured to make it here? He could have easily collapsed somewhere – and if it were somewhere out of the way, who knew when they might have found him? It could so very easily have been too late.

Naegi’s room was a few steps closer than Togami’s, and even a few feet would make a difference considering Naegi’s condition. Togami located Naegi’s key and let them both in, making sure to lock the door behind them and then pocketing the key. With Naegi in this state, he was taking no chances.

“Thanks,” Naegi mumbled as Togami guided him over to the bed. He seemed to be running on autopilot at this point, and left to himself he probably would have simply flopped on top of the bed and fallen asleep there. That would hardly get him the rest he needed, though.

Once he’d ensured Naegi was safely ensconced in a nest of blankets and pillows that wouldn’t put pressure on his injured head, Togami settled on the edge of the bed beside him. Seeing the boy snuggled among the blankets would have been a charming picture in any other circumstances, but
Togami couldn’t forget about the dirt, cuts, and blood left behind. None of it could be cleaned away until the water came back on in the morning, leaving Naegi marked with the evidence of whatever had befallen him. Naegi barely seemed to notice it at this point, but Togami couldn’t ignore it.

He reached out and ran a hand through Naegi’s hair, careful to avoid the part of his head where the injury was. “Naegi?”

“Mm…?” Naegi’s eyes were closed, but he didn’t seem fully asleep just yet. Good.

“What happened to you?” Togami kept his voice as soft as he could, gentle fingers continuing to stroke through Naegi’s hair.

“Got hit…” Naegi murmured, his voice quiet and fading. Togami had to lean close to hear it, close enough that Naegi was speaking almost directly into his ear.

So it hadn’t been an accident. “Who hit you?” Only Togami’s iron will kept the words from shaking with his fury at the thought. Someone had attacked Naegi, mere hours after the last trial had ended.

“Don’t… know.”

Well, that made sense, Togami supposed – whoever had done it must have snuck up on him. If he’d seen his attacker, no doubt he wouldn’t be here right now.

“What were you?” he asked, trying a different tack.

“Can’t say.”

Togami’s fingers stilled in Naegi’s hair at that. Can’t say? Not that he didn’t know or something along those lines, but – can’t say? “Why not?”

“Promised… Kirigiri…” And with that, Naegi’s breathing evened out, and he dropped from his half-doze into true sleep.

Togami had to fight not to let his hands clench into a fist, not when his fingers were still trailing through Naegi’s hair. So wherever Naegi had gone this evening, Kirigiri had known about it. She’d sent Naegi to a place where he’d been attacked like this.

Togami was going to make her regret that decision.

Chapter End Notes

Due to the Thanksgiving holiday here in America, I'm going to take a short break while I'm out of town. The break will last through the end of November, and the next chapter should be up Tuesday, December 1.
Naegi woke up slowly, the world blurring in and out of focus as he blinked up at the ceiling. So he’d made it all the way back to his room? That was a relief – for a while there, he’d really thought he might not be able to drag himself all the way across the first floor. But here he was in his own bed, with pillows propped around him in a soft nest of comfort. He couldn’t believe he’d had the energy to do all this –

And then a weight shifted on the other side of the bed, and Naegi realized he wasn’t alone. He forced himself to turn his head, sending a wave of fading aches through his skull, and he saw Togami sitting up and rubbing at a crick in his neck. Had he slept there?

The way his clothes wrinkled and his hair stuck in all directions suggested that he had. Naegi could kind of remember it now, though those last few minutes were still fuzzy. Just when he’d collapsed against the hallway wall, wondering how he’d ever be able to muster the strength to move the gate to the dorms, it had swung miraculously open. Togami had been there, as if he’d somehow known Naegi needed help and had been summoned to his side. Naegi remembered the soft murmur of words, the support of a strong arm, the sheer relief of being able to rely on another person.

“Are you awake?” Togami asked, propping himself up on one arm as he gave Naegi an appraising once over. Even though it was probably just an assessment of the state of his injuries, the straightforwardness of the look made Naegi blush.

“Yeah.” Naegi winced a little as speaking made his head twinge again. “Thanks.”

“For what, not leaving you in a broken heap on the ground for any passerby to murder?” Togami scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Be serious. If I’m not going to kill you myself, I’m certainly not going to let one of those other incompetent idiots get a chance at it.”

The words might have been harsh – but Naegi couldn’t really hear them that way, not when he’d been tucked so carefully into a nest of blankets. Not when Togami had chosen to stay beside him all night.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Naegi told him, smiling.

Togami rolled his eyes again and turned away to push himself off the bed – but not before Naegi saw a hint of pink high on his cheekbones.
Ding dong, ding dong.

The Monokuma announcement rang through the room, letting them know morning had officially arrived. Naegi grimaced, trying to sit up – and oh, that had been a bad idea. The room spun around his head in a whirl of sickening colors.

Hands caught his shoulders when he would have collapsed back against the bed. “Slowly!” Togami snapped. “Do you want to make yourself faint?”

As Naegi’s vision steadied, he realized Togami had bent down to peer intently into his eyes from less than a foot away. “Hmm. Well, you’re able to focus your eyes, at least.” He frowned. “Maybe the library has books on first aid.”

“I’m fine,” Naegi protested. He had to admit that the idea of Togami researching how to take care of him made a wave of warmth burst in his chest – but he didn’t like the implication that he’d need extensive looking after. “I just got a little dizzy, that’s all. I need to get up and meet everyone at breakfast, or they’ll worry that something happened to me.”

“Something did happen to you.” The acid in Togami’s words could have etched through metal. “They can wait for us to get there, or they can find something more useful to do than sitting around the dining hall – but I’m not letting you make yourself sick by running around injured. You’ll move slowly or not at all.”

Under Togami’s unrelenting supervision, Naegi found himself inching out of the bed at a snail’s pace. He would have objected to the lack of speed – but the ache in his head and the heavy weight of his limbs all told him that Togami had a good point. He probably could have forced himself to ignore it and keep going, but who knew what that would have done to him?

Once he was out of bed and on his feet, Naegi realized just how grimy he was after collapsing on the floor of that hidden room. It hadn’t been the cleanest place, and the indeterminate amount of time he’d lying there on the floor had left dirt streaking his skin and clothes. The back of his head still ached, and he could feel his hair lying stiff and matted with blood from where he’d been hit. He desperately needed a shower, and since Togami steered him towards the bathroom, he apparently agreed with that assessment.

But instead of stepping back so that Naegi could go ahead into the bathroom and have a chance to clean up, Togami helped him inside and then shut the door behind them both.

“Uh…” Naegi glanced up at the other boy. “What are you doing?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Togami tugged Naegi’s jacket off, giving the scuffs and dirt a dark look. “I’m helping you shower.”

“You – what?” Naegi felt his cheeks flush a brilliant red. “I don’t need help!”

“Are you joking?” Togami stared at him like he’d spoken in a foreign language. “You’ve had a head injury. Are you incapable of keeping that fact in your brain for more than two seconds together? Or should I take this as evidence that you’re having cognitive difficulties?” He shook his head. “I’m not leaving you alone to shower. All it would take is one dizzy spell, and you’d slip and crack what’s left of your head.”

“Oh. I – uh, I guess that makes sense.” Naegi supposed it did sound fairly reasonable when Togami put it like that, if a little more on the overprotective side than he would have expected. He must have been in pretty bad shape last night, if Togami was reacting like this now.
“Of course it does,” Togami said impatiently. “Now come on.”

Reasonable plan or not, Naegi couldn’t help the wave of embarrassment rising through him at stripping down so matter-of-factly in front of someone else. It had been one thing before, when they were tangled together and well on their way to sex – but this was much more utilitarian. It left Naegi feeling exposed in a way that he hadn’t before, and he wasn’t sure if that was fair or not.

To add to his confusion, Togami began removing his own clothes, too. Well, when Naegi thought about it, that made sense. Togami couldn’t very well be in the shower fully clothed, could he? Not unless he wanted to get his clothes soaked, and from what Naegi could tell, Togami’s clothes were the sort that would be ruined by standing in a shower while wearing them. Showering together was the obvious solution to all their problems.

It wasn’t exactly the scenario Naegi would have envisioned for sharing a shower with the other boy, though. He couldn’t stop his eyes from tracing the pattern of Togami’s fingers as he unfastened buttons, or following the long expanse of bare chest when he shrugged off his shirt. Watching the play of light and shadow against Togami’s pale stomach, Naegi wasn’t sure if it was attraction or the injury that made his head spin. But when Togami’s hands dropped to begin undoing the buttons on his dress slacks, Naegi hastily averted his eyes, turning back to his own clothing. It felt like there was something illicit in watching such a perfectly dressed boy strip away his clothes, even though Togami didn’t seem to care.

Even though he refused to look in Togami’s direction again, Naegi couldn’t help but be aware of the other boy as he moved through the bathroom. Heat seemed to radiate from the area where Togami was standing, calling Naegi to step closer and let it warm him. As he reached out to put his dirty clothing next to the sink, though nowhere near as neatly folded as Togami had left his pile of clothes, goosebumps trailed down Naegi’s spine like the ghost of a touch on his back – and he knew Togami was looking at him.

It was an unsettling realization to have while his back and he couldn’t see the other boy’s expression. Was he checking for injuries again? Naegi had no idea what state his back might be in, and it was entirely possible that he’d inadvertently revealed a wound he hadn’t known about. Of course, if that were the case, he’d probably have noticed the pain, if nothing else. So did that mean Togami was just appreciating the view? Naegi much preferred that idea to the thought of being covered in unnoticed injuries.

Taking a deep breath to steel his nerves, Naegi finally turned around, steadying himself against the sink when the floor seemed to shift a little beneath his feet, and looked up into Togami’s eyes. A deep frown of concern creased Togami’s face – but Naegi could see heat there, too, in the lightly flushed cheeks and the dilated pupils.

“I didn’t –” Togami swallowed, the motion plainly visible along his pale throat. “I should probably clarify that I didn’t intend to suggest anything beyond cleaning your injuries and preventing you from hurting yourself further.”

“Oh – right.” Naegi knew that was sensible, since with his aching head and body he knew he wasn’t up to much – but with Togami so close, it was a little hard to keep his mind on sense. “Just cleaning up.”

“Yes, that’s right.” But then Togami’s eyes shifted focus, and his expression darkened as he looked at the streaks of dirt stretching down Naegi’s shoulder. Or no – looking closer, Naegi could see that there was blood mixed with the dirt, trailing down from his scalp.

“Right,” Togami said again, sounding much more certain of himself this time. He reached out to
turn the shower on, switching it to the highest and hottest setting possible. The roar of pounding water didn’t do much for Naegi’s headache, but his sore body did welcome the heat. With the hot water thundering out at that rate, the bathroom began filling up with steam in seconds. Normally Naegi would have left the door open a crack to let it out, but since Togami had closed it, the steam had nowhere to go and, leaving them slowly obscured by the fog.

Togami circled around behind Naegi, a vaguely defined figure in the hazy air and pouring water, and he began carding gentle fingers through the bloody mat of hair on the back of Naegi’s head. Naegi would have turned around to face him to thank him again, but strong fingers kept his head facing forward as Togami leaned forward to murmur in his ear, “Don’t turn around.”

Naegi frowned. That seemed like an odd thing to say.

“Now,” Togami went on, cold steel entering his voice for the first time since they’d woken up, “I want you to tell me exactly what happened last night.”
Naegi tries to decide just what to tell Togami about how he got injured.

With his head aching, it took Naegi a moment longer than it normally would have to figure out what Togami meant — but then, with steam clinging to his skin and his ears full of the sound of water, it finally clicked. With the steam and the sounds of the shower, the cameras pointing into the bathroom wouldn’t be able to capture anything they said. With Togami standing behind him, they could both face away from the cameras, and even the slightest potential for eavesdropping would be eliminated. It was a good plan, designed to foil the mastermind at every turn.

The only problem was that now that they had the opportunity for private communication, Naegi wasn’t sure what he should say. Of course Togami wanted to know what had happened, and considering the way he’d helped Naegi get through it, he deserved answers. It wasn’t fair to keep secrets from him.

But on the other hand, these weren’t Naegi’s secrets to tell. Kirigiri had told him about the hidden room behind the storage closet in confidence. She hadn’t actually sworn him to secrecy, but considering the difficulty Naegi had had getting any information out of her at all, he was pretty sure she hadn’t intended for it to be shared.

And then aside from her, there was the question of what he’d seen afterwards. While trying to drag himself back to the dorms, he’d heard the sounds of fighting coming from the gym, and when he’d investigated, he’d seen a furious battle between Monokuma and Ogami. And the things they’d said — if he told Togami about it, he knew Togami would take it as hard evidence that Ogami was a traitor. How could he do that to one of his friends, just based on a conversation he’d overheard while dizzy from a head injury?

“Well?” Togami asked impatiently, though the biting tone didn’t alter the light touch of his fingers cleaning the blood out of Naegi’s hair. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes,” Naegi said, keeping his voice low enough that it would only just be audible above the roar of the shower. “I was just thinking about what to say.”

“Say everything, obviously.”

Naegi sighed and decided to go with honesty, since he doubted he could manage anything more complicated with the way his head kept aching. “I’m not sure I can. Some of it is about other people’s secrets.”

Togami didn’t respond immediately, at least not verbally. One of his hands moved from Naegi’s hair to trail down along his jaw. Naegi flushed at the touch, a little confused — until he realized that Togami was wiping away dirt from a scrape he must have gotten when he hit the ground.

“Would you really respect those secrets when they got you hurt?” Togami asked, his fingers sending tiny shivers rippling down the skin of Naegi’s throat.
“Well – yes,” Naegi said, forcing his attention away from the touches and back onto the conversation. “I mean, I don’t think anyone meant for this to happen. It doesn’t make it okay for me to start telling people’s secrets without their permission.”

“Not even when it could help?” Togami persisted. “You know that information is one of the weapons the mastermind uses against us – they watch everything we do with their cameras while trying to control what we know. Any information we don’t share is a potential weakness for them to exploit. Secrets are a luxury we can’t afford.”

“Really? You’re going to say that when you go off on your own all the time?” Naegi tried to make the words warm, but he couldn’t help the tiny sting that made its way into his tone.

Togami went silent for a moment, his hand going still against Naegi’s cheek.

Naegi frowned. Maybe bringing that up had been too unkind. After all, it had only been a day ago that going off on his own had gotten Togami kidnapped and nearly framed for murder. Maybe he should have been more tactful about bringing that up.

“Not anymore.” Togami’s words were so quiet that if his lips hadn’t been close enough to brush Naegi’s ear, he wouldn’t have heard them. “I’m not leaving you alone again.”

Naegi felt the words curl down into his stomach in a long trail of heat, leaving him warmed in a way that had nothing to do with the hot water pouring down on him. Togami wanted to stay with him? This meant that much to him? Oh, Naegi knew it wasn’t just about some romantic notion of staying at his side – a large part of this response came from concern over what had happened when Naegi had been alone tonight. But if it came to that, he didn’t exactly like the idea of Togami going off on his own either, not when it had put him at such great risk in the last trial.

“Fine with me,” he murmured, tilting his head so that his temple rested against Togami’s cheek.

“Well – good,” Togami replied, a faint catch in his voice. “Good.” Naegi couldn’t see him swallow, but he felt the muscles moving in Togami’s throat as it happened. “But that doesn’t answer my question. Something happened after you and Kirigiri went into that dressing room, and it left you so hurt you could barely walk. What happened? What did that to you?”

It was the same question as before – but it also wasn’t. Togami’s first question had been a demand for information, cold and detached and logical. This one might have used similar words, but there was nothing detached about it. Naegi could hear the emotion coloring these words, and he realized now just how worried Togami must have been when Naegi didn’t return to the dining hall last night. It hadn’t even occurred to him at the time that Togami might be concerned about his whereabouts, but obviously he’d been very mistaken.

Togami might be cloaking his question by saying he wanted information to use against the mastermind, but that wasn’t the only reason he was asking all this. He’d been genuinely afraid for Naegi’s safety, and he was asking because he wanted reassurance that Naegi was all right.

Naegi had been willing to oppose the logical arguments, but how could he deny something like this?

“I guess I can tell you some of it,” Naegi said at last. “I’ll ask Kirigiri later if I can tell you the details, but I think just the general outline of what happened should be all right.”

“Oh, we’ll definitely need to talk with Kirigiri later,” Togami agreed grimly. He reached for a washcloth and began wiping at the stubborn remnants of bloody dirt clinging to Naegi’s arms and
shoulders. “So?”

“She told me about a hidden room she found where there are no cameras,” Naegi said. He figured that it had to be okay to share that much, as long as he didn’t say where exactly the room was. “And when I went to check it out –”

“You went immediately after talking with her?” Togami interrupted.

“Yeah,” Naegi said. He tried to focus on the conversation, not the gentle movement of the washcloth over his water-slick skin. “She went to the dining hall, and I went to the – uh, the hidden room.”

“Because she asked you to go?”

“Well – I don’t think she actually asked.” Naegi frowned, thinking back. It was a little hard to pin down the specifics with his head still feeling fuzzy. “But it just sounded so unbelievable, you know? A hidden room like that – of course I had to go look at it.”

“I see.” Togami’s tone was unreadable in that moment, with an edge that Naegi couldn’t quite catch through the masking noise of the shower. “So you headed directly to this mystery room where no one would be able to find you – and then what?”

“Well, it was full of all kinds of documents and files and things,” Naegi said. “But then just when I started to look through them, someone came up behind me and hit me.”

“Did you see who?”

“No, I didn’t get a chance,” Naegi said, sighing. “They were gone when I woke up – and not just them. All the files and papers had been moved out of that room, too. It was completely empty.”

“Really?” Togami’s voice lit with sudden, sharp attention. “Now that is interesting. That means that somewhere in this school there is a room-sized cache of information that the mastermind doesn’t want us to find.”

“You think it’s still here somewhere?” Naegi asked, frowning. “I guess they wouldn’t have bothered carting it all out if they were just going to destroy it. And if they’d destroyed it in that room, I’m pretty sure I would have seen something left over afterwards – at least dust or ashes or something.”

“And it must be useful, or they wouldn’t bother keeping it stored somewhere in the school in the first place,” Togami said. “Though presumably the second location will be more secure than the first. It sounds as though you were just able to wander aimlessly in – unless Kirigiri gave you some kind of key or password?”

“No, nothing like that,” Naegi said. “It was just that the entrance was tricky to spot unless you knew it was there.”

There was a long moment of silence, filled only with the spray of the shower soaking down over them both. Then Togami asked very softly, “Did she say how she knew about it?”

“No, not really,” Naegi said. “We were a little short on time, since it was getting close to the curfew.”

“Of course.” Togami’s hand had gone still on Naegi’s shoulder, gripping rather than washing at this point. “Naegi, I want you to promise me that you won’t go back to that room – not without
telling me first.”

Naegi frowned. “There’s nothing left. Why would I go back?”

“I don’t know. Why did you go in the first place?” Togami heaved a frustrated sigh. “Will you promise me or not?”

“I guess, if it matters that much to you,” Naegi said, shrugging. The motion made Togami’s hand flex around his shoulder, palm sliding down the curve of his arm. “I promise.”

“Good.” Togami leaned forward a little to press his lips to Naegi’s temple. “Don’t forget.”

“I won’t.”

At that assurance, Togami nodded and reached out towards the knob that would turn the shower off. Apparently the conversation was finished – and none too soon for believability’s sake, since Naegi had long since gotten all the dirt and grime dealt with. But that also meant that Togami was assuming he had nothing more to say – that nothing else of note had happened before Naegi had left the hidden room and dragged himself to the dorms. And Naegi knew that wasn’t true.

“Wait.” Naegi’s hand shot out and caught Togami’s wrist, just before he could turn the shower knob. “There’s one other thing.”

“What?” Togami asked, voice going sharp even as his hand stilled.

“There’s something else that I think I might have seen,” Naegi said, trying his best to choose his words with care. “But – well, I’m not really sure about it. Like you keep saying, I had a head injury, and it was confusing.”

“What did you see?” Togami prompted impatiently when Naegi paused to think.

“I – well, I don’t think I can tell you exactly what it was,” Naegi said after a moment. “I’m sorry, but I just don’t think it would be fair. I have to ask about it before I can tell anyone else.”

“Then why did you bring it up at all if you aren’t going to say anything useful?” Togami demanded.

“Because I wanted you to know that there is something else,” Naegi said. “Even though I can’t tell you yet. But I’ll try to ask about it and tell you as soon as I can.”

“And you think that’s going to be enough?” Togami asked. “You just expect me to take this on faith? You know something, and you’re not telling me what it is!”

“But I will!” Naegi protested. “I’ll tell you as soon as I know for sure. But you can’t just expect me to betray someone else, can you?”

“Well – when you put it like that.” Togami sighed. “No, I certainly don’t expect you to be capable of betraying anyone. And I can’t force you to tell me anything against your will.” With the hand still resting on Naegi’s shoulder, he drummed thoughtful fingers against Naegi’s collarbone, a light staccato pattern almost undiscernible beneath the shower pressure. “How long?”

“Uh – how long what?”

“Until you think you can tell me,” Togami elaborated, annoyed. “I don’t think a timeframe is too much to ask. An estimate will do.”
“Oh.” Naegi frowned and thought about it. “I guess a day or so should be enough.”

“So you’ll tell me tomorrow?” Togami pressed.

Naegi pressed his lips together and considered it. There was always the chance he wouldn’t be able to get Ogami alone today. “I’ll try to. And if I can’t – I guess I can tell you why not.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “You just have to make everything more complicated, don’t you?”

“No?” Naegi blinked. “I’m not trying to.”

“You do it without trying,” Togami said dryly. He reached out and shut the water off, and the sudden absence of noise felt loud in its silence. “I didn’t expect trying to keep you safe to be so difficult.” He let his lips graze over Naegi’s cheek as he spoke.

Before he could pull away, Naegi turned his head and brought Togami’s lips against his own. He didn’t want to hide things or to make life difficult for the other boy, and he hoped the kiss would convey that. He just wanted everything to be as simple as the way their bodies fit so easily against each other, arms curling around one another in a skin-to-skin embrace. Heat washed through him, warm and welcome, exactly what he’d needed to chase away the chilly loneliness of trying to get through the school alone and injured. He felt safe here, supported by Togami’s arms.

And then a flare of white pain burst from the lump on the back of his head, and Naegi jerked back, swallowing down a yelp.

“What –” Togami stared at Naegi blankly for a moment, face flushed and shoulders heaving. Then his gaze sharpened as he took in Naegi’s expression. “You’re still in pain?”

“I’m fine –”

“You’re not, and you should have said so sooner.” Togami reached over to grab one of the towels by the sink, shaking it open and wrapping it around Naegi. The motion made the world tilt a little around Naegi, and Togami had to catch his arm to hold him steady.

“I guess maybe I’m not,” Naegi conceded, letting Togami lead him out of the bathroom. “Sorry.”

“For what, not being up to elaborate contortions on a slippery surface less than eight hours after you were injured?” Togami’s voice might have sounded sarcastic, but his supportive arm around Naegi’s waist was gentle. “I should have stopped you sooner. That was rather the opposite of keeping you safe.”

“Oh. Right.” Naegi flushed, feeling a little silly. Togami had even said it already, hadn’t he – that he didn’t want to do anything other than clean up in the shower. He should have remembered that, no matter how much he’d wanted to do anything else.

“Although –” Togami cleared his throat, looking away from Naegi as a blush crept steadily down his neck. “If at some point after you’ve recovered, you felt like making the suggestion again –”

“Consider it made,” Naegi interrupted, a grin spreading over his face as his embarrassment melted away.

Togami’s hand clenched reflexively for a moment, just before he stepped forward and pressed a quick sunburst of a kiss to Naegi’s mouth. “Until later, then.”

“Definitely.” Naegi couldn’t help but keep smiling, even though his head wouldn’t stop aching.
“But until then, we really should meet the others at the dining hall.”
Naegi and Togami reached the dining hall just as the other four students were about to leave it. They would have been there sooner, but they’d had to stop in Togami’s room first so that he could put on fresh clothing. This made the second time he’d had to do that, and for a moment, Naegi had considered suggesting that Togami leave some fresh clothes in Naegi’s closet so that they’d be on hand. He hadn’t quite been able to muster the nerve to say it, though – it sounded very personal, even if it did make sense from a logical point of view.

“Oh – you’re here,” Asahina said, giving them a startled look when Naegi and Togami entered to find the other students just standing up from their seats. “You’re all right!”

Ogami turned to check the clock, then gave them a reproachful frown. “You’re late.”

“Hey, looks like they found something better to do than show up for breakfast,” Hagakure said with a grin. “Can’t be helped if that’s the case, right?”

“Of course it can be helped,” Kirigiri said, her words clipped and chillier than usual. “And in the future, it should be. We have a standing breakfast meeting for a reason. A person with a moderate amount of self-control should be able to confine their personal activities to the other twenty-three hours of the day.”

With that, she brushed past Naegi and stalked out the dining hall door. Naegi turned to watch as she headed for the gateway to the rest of the first floor, frowning in bewilderment. “Did something happen this morning?”

“Yes – you didn’t show up!” Asahina glared at him. “Obviously she was worried about you! She said she was about to go down to your room to check on you before we started exploring.”

“Oh.” Naegi winced. Of course Kirigiri would be especially worried when he didn’t show up for breakfast – she knew he’d gone to investigate the hidden room last night. When she didn’t see him this morning, naturally she would have assumed the worst. That should have occurred to him sooner. “I should probably apologize to her, then.”

Togami snorted softly. “You don’t owe her anything.”

“Ugh, I knew it,” Asahina said, shaking her head. “You’re just going to be a bad influence on poor Naegi now, aren’t you? You’re making him late, telling him to be mean to people – I bet it’s only a matter of time before you start trying to get him to say he’d kill all of us.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Togami snapped, before Naegi could object to this unfair statement. “Why would I want to encourage anyone in a course of action that would end with me dead?”

“Oh, don’t worry, you won’t,” Hagakure said with a cheerful grin. “You’re not going to die – there aren’t going to be any more successful murders!”
Everyone turned and stared at Hagakure after this pronouncement. He beamed at them all, apparently oblivious to their confusion.

“What makes you say that?” Asahina asked at last, when no one else seemed inclined to say anything.

“I predicted it last night!” Hagakure announced proudly. “Since it revealed itself to me from the ether, there’s no doubt about it!”

“And is your fortune-telling ever actually right?” Togami asked, lip curling with disdain.

“You bet!” Hagakure said. “I can usually hit twenty or thirty percent on a good day!”

Togami rolled his eyes. “Yes, that’s about what I expected you’d say.”

“I hope your prediction turns out to be true,” Naegi said, before Togami could elaborate on that note.

“Well, I won’t murder anyone,” Hagakure said brightly.

“Me either,” Asahina agreed. “I would never.”

“Nor would I,” Ogami said, closing her eyes as she made the declaration.

“Me too,” Naegi said, nodding firmly. “I could never kill any of my friends!”

Everyone turned and looked at Togami. He scowled at the others. “Didn’t I cover this yesterday? I don’t see what will come of restating it.”

Naegi reached out and caught Togami’s hand in one of his, letting their fingers intertwine. Togami didn’t look down at it, but he did squeeze Naegi’s hand back, heaving a put-upon sigh. “Fine. As the current circumstances stand, I have no intention of committing a murder.”

Naegi grinned. Hearing everyone reaffirm their commitment not to kill anyone was a strong encouragement, bringing them all together. He could feel them all uniting into a team, a single force powerful enough to take on the mastermind. As long as they all stuck to the promise they made in this moment, there was nothing the mastermind could do to force them into murder.

“To be honest, I wish Kirigiri and Fukawa were here for this, as well,” Ogami said, looking away from the others.

“Yeah, it’s too bad Kirigiri didn’t wait,” Asahina said. “But Fukawa is so hard to deal with – especially now that she realized her white knight really isn’t interested in her.”

“I’ve told her the truth about that from the beginning,” Togami said, scowling. “She can’t pretend I’ve misled her. She can only blame her own outrageous delusions if she thought otherwise.”

“Yes, no one is accusing you of stringing her along in any way,” Ogami said. “But that doesn’t change the fact that she’s withdrawn even more from the rest of the group over the past few days. I would feel better if she were here to speak for herself.”

“Why would you want to talk to someone who’s gone off the deep end?” Hagakure asked. “We’re better off without her, I say.”

Naegi sighed. Maybe they’d had a moment of unity – but that was all it was, a single moment. He could see that they were still fractured, with Fukawa and Kirigiri absent and the others still
suspicious of Togami’s actions. Whatever bond the group shared was still fragile, and with fault lines that would fracture under any real pressure.

“Well, we were about to head out to start our search of the school,” Asahina said, shrugging away the dark mood that had fallen on all of them. “We had another trial, so there should be –”

“Another floor open,” Togami finished, sounding bored. “Presumably the fourth floor, this time. Fine, you can all feel free to go on ahead with whatever it is you usually do. We’ll be up shortly.” He headed back towards the kitchen, and since he didn’t seem inclined to let go of Naegi’s hand, Naegi found himself towed along behind as the others shrugged and headed out the door.

Figuring they shouldn’t delay too much longer than they already had, Naegi grabbed a few breakfast foods that he knew he could eat quickly. Togami, on the other hand, appeared to consider several cups of coffee all that was necessary for a complete breakfast.

“Don’t you want to eat anything?” Naegi asked, in between hasty bites of a granola bar. “You need to keep your energy up.”

“That’s what the caffeine is for.” Togami took another sip of coffee, and Naegi wondered how he managed not to scald his tongue on the hot liquid. “I thought you were the one who wanted to hurry.”

“Okay, fine.” Naegi went back to eating his breakfast, but even trying to move at his fastest, Togami still finished before he did. Naegi finished off his last few bites of a sliced apple as they headed up the stairs to the fourth floor.

They stepped off the staircase to find a hallway very similar to the others they’d seen so far, but this time lit with a dark golden brown.

“Do you think we’ll find any clues here?” Naegi asked, peering down the hall.

Togami shrugged. “Possibly. But first we’ll need to find everything the mastermind wants us to see here, so that we can try to figure out what it is they don’t want us to see.”

Naegi nodded. “Right. Okay, then, let’s go!” He reached out and caught Togami’s hand in his own. If they were going to search together, they might as well do it as a team.

Togami led the way, taking a right hand turn down a branching path at the first opportunity. Naegi let him take the lead, since it wasn’t like either of them really knew where they were going anyway. This first blue door, the data center, was as good a place to start as any.

Except that when Togami reached out to try the door, it only rattled beneath his hand.

“It’s locked?” Naegi frowned and tugged at the door himself. Sure enough, the door was stuck fast, and the knob wouldn’t turn no matter how he twisted it.

“What is that supposed to be?” Togami glared at the data center door with an almost personal outrage. “Why is there a locked door here? How are we meant to investigate properly if there are places we can’t get to?”

“I think that’s probably the point,” Naegi said, trying not to smile at Togami’s indignation at being locked out of a place he wanted to go. “If it’s locked, we’re not supposed to investigate it.”

Togami glared at the door for a few more seconds, and for a moment Naegi thought he might kick it out of pique. But Togami managed to get ahold of himself before it went that far, and he turned
away from the door and dragged Naegi further down the hallway.

“Wait, aren’t we going in those rooms?” Naegi asked as Togami strode past a pair of doors.

“They’re just classrooms,” Togami said over his shoulder. “Those are all the same. Why waste time there when there are more interesting rooms around?” He turned a corner, and his eyebrows shot up as he caught sight of the room at the end of the hall. “Ah – you see?”

Naegi followed Togami’s gaze to the plate above the door at the end of the hall. “The headmaster’s office?”

“Much more worthwhile than yet another classroom with childish graffiti all over the chalkboard,” Togami said, approaching the door. “Now, then, let’s see –”

The knob rattled under his hand.

Togami stared at the locked door in disbelief. “Another one? Is this some kind of joke?”

“I’m pretty sure Monokuma is the only one who’d think it’s funny,” Naegi said. “Look, let’s just keep trying the other doors, okay? There are still some other rooms on this floor. They can’t all be locked.”

“None of them should be locked,” Togami muttered angrily, giving the door a last dark glare. “Keeping us out of certain rooms is cheating.”

Naegi decided not to comment on that one, instead heading a little ways back down the hall to the door they’d passed as they zeroed in on the headmaster’s office. This one was just labeled “office,” and while that didn’t sound quite as intriguing as the other rooms, maybe that meant it would be open.

And sure enough, when Naegi tried the office doorknob, it turned under his hand. He grinned at Togami. “See? I knew they couldn’t all be locked.”

“Yes, but it won’t be as interesting as the locked rooms,” Togami said. “That’s where the useful things will be.” He looked around the office as they entered, giving the whole thing a single glance before scowling. “See? Just an administrative suite with atrociously orange fake flowers. Boring.”

But despite declaring the room to be devoid of interest, Togami went further in, peering around closely as he walked down the rows of desks. He didn’t examine the room quite as thoroughly as Kirigiri seemed to investigate the various spaces of the school, but he also didn’t do it halfway, either. He scanned the plants and opened all the desk drawers, continuing even when he didn’t find anything of interest in the first several he tried.

To speed things up, Naegi forced himself to let go of Togami’s hand so that he could poke around the room as well. Figuring he might as well carry on with what Togami was doing, Naegi went to the second row of desks, intending to examine those. But before he could start, a colorful paper on the ground caught his eye.

“What’s this?” Naegi bent to pick it up as Togami circled around to his side, looking at the paper over Naegi’s shoulder.

“A photograph?” Togami asked, reaching out to run a suspicious finger over the photo’s glossy surface like he suspected it of not really being there.

Naegi couldn’t stop staring at it, even with Togami’s finger in the way. The picture showed
Yamada and Celeste fighting over a camera while Maizono laughed in the background, in a school where sunshine easily streamed through the open windows. They looked so energetic, so full of life – so different from the bloody, mangled corpses that had been the last he’d seen of any of them. In fact, they looked happy, in a way he’d never seen them while they were all locked here in this twisted version of Hope’s Peak. The sight made a dull ache rise behind his eyes, like he wanted to cry but had gone somewhere beyond tears.

“It’s exactly the same!” Naegi said, the hand holding the photo beginning to tremble. “It’s just like the photo I saw before!”

Togami turned sharply to face Naegi. “Before? What photo are you talking about?”

“When we were exploring the third floor for the first time, I saw another photo like this,” Naegi said. “Well, not exactly like this – it was Kuwata, Owada, and Fujisaki in that one. But they were all together, in a classroom with no iron plates on the windows, smiling like they were normal students.”

“And you didn’t think to mention it?” Togami demanded.

“I told the others,” Naegi said. “If you’d been at the meeting where we talked about what we found, you would have heard it, too. But we all thought it was a forgery – just like this one.” He shook his head, eyes still locked on Maizono’s laughing face. “Monokuma must have faked this!”

“Or maybe you’re the fake!” Monokuma called out, bouncing up beside them with a laugh and snatching the picture out of Naegi’s hand. “A forgery plot? What, do you think the moon landing was faked, too? Come on!”

“Then you’re saying that picture is real?” Naegi asked, craning his head to try to get another glimpse of it.

“And if you’re claiming it is, then why only show it now that the students in it are dead and unable to corroborate your story?” Togami added, pinning Monokuma with his glare.

“Oh, is that what I’m doing?” Monokuma tilted his head questioningly.

“Obviously it is!” Naegi said. “Is the picture real or fake?”

“Aw, Naegi, you’re always so eager for the black and white answer,” Monokuma said, grinning. “Are you trying to get yourself split in half like me? Do you admire the binary beauty of my black and white coloring? Well, sad to say, it’s just no use. If you try to split something into black and white when it can’t be split at all, you’ll just end up bloody.”

“Is all that gibberish supposed to mean something?” Togami asked, glaring at Monokuma.

“It means the picture is real,” Monokuma said. “No more, no less.” And with another burst of laughter, Monokuma disappeared, taking the photo with him.

Naegi bit his lip, looking up at Togami. “Do you believe him?”

“I don’t know.” Togami crossed his arms, staring at the place where Monokuma had been. “But I do know that he wants us to focus on that picture instead of on anything else on this floor – and I’m not at all inclined to do what he wants.” He turned and headed for the door. “Come on, let’s get the rest of the floor over with.”

Naegi followed after Togami, but try as he might, he couldn’t quite put the picture out of his mind.
If it were real – if Monokuma was telling the truth – then did that mean the others had known each other before arriving at Hope’s Peak? Could it be possible? And if so, why wouldn’t they have mentioned it?

Togami headed back the way they’d come after leaving the office, making for the hallway they’d ignored on their way to the data center. The walls here were a dark violet leading up to an elaborate wooden door, the word “music” on a sign above it. Togami glared at the doorknob as he tried it – but this one turned easily under his hand.

The music room turned out to be closer to a concert hall than a classroom, with high arching ceilings and plush red benches facing a raised stage with a grand piano on it. But Naegi couldn’t really spare much attention for the room – his eyes had gone immediately to the person standing in the central walkway.

Kirigiri crossed her arms and surveyed the two boys. “So you two finally decided to show up.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Togami confronts Kirigiri over her treatment of Naegi.

Kirigiri did not look happy, to the extent that Naegi was able to read any emotions from her at all. She mostly looked the same as usual, but there was a certain set to her mouth that hinted she might be feeling irritation. And since she’d demonstrated time and again that she had excellent control of her emotions, that meant she wanted Naegi to see that she wasn’t happy with him.

“Hi, Kirigiri,” Naegi said, offering the girl a hopeful smile as a sort of peace offering. “I’m sorry I was late to breakfast this morning. I didn’t mean to make you worry. It just took longer than usual to get ready.”

“I’m sure that you had quite a bit to do,” Kirigiri said, her voice cool as she looked down at Naegi’s hand entwined with Togami’s.

“Yes, it was especially time consuming to wash off all the blood,” Togami said before Naegi could reply, his voice unnervingly soft. “There was such a lot of it, what with the head injury.”

“There wasn’t that much,” Naegi protested as Kirigiri’s gaze flicked up to Togami. “It was fine, honestly. I just had to wait for the water to come back on.”

“And of course you weren’t able to move very fast,” Togami said, his eyes fixed darkly on Kirigiri even though his words were addressed to Naegi. “Dizzy spells can really slow you down.”

Kirigiri looked back at Naegi, eyes narrowed as she examined him. “You hit your head?”

“Sort of,” Naegi said. “I found the room you told me about, but as soon as I started looking around, I was attacked.”

“Attacked?” Kirigiri looked from Naegi to Togami. “Who attacked you?”

“Well, I didn’t get a chance to see,” Naegi said. “They came up from behind me. And then when I woke up, all the files and documents were gone.” He grimaced. “Sorry, I know how important they were.”

“I see.” Kirigiri frowned. “Well, that’s fine, I already saw what I needed to in there.”

“Yes, you clearly didn’t think there was anything else of interest in that room,” Togami said. “You had no reason whatsoever to go back, did you?”

“I was trying to avoid drawing too much of the mastermind’s attention to it,” Kirigiri said. “Two people entering the room would have been much more noticeable than just one.”

“Well, just one was obviously noticeable enough,” Togami said, voice low and dangerous. “Or are you going to try to claim you didn’t know there was a risk that the mastermind was already watching?”
“What?” Naegi frowned, looking up at Togami in puzzlement. “What are you talking about?”

“Even if this hidden room of hers doesn’t have any cameras, the area around it still would,” Togami said. “The mastermind would still be able to see anyone approach it.” His hand tightened around Naegi’s. “She deliberately sent you there to see if the mastermind would react.”

“Really?” Naegi looked at Kirigiri, startled by the accusation.

“Yes,” she said, her voice perfectly matter-of-fact as she met his eyes without a hint of apology. “I wanted to see if the mastermind knew about that room.”

“And you didn’t bother to take a single precaution in case the answer was yes,” Togami added.

Kirigiri crossed her arms. “I didn’t think the mastermind would go so far as to attack him and remove all the papers in that room.”

“No? Then enlighten us – what exactly did you think would happen?” Togami asked, his voice biting. “Or did you bother to think about it at all? Did you spare a single thought for what might happen to Naegi after your little experiment was done?”

“He can handle that sort of thing,” Kirigiri said. “He’s a boy, isn’t he?”

“Is that all you have to say for yourself?” Togami snarled, his grip on Naegi’s hand like an iron vise. “Being a boy didn’t do him much good when he woke up alone and injured in a hidden room no one else knew about!”

“Look, it’s fine,” Naegi tried to interrupt and stop the argument. “I’m okay, so no one needs to worry about it anymore.”

“Yes, you’re so okay that you collapsed halfway to the dorms,” Togami said, his eyes never wavering from Kirigiri as acid sarcasm bit through the air. “She had no idea what might happen when she sent you to that room, and then she didn’t even bother to check on you afterwards.”

“But –”

“If your attacker had hit you even a little harder, you wouldn’t be standing here right now.”

Naegi looked from Togami to Kirigiri as they glared at one another. “You think the mastermind would have killed me?”

“No,” Kirigiri said coolly. “If exploring were an offense worthy of execution, there would be an explicit rule against it.”

“Oh? You’re so sure you’re right?” Togami demanded. “But it wasn’t your own life you decided to risk, was it?”

“I don’t think I need to justify my actions to you,” Kirigiri said, her tone chilling the air around them. She turned to Naegi. “You understand what I’m doing, don’t you?”

“Uh – yeah,” Naegi said, as the force of both their intense gazes turned to him. He had to work to resist the urge to rub at his temples. All the raised voices were making his head ache even more than it already had, but he didn’t think drawing attention to the fact would be a good idea at this point. “I mean, I can’t say that I liked getting attacked, but I do understand. You’re looking for something we can use against the mastermind.”
“And there must have been a clue to the mastermind’s identity in that room,” Kirigiri said, nodding. “Otherwise, they wouldn’t have gotten rid of the documents.”

“And how does knowing that do you any good?” Togami snapped. “Those files are gone. It isn’t very valuable to know that there was a clue in some documents that the mastermind confiscated.” His lip curled. “Or do you expect us to take your word about what they contained?”

“Actually, you don’t have to take her word about everything,” Naegi said. “There was one thing I did see before I got knocked out.” He looked at Kirigiri. “You saw that note, too, right? The one that said you must not leave?”

Kirigiri’s lips tightened, and she glanced up at the surveillance cameras. “We shouldn’t talk about that here. But I’m looking into it. If I find out anything, I’ll let you know.”

“Very reassuring,” Togami said scathingly. “Will your next plan to find things out involve a literal knife in the back, or do you intend to keep them metaphorical?”

Kirigiri frowned at him. “If you aren’t going to say anything helpful, maybe you shouldn’t be a part of this conversation at all.”

“After what happened the last time you spoke to Naegi alone?” Togami laughed coldly. “Not likely.”

“Kirigiri didn’t mean for me to get hurt,” Naegi objected. “She’s my friend! And anyway, I can take care of myself.”

Togami stared at him, lips compressed until they went white, and for a moment Naegi was sure he was going to disagree, probably with some elaborate insult about Naegi’s ability to do anything. But instead, Togami turned back to Kirigiri, his eyes colder than Naegi had seen them yet. “You are not going to manipulate him into risking his life again. Do you understand?”

A faint smile twisted Kirigiri’s lips. “I understand you perfectly.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her like he was prepared to continue the argument.

Naegi frowned. “You guys, we shouldn’t be fighting with each other like this. We need to focus on beating the mastermind, not our friends.”

“I’m more than willing to leave this topic behind,” Kirigiri said calmly. “I’d much rather hear your secret instead.” She smirked. “Or did you think I wouldn’t notice that you’re hiding something?”

Naegi’s jaw dropped. “That’s –” He stopped, unsure what to say. The only secret Kirigiri could mean was the battle he’d seen between Ogami and Monokuma – and the conversation that had sounded like Ogami had been the mastermind’s spy.

“What’s the matter?” Kirigiri asked, raising an eyebrow. “We’re friends, so you should be able to trust me. Isn’t that what you said before?”

“Well – yeah, but –” Naegi hesitated, caught in the same dilemma he’d faced earlier that morning when Togami had asked. He didn’t want to keep secrets, not when Kirigiri had trusted him – but he couldn’t just make baseless accusations against another one of their friends without any proof. He hadn’t even had a chance to ask Ogami about it yet.

But this morning, Togami had agreed to give him time to figure out an answer, hadn’t he? Naegi looked questioningly up at Togami, and was reassured to find the other boy’s eyes fixed steady on
him. Yes, that had been all right. So maybe Kirigiri would be willing to wait as well.

“Sorry, but I can’t tell you,” Naegi said, looking back at Kirigiri. “Not yet.”

“You can’t? That’s your answer?” Kirigiri asked, eyebrows snapping together as she frowned at him. “But you were quite happy to hear what I had to say. You even felt free to share it with him.” Her gaze stabbed in Togami’s direction. “But now you won’t share what you know with me?”

“It’s not like that,” Naegi protested. “I’ll tell you when I can –”

“Don’t bother.” Kirigiri brushed past him, hair streaming behind her as she headed briskly for the door. “Goodbye.”

Before Naegi could say anything to stop her, she was gone, the door clicking closed behind her.

Togami shook his head. “Well, that’s one problem solved.”

“What?” Naegi blinked up at him. “It’s not solved. I think I made her mad!”

“You are the one who should be mad at her,” Togami said, sighing like Naegi was being particularly slow. “Weren’t you listening to what she said? Even if we put the best possible interpretation on the facts, she still knowingly sent you into danger without warning you or offering you an escape route. And that’s assuming she was telling the truth.”

“You think she was lying?” Naegi asked. “About what?”

Togami glanced at the surveillance camera, then leaned down, brushing Naegi’s hair aside to whisper in his ear. “I think it’s extremely convenient that she just happened to find a mysterious room with no cameras and a huge cache of information – and that she was able to peruse it at her leisure while you became a target the moment you set foot in the room. And it isn’t just this. Haven’t you noticed that she’s the only one of us who has never revealed any information about herself or her past – even to the point of concealing her ultimate talent?”

“Well, yeah.” Naegi was starting to get a very bad feeling about this. “What’s your point?”

Togami took a deep breath, and Naegi could feel the moving air raise goosebumps along the back of his neck. “I think Kirigiri is the most likely candidate to be the mastermind’s spy.”
“You think she’s –”

Togami’s finger pressed against Naegi’s mouth, stopping him before he could finish the thought. “Not out loud!” he hissed in Naegi’s ear.

Naegi glared up at him. Cameras or not, Togami couldn’t just make an accusation like that and expect him not to respond. But he was much too unfairly tall for Naegi to reply the same way, not unless he stooped down. Or…

Naegi tugged on Togami’s arm, leading the taller boy over to one of the cushioned benches and pushing him down onto it. Togami let him, though he raised an amused eyebrow as Naegi settled next to him, kneeling on the bench so he could get comfortably close enough to whisper in Togami’s ear.

“Kirigiri isn’t spying for the mastermind,” Naegi said, his voice as determined as a whisper could be. “She wouldn’t do something like that. She’s been working harder than any of us to stop them!”

Togami tilted his head so that he could whisper into Naegi’s ear in return. “So she says, but we only have her word on that.”

“That’s all any of us have, though,” Naegi said. “If you start doubting one of us, then where does it stop? How do you trust anyone?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t.”

Naegi frowned, flashing back to the cold and aloof heir he’d first met. “But you trust me, right? Even though you only have my word about who I am?”

Togami took a moment to study Naegi before he answered, brushing one of the unruly locks of Naegi’s hair away from his forehead. “I do trust you, yes,” he said at last. “But that doesn’t necessarily extend to trusting your judgement in all other matters.” Naegi could feel the other boy’s lips curl into a smile as they pressed against the curve of his ear. “Besides, you’re a terrible liar.”

And Naegi had to admit that Kirigiri was definitely an excellent liar. It wasn’t just her ability to hide her emotions – in the few hours he’d tried to spend with her outside of any investigation, she’d demonstrated that she could fake emotions she didn’t feel just as easily as she could present a blank façade. But why would she show him that ability if she was really trying to deceive them all about something so important? Wouldn’t it make more sense to hide her ability to lie, if she was really lying to them all?

But then again, if the unthinkable was true – if one of their friends really had been lying to them from the start – then Naegi knew Kirigiri wasn’t the one they should be suspecting.
He’d been trying not to think about it, but the memory of that terrible battle had been lurking in the back of his mind all morning. He’d seen Ogami fighting with Monokuma, flying through the gym in a whirl of targeted destruction – and instead of impaling her on the spot with a dozen spears like Enoshima, Monokuma had spoken to her, like they were continuing a conversation they’d had before. And then, when he’d mentioned hostages…

Naegi couldn’t imagine any of his friends acting against the group, but as they’d been reminded time and again, he didn’t know what mattered to the others. Simple betrayal seemed impossible, especially from someone as upright and honorable as Ogami – but if there were hostages involved, would that change things? He didn’t know. He couldn’t know, not until he’d had a chance to ask her about it.

But he couldn’t just leave things like this, either. Togami suspected Kirigiri, and who knew what that would lead him to do. She was already upset about Naegi refusing to tell her about what he’d seen last night – accusations of spying would only make her splinter even further away from the rest of the group.

“I don’t know why exactly Kirigiri acts the way she does,” Naegi said at last, just as Togami was starting to look impatient at his lack of response, “but it isn’t because she’s working for the mastermind. We’d have lost the trials without her help.”

Togami snorted. “We’d have managed without her. But there’s nothing to say that a traitor would hinder us. For all we know, part of her job might have been to try to help us enough during the trials that the mastermind’s game goes on for as long as possible. Since we don’t know the mastermind’s real goal, we can’t say what the traitor would have been instructed to do.”

“But they wouldn’t want to give us hope, right?” Naegi persisted. “They’d want us to fall apart after the trials – and after the first trial, Kirigiri is the reason I didn’t. She helped me get past what happened with Maizono. Why would she do that if she was on the mastermind’s side?”

“I don’t know yet,” Togami said. “But Naegi – it’s possible that everything she’s done has been a lie. You may not want to believe it, but you have to admit that the possibility exists.”

“No, I don’t,” Naegi tried to say, but Togami pulled his head away.

“We need to think of a way to confirm it either way,” Togami went on, holding his head so that he could speak into Naegi’s ear while Naegi couldn’t respond in turn. “Either we prove it and expose her, or if you’re right and she’s actually innocent, she can explain exactly what she’s been doing to make herself look so suspicious. But in either case, we need to confront her –”

Which was exactly what they shouldn’t do. Naegi jerked his head away, not letting Togami finish the sentence. He took a moment to make sure the other boy saw his glare before leaning in again. “No. I know she isn’t the traitor. We can’t just accuse her when she isn’t the one!”

He expected another argument, something else cold and calculating to rip apart Kirigiri’s actions – but Togami was silent. Naegi leaned away again, getting a glimpse of the deep frown on Togami’s face, just before the other boy drew close again.

“You know she isn’t the one?”

Naegi froze. He hadn’t meant to say it like that, but when Togami repeated his words back at him, Naegi heard the other boy emphasizing the inflection he’d spoken without realizing.

“What exactly did you mean by that?” Togami asked, his voice hard. “And don’t try to lie. Not
“I wouldn’t lie to you,” Naegi said. “Especially not about something important. I just – I don’t know what’s true yet.”

Togami’s hand shot out and clasped around Naegi’s. “Is this the thing you couldn’t tell me this morning? Is this your secret?” He pressed Naegi’s hand tightly, thumb against his palm and fingers wrapping around to his wrist. “Do you know who the traitor is?”

“No,” Naegi said, a wretched sort of guilt churning in his stomach. “Not for sure.”

“But you suspect someone,” Togami said. “Someone other than Kirigiri. And for you of all people to be suspicious, you must have a good reason. What did you see?”

“You said you’d wait,” Naegi protested. “You said I could talk to them about it first.”

“I didn’t know you meant something this important!” Togami snapped. “You can’t keep something like this a secret. For god’s sake, Naegi, what if they know you saw something about them? Being suspected might push them into acting!”

Naegi bit his lip, trying to hold back the sudden tears burning at the edges of his eyes. He knew he shouldn’t keep secrets, but he couldn’t just turn on Ogami, either. It wasn’t an easy decision, and he didn’t know what choice was the right thing to do, and his head kept hurting, and he just wanted to go back to bed and sleep until this was all over.

But he knew he couldn’t. It was just like every other time things here had seemed impossible – he just had to keep going and get through it.

“I asked you to wait,” Naegi said, hoping his voice didn’t sound as shaky as he felt. “And you said that you would if I gave you answers when I had them. I’ll keep my word. Are you going to keep yours, or are you going to get mad and run off again?”

Togami went still, his lips pressing together. His thumb slid over Naegi’s palm, moving slowly back and forth as he thought.

“You intend to talk to the traitor, don’t you?” Togami asked at last.

“Well – yeah,” Naegi admitted. “I have to. I don’t know what I saw, not really, and I can’t just accuse someone without knowing for sure.”

“Then I’m not going anywhere,” Togami said. “I’m staying with you. I’ll wait for answers if you insist on it, but I’m not letting you talk to a potential spy by yourself.”

“But –”

“Do you have any sense of self-preservation at all?” Togami snapped. “I know you want to be wrong, but what if you’re right? Do you think they’ll let you just walk away knowing the truth?”

“I didn’t think of that,” Naegi said slowly. He’d thought they’d have a conversation, one where Ogami was able to offer some plausible explanation for what he’d seen – or at worst, where she would admit to being forced to act as a spy against her will while the mastermind held threatened their hostages. But now that Togami brought it up, he had to admit there was a possibility that things might get even more dangerous than that.

“Well, I’ve thought about it for you,” Togami said. “And I’m telling you that if you want to walk
out of that meeting alive, you shouldn’t go alone.”

Naegi frowned. On one hand, Togami did make a good point – but on the other hand, he could envision just how that conversation would go if Togami were present, and it didn’t sound good. Tact and understanding weren’t exactly Togami’s strong points. And besides, even if he didn’t say the words, wouldn’t this still be the same as making the accusation? He’d still be pointing at Ogami as a traitor before he had any evidence.

“You don’t have to name the person beforehand,” Togami said, when Naegi didn’t answer him. “And since I don’t know what you saw, I won’t involve myself in the conversation until you’ve gotten your answers.”

“That – that might be okay,” Naegi said, thinking it over. He still didn’t like the idea of casting doubt on one of his friends without any proof – but at least this way, Togami had promised to listen to what Ogami had to say in her own defense first.

“Good,” Togami said, and Naegi thought he caught a faint sigh of relief from the other boy as he pulled further away from Naegi. “Then let’s not waste any more time.”
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Togami run into a problem before they can begin their plan to confront the traitor.

Naegi frowned as he and Togami walked out of the music room, wondering where he should go to look for Ogami. He hadn’t seen her at all while exploring the fourth floor, but then again, he hadn’t looked everywhere, either. She usually checked the classrooms so that she could try to get the iron plates off the windows, didn’t she?

“This way,” Naegi decided, heading back past the data center towards the classrooms they’d skipped earlier. Togami followed a pace behind him, arms crossed and jaw tense as he scanned the hallway.

The first classroom turned out to be empty, though the strange almost leopard-print wallpaper made it seem fuller than it was. Naegi shrugged and tried the second door, wondering where he’d try next if it was empty as well.

“Hey, there you are, White Knight! Man, I’ve been looking all over for you!”

Fukawa – no, Genocide Jill bounded across the classroom towards them, a huge grin on her face at the sight of Togami. “It’s been ages, darling! You weren’t hiding from me again, were you? Gyahahaha!”

Naegi gulped as the serial killer beamed at them. He hadn’t really had to interact with her since he and Togami had gotten involved – but Fukawa had taken the revelation badly enough on her own. Jill freely admitted to murdering countless young men to express her romantic feelings. How would she react to learning about his relationship?

“Of course I was avoiding you,” Togami said flatly. “I don’t want to see you.”

“Aw, don’t be like that,” Jill said, her cheerfulness undiminished by his tone. “You know you missed me! Too bad I wasn’t the one around when you got in all that trouble, huh? I could have helped you out when you were locked up in that closet!”

“I can think of very few things I would want less than that.” Togami looked away from her, grimacing in Naegi’s direction. “Please tell me you’re ready to go.”

Naegi blinked. Why was Togami asking that? He couldn’t just be trying to be polite – did he actually think that Jill might be the traitor?

“Aw, Mahkyutie, you don’t want to go, do you?” Jill said. “Not before you check out this fantastic artwork. Come on, baby, you’ll love it!”

“Uh – what artwork?” Naegi asked cautiously, not entirely sure he wanted to see something that Jill would call fantastic.

“Take a look!” Jill jerked a thumb back at the chalkboard.
Naegi looked where she was pointing, and his eyes widened. Like all the other classrooms, this one had Monokuma’s graffiti scribbled all over the chalkboard – but this one included a picture of a boy with fluffy brown hair sitting happily at a desk beside Monokuma with little music notes around them.

“Is that supposed to be me?” Naegi asked, staring at it.

“Looking all bright-eyed and innocent, just waiting for a big bad wolf to eat you up!” Jill laughed and winked at him. “They got the hair down pat, didn’t they, White Knight?”

“Why are we wasting any of our time looking at these drawings?” Togami asked, sounding very put upon. “It looks stupid, just like all the others.”

“Really?” Jill turned and looked at it, tilting her head consideringly. “You’re right, darling – it needs something!” She flew over to the chalkboard and snatched up a spare piece of chalk, scrawling her own addition to the drawing. “There!”

Naegi stared at the long pink tongue she’d drawn curling out of his mouth. “Uh…”

“Makes him look extra adorable, right?” Jill laughed, one hand on her hip as she surveyed her vandalism.

“Not really,” Naegi said, grimacing. And since when did Jill think he was adorable, anyway? He’d thought she only looked at Togami like that – he wasn’t at all sure he liked the change.

“Well, I’ve got to appreciate what I can get, right?” Jill said, turning back towards them. “Since I missed the other show and all.”

“What other show?” Naegi asked. “Do you mean the last class trial?”

“That thing? Ugh, no – though I would’ve loved to go up against the bitch who tried to make my White Knight look stupid,” Jill said, a dark look flashing across her face for just a moment before her grin came back stronger than ever. “No, baby, I mean the big ol’ slasher film fest Monokuma had for you guys.”

Togami’s hand wrapped around Naegi’s elbow, tight enough that it almost hurt. “How do you know about that?”

“Oh, darling, you would not believe the things I hear about,” Jill said, her grin turning very suggestive as she moved back towards them like iron swinging to a magnet. “And if the two of you going to give the cameras a show like that, you gotta expect that people will want to show you off to the world!”

Naegi stared at her, hoping she wasn’t about to whip out her scissors. “So – you mean you don’t mind?”

“Of course I mind!” Jill said, tossing her braids. “I just can’t believe that my White Knight’s silver screen debut got wasted on Gloomy. Now there’s a girl who doesn’t know how to enjoy a good show. I bet she didn’t even bring popcorn!” She leered at them, making Naegi turn red. “What do you think – is there another showing in the works where I can take a good long look?”

“I really hope not,” Naegi said, face hot at the idea.

“Yeah, who wants reruns, right?” Jill agreed brightly. “No, if you’re looking to be movie stars, you gotta release new content! Is there a sequel in the works? Or better yet, a live performance?” She
licked her lips with her long, dangling tongue.

“Absolutely not,” Togami snapped, yanking Naegi with him as he took a step backwards out of her reach.

“Let me know if you change your mind, darling,” she said. “I’m always willing to be your test audience.” Her grin widened. “Or if you decide you need another co-star –”

“That’s it, we’re done here.” Togami spun and stalked out of the room, and Naegi had to scramble to keep from being dragged as the other boy refused to let go of his elbow. Jill’s laughter echoed down the hall behind them as Togami hurried away.

“You know, that wasn’t so bad,” Naegi said, once they were out of earshot.

Togami shot him an incredulous glance. “What about interacting with her isn’t bad?”

“Well, she didn’t seem angry or anything,” Naegi explained. “You know – about us.”

“She has no right to be angry about anything I do.”

“Yeah, but she wasn’t.” Naegi frowned, thinking over the way she’d tried to show Togami the graffiti of him and her promotion of him to adorable status. “Do you think she might be okay with it?”

“I don’t care if she is or not,” Togami said. He looked around the empty hallway, scowling. “I don’t think there’s but her left on this floor.” He took a sharp left towards the stairs.

“Yeah, I guess it’s been long enough that everyone’s probably gathering in the dining hall by now,” Naegi realized.

“Though I don’t know what they can possibly find to talk about,” Togami said. “This floor has been worthless – nothing but locked doors and wastes of time. The mastermind should be ashamed of acting like this is genuinely a new area to explore.”

“At least it wasn’t full of weapons or anything,” Naegi pointed out.

“Oh, there will be weapons there somewhere,” Togami said grimly. “The mastermind will have made very sure of that. With so few of us left, they’ll be planning something dangerous.”

“You think so?” Naegi asked, a sick feeling sinking through his stomach.

“Definitely,” Togami said. “And not just that. If the mastermind sticks to their pattern, there’ll be another motive coming soon.” He leaned down to whisper in Naegi’s ear again. “If we’re going to act, we need to beat them to it.”

Which meant that Naegi needed to talk to Ogami now – ideally before the group dispersed after the discussion. He nodded, determination settling through his shoulders. He could do that.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Togami meet up with the other students after exploring the fourth floor.

Naegi frowned as they entered the dining hall. Ogami was there, but she stood with Asahina, as usual. It was going to be hard to get a chance to talk to her alone, wasn’t it?

“Let’s discuss what we all discovered,” Ogami said, once everyone had trickled in and taken their usual spots.

“So where were you guys?” Naegi asked her. “I don’t think I saw you upstairs.”

Asahina was the one who answered. “We found a big shelf of chemicals in the chem lab! It had an all-star cast of nutrient additives and supplements.”

“Oh, there was a chem lab up there?” Naegi frowned. “I guess we must have missed it.”

“Well, you should definitely check it out!” Asahina said. But then her face fell. “It wasn’t all good stuff, though. It also had a bunch of different poisons.”

“Ah.” Togami nodded. “I knew there would be something.”

“They were clearly labeled,” Ogami told him. “It would be very hard to grab one by mistake.”

“But easy to do it on purpose.” Togami frowned. “Poison adds a new twist to the game. Someone could kill now without being anywhere near their victim. Very interesting.”

“I thought you were going to stop treating this all like a game!” Asahina glared at him.

“I can think it’s interesting without intending to try it myself,” Togami said, not sounding phased in the slightest by her annoyance.

“I guess it’s good that we’re all aware of something so dangerous, though,” Naegi said. He shivered at the thought of poison sitting right out there in the open, mixed in with other normal supplements. “It’s too bad the poison couldn’t have been behind one of the locked doors.”

“Oh, yeah, there were a bunch of locked doors on the new floor, weren’t there?” Hagakure said, nodding. “The data center and the headmaster’s office, right?”

“The headmaster’s room?” Asahina’s face lit up. “I bet we’d find a lot of clues in there!”

“Not with the door locked, we can’t,” Togami said, rolling his eyes.

“Who cares about a stupid lock?” Hagakure said. “With the Ogre on our side, breaking down one measly door should be no problem!”

“What was that?”

Monokuma bounced out to land at Hagakure’s side, giving him an innocently questioning look
when he yelped and scrambled to move away. “I didn’t say anything!” Hagakure protested.

“Oh, no, please continue. I insist,” Monokuma said. “It sounded like you said I’ve got the nicest butt on the whole block. Was that it?”

“Hell no!”

“Well, I know you couldn’t have been talking about tearing down the door to the headmaster’s office,” Monokuma said. “That’s my room, you know – or it is now, anyway. And you want to bust it down?” Monokuma raised a paw, and wickedly sharp claws slid out. “You seriously don’t want to piss me off.”

“No – I was just kidding!” Hagakure protested hastily.

Monokuma sighed heavily. “I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do this, but if you’re going to have those kinds of thoughts – then I have no choice but to add to the school regulations! Breaking down a locked door is now prohibited!”

With that pronouncement, he disappeared again, just as all their e-handbooks beeped to announce the addition of the new rule.

“Of course it wouldn’t be that easy,” Togami said darkly.

“But if he went so far as to make a rule about it, then there must be something important in the headmaster’s office,” Ogami said, frowning as she thought it over.

“We can’t do anything about it now, though,” Naegi said. “Not after he made that rule.”

“So that’s it, then?” Hagakure asked. “Nobody found any clues, or a way out?”

“Well – I wouldn’t say that,” Naegi said. “Togami and I did find something in the office.” He looked around. “You all remember the picture I found on the third floor, right? Well, we found another one just like it, but with Yamada, Celeste, and Maizono this time.”

“So it was real? You saw this one, too?” Asahina asked, looking over at Togami skeptically.

“I saw it,” Togami said, shrugging. “I can’t say if it was a genuine photograph, though.”

“But if it is real, that means everyone in it had some kind of hidden connection, right?” Naegi asked. “Something that we just don’t understand yet.”

“It was obviously just a distraction,” Togami said. “We found it directly after seeing the locked headmaster’s office. The mastermind must have wanted us to worry about the picture instead of what might be in that room.”

“But Monokuma did go out of his way to say it was real,” Naegi said, frowning. “I mean, we could just write it off as a lie, but –”

“But you trust Monokuma’s word over the people who have died?” Kirigiri interrupted, her icy gaze piercing into him. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“What?” Naegi stared at her. “No, that’s not –”

“I’m shocked.” Kirigiri smiled at him, sharp and pointed. “After everything you’ve said about how we all need to trust our friends, you refuse to do the same.”
“Or maybe he’s just learned that some of his friends aren’t quite so trustworthy after all,” Togami said, crossing his arms and glaring at Kirigiri from his place at Naegi’s side. “When you mislead your so-called friend, you can’t very well complain about the consequences.”

“I see.” Kirigiri looked from one boy to the other. “So it isn’t just the dead students – I rank lower than Monokuma, as well, is that it?”

“No, of course not!” Naegi said. “I just meant that we should consider all the possibilities, that’s all.”

“Come on, guys, stop fighting, or all your good luck’s going to float away,” Hagakure said, rubbing at his wild hair. “There’s no way Monokuma didn’t fake that picture.”

“He’s just trying to confuse us,” Ogami agreed. “You shouldn’t listen to anything Monokuma has to say.”

That statement made Naegi pause for a moment – not because of what Ogami said, but because of how she said it. There was something in her tone that rang in his aching head like the words he’d heard her say to Monokuma the previous night. The steel core of determination in her voice, rejecting Monokuma’s insidious lies – it was the same.

And that reminded him that right now, he had something else to worry about than the fact that Kirigiri was mad at him.

“I’ll try not to worry about the photo for now,” Naegi said. He still wasn’t convinced they should ignore it, but until he could come up with a stronger argument, there wasn’t much he could do about that. “Is that everything that everyone found?” He looked around the group, seeing a series of half-hearted nods. That seemed to mark the end of the meeting, as Kirigiri turned to stalk out of the room in a swirl of silvery hair.

“All right,” Togami muttered as the others began to drift apart. He looked at Naegi and raised a challenging eyebrow, as if to ask if he was ready. Naegi nodded slightly, taking a deep breath. Yes, he was. He had to be.

He walked over to where Ogami and Asahina were chatting. “Uh, hey, Ogami – do you have a few minutes? There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.”

“All right,” Ogami said. “Go ahead.”

Naegi looked over at Asahina. “Well – uh, actually, it might take a little time. Could we go somewhere to talk about it?”

“Huh? You’re not going to start cheating on Togami already, are you?” Asahina asked, eyes widening. “I know he’s a huge jerk, but you should break up with him first before you try to win Sakura’s heart!”

“No, of course not! It’s nothing like that!” Naegi said hastily. “And – he’ll be there, too, actually.”

“Whoa, both of you?” Asahina’s jaw dropped.

“I’d just like to talk to you,” Naegi said, deciding that his best bet was to ignore Asahina’s misunderstandings and focus on Ogami instead. “Can we?”

“Well – can it wait until tomorrow?” Ogami asked, turning to glance up at the clock. “I’d like to get some rest. I’ve been feeling worn down all day.”
Naegi wasn’t surprised to hear that, not after the way she and Monokuma had fought. But – he hated to have to do this, but he didn’t think delaying was an option, either. Togami didn’t seem like he’d accept any delays, not now that he knew the subject of Naegi’s secret – and really, he’d made a good point that waiting on this issue could be dangerous.

“Sorry, but I don’t think it can,” Naegi said. He bit his lip, then decided that he needed to let her know what he meant. “It’s about something that happened yesterday – after the trial.”


“Okay, sure!” Asahina said with a smile. “I guess I’ll go find some dinner, then. Let me know when you’re done, and I’ll make you something, too!” She turned and made for the kitchen.

Naegi looked up at Ogami. “So –”

“Long conversations are best had over a bath, don’t you agree?” Togami interrupted, taking a few steps closer. His eyes settled on Ogami with a dark malevolence that Naegi hadn’t seen since Monokuma had first announced the killing game’s rules. “It’s the perfect place for everything to come clean.”

Ogami eyed him for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, that would make it easier.”

Without another word, the three of them left the dining hall, crossing over to the bathhouse. Naegi knew that entering it as a group of three right now was risky, especially since Alter Ego was still in there – but they couldn’t very well have a conversation about spies where the mastermind’s cameras could overhear them. The bath was the only option they had.

Once they were inside, Togami shut and locked the door, leaning against it with his arms folded and his lips pressed tightly together. It looked like he intended to keep his word about not talking, at least for now. Naegi nodded to himself and looked at Ogami.

She’d seated herself on one of the benches, hands on her knees and shoulders tense as she looked up at him. “So, then – what do you want to discuss?”
Naegi hated the way it felt to stand there in front of Ogami. The slimy sensation of guilt churned through his stomach as he contemplated what he had to say. What if he was making a mistake? Did he really have the right to stand in front of her like some kind of inquisitor, preparing to wring out answers?

No – that wasn’t what he was doing, Naegi decided. He wasn’t interrogating her. Whatever happened in the next few minutes, even if it changed everything, that didn’t matter – right now, they were friends. He was going to talk to her the way that a friend would.

Naegi moved to the other row of benches and sat on the one facing Ogami, as close as if they were sitting at a table in the dining hall. Sitting there, she towered over him, but he didn’t feel the aura of intimidation that she’d projected when they first met. She was quiet and still, a faint smile on her lips as she waited.

He took a deep breath, gathering his nerve, and said, “I saw you fighting with Monokuma last night.”

He paused, waiting a moment – he wasn’t quite sure for what. But Ogami didn’t object, or ask what he meant, or anything to contradict him. She just closed her eyes and said, “Go on.”

“Well – I was walking past the gym, and I heard noises,” Naegi said, figuring that she’d need to know what exactly he’d seen in order to explain it. “And when I looked in to see what was going on, I saw the fight. You were –” He shook his head. “You were fighting so intensely I could hardly see what was happening. And then – then Monokuma asked what you were doing. He said that fighting him wasn’t part of the deal.”

Ogami didn’t respond, sitting so still she could have been a statue, untouched by the words Naegi was speaking.

“I – I did hear something else, too, though,” Naegi said, trying to stave off the guilt crawling through his chest. “It wasn’t just that you had a deal. He said that he had a hostage.”

Ogami’s head bowed towards the floor like a great weight had fallen on her. “So you saw all of that.”

“Yes.” Naegi felt like he was the one admitting to wrongdoing. “And – I’m sorry, but I have to ask – what did it mean? What was Monokuma talking about?”

“He was talking about the fact that I’ve been his spy since the first night here.”

The words hit Naegi like a punch in the gut. He’d expected an explanation, an excuse, some kind of protest. He hadn’t thought she’d just admit it. With anyone else, he might have thought it was a bad joke – but Ogami wouldn’t joke about something like this. She definitely didn’t look like she was joking. She looked like she might never smile about anything again.
“But I heard what you said to him, too,” Naegi said, offering the words like an apology for what he’d said already. “I heard you say that you were going to resist him – that you weren’t going to work for him anymore. And if you only did it in the first place because it was a hostage situation, then –”

“Don’t try to defend me,” Ogami cut him off. “No reason can excuse what I’ve done, or absolve me of responsibility for my actions. It was weakness, my own unforgivable weakness, that made me listen to the mastermind. If the time has come for me to face the consequences, then you shouldn’t intervene on my behalf.”

“But – if we explain –”

“No explanation will be enough.” Ogami looked past Naegi, to where Togami stood against the door. “Will it?”

“No,” Togami said. “But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t give it.” He looked at Naegi. “It sounds to me like you have your questions answered.”

Naegi nodded slowly, head still spinning from the ease of the revelation. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

“Good.” Togami crossed the floor to stand beside Naegi, glaring down at Ogami. “Then it’s my turn.”

“I expected as much.” Ogami nodded. “Go on, then.”

Togami frowned down at her. “First of all, how secure is this room?”

Ogami blinked. “What? This room?”

“We’ve all believed it to be safe from the mastermind, due to the lack of cameras,” Togami said, waving an impatient hand at the empty walls. “But if you’ve been reporting to the mastermind, then you must have some idea about the gaps in their surveillance. Are we able to talk freely here, or do they have some alternate method of spying on us?”

“I don’t know for certain,” Ogami said slowly. “They did ask about what happened in here – and in much more detail than they asked about what happened anywhere else.”

“Then we’ll continue with the conditional assumption that we’re out of the surveillance range,” Togami said. “All right, then. So you’ve been working with the mastermind? Then tell us their identity.”

“I can’t,” Ogami said, looking away. “I never spoke to them directly, only through Monokuma. He approached me on our first night here. Before that, I knew only what the rest of you did, and afterward, he said as little as possible.”

“Of course he did,” Togami said. “Because if Monokuma has one defining trait, it’s his silence.” He rolled his eyes. “Maybe you’ll do better with my next question. Are any of the other students also spies?”

Naegi stared up at Togami. “What? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What it sounds like,” Togami said, not taking his eyes off Ogami. “There’s nothing to say the mastermind would limit themselves to a single spy. In fact, a second one would let them confirm your reports against each other.”
“I – I don’t know,” Ogami said. “If any of the other students were in a similar situation, the
mastermind never gave me any indication of it.”

Togami’s mouth twisted in a skeptical sneer. “So you don’t know who the mastermind is, and you
don’t know anything about what they might know about us? For someone who supposedly just
swore to fight against the mastermind with the rest of us, you’re not doing a very good job of it. Is
there any reason we shouldn’t just write this imaginary change of heart off as some kind of plot?”

“It wasn’t –”

“Don’t,” Ogami interrupted before Naegi could form any more of his protest. She eyed Togami a
moment longer, evaluating him. “There is one thing that I do know about our situation that the rest
of you don’t know.”

“Oh, really?” Togami leaned forward, eyes flashing eagerly behind his glasses. “And what’s that?”

“There weren’t fifteen students sealed in this school,” Ogami said. “There were sixteen.”
“Sixteen students?” Naegi asked. “Do you mean that there’s another person locked in the school with us?”

For a moment, he remembered that hidden room – and the figure that had attacked him. He hadn’t gotten a good look, but it was certainly possible that it could have been a student who had done it.

“And if I ask you who that is, will you have anything useful to say?” Togami asked, crossing his arms.

Ogami shook her head. “I don’t know. I asked, but the mastermind refused to tell me. He called the sixteenth student the ace up his sleeve.”

Naegi frowned. A sixteenth student hidden somewhere in the school – could it really be possible? Well, there were certainly enough closed off areas and locked doors to hide another person without much of a problem. He’d seen the stairs leading up to yet another floor of the school when they’d been exploring the fourth floor.

“His ace, is it?” Togami asked. His mind had clearly been going in a different direction than Naegi’s. “What would the mastermind need an ace for? What can this supposed other student do that a spy among us couldn’t?” He shook his head. “Assuming we can even believe what you’re saying, that is.”

“Yes, which very conveniently raises the specter of a different threat to distract from her,” Togami said. He shook his head. “No. I’m not convinced. She could just be pretending to have betrayed the mastermind as part of acting against us.”

Naegi looked over at Ogami. Her eyes had gone very wide, but she didn’t say a word of protest. Somehow, that seemed to make it worse than if she’d objected. “I don’t think that’s true.”

“You didn’t think there was a traitor when I first suggested it, either,” Togami countered. “And I was right about that. You may want to live in a fantasy world where you can blindly trust anyone you meet – but this is reality. Here, people betray one another. And if someone betrays you once, they can just as easily do it again.”

“You don’t need to argue about it,” Ogami said, before Naegi could respond. “I told you already that I have no intention of trying to avoid responsibility for what I’ve done. If that means you choose not to believe me, then so be it.” She folded her arms. “But what I would like to know is what you intend to do now.”

“Well – I guess we need to tell the others,” Naegi said slowly, looking up at Togami again. “I mean, we can’t keep a secret like this from them, right?”
“Certainly not,” Togami agreed. “If the others don’t know the truth, she could do or say anything she pleases. The ideal choice would be to confine her somehow, but of course that isn’t an option.”

“We can’t just lock her up!” Naegi protested, horrified.

“Obviously we can’t, she’s much stronger than we are,” Togami said impatiently. “It would only be possible if she let us restrain her – and frankly, I wouldn’t trust it if she did.”

“I wouldn’t agree to it, anyway,” Ogami said quietly. “I have no intention of being locked away.”

“I thought as much,” Togami said with grim satisfaction.

“There’s still something I have to do,” Ogami went on. “I want to make up for what I’ve done – and so I intend to destroy the mastermind.”

“What?” Naegi stared at her.

“I will wait until after you’ve informed the others, so that they can hear my confirmation,” Ogami said. “But after that, I will confront the mastermind and take them down by any means necessary.”

Togami shrugged. “If you want to be melodramatic about it, go ahead and get yourself killed. It will solve the problem of containing you very nicely.”

“Hey! You can’t just say that to someone’s face!” Naegi objected.

“Would you rather I waited till she left and said it behind her back?” Togami said, raising an eyebrow. “She knows herself that it’s true – she worked for the mastermind, and as long as she’s alive, we can’t trust that she’s really stopped. The only way that we can stop worrying about it is if she’s dead.”

“Or if we take the mastermind down,” Naegi said.

“If the mastermind could be taken down by punching him, we wouldn’t still be here,” Togami said. “No, there’s nothing of consequence that a spy can contribute.”

“I’ll think of a way,” Ogami vowed.

“Don’t overtax what little brain you have,” Togami told her. “You can go in there while you think about it.” He gestured towards the door that led from the changing room into the actual baths.

“In the bath?” she asked, frowning.

“Yes. There’s something else I want to do here, and I don’t want you hanging over my shoulder taking notes for the mastermind,” Togami said. “And I don’t trust you to wander around the school, either. So go wait in the bath where I can keep track of you.”

Something he wanted to do? Naegi frowned – and then his gaze fell on the lockers lining the wall of the changing room. Alter Ego was the only other thing of note in the changing room – did Togami want to talk to him?

Either way, Ogami nodded. “Very well. Then I’ll wait until I hear from one of you.”

She headed into the bath, grimacing as the steam touched her clothes, and shut the door behind her.

Togami frowned at the door for a moment, then pushed one of the benches up against it. “There. It won’t keep her inside, but that should at least make enough noise to let us know if she’s trying to
“So you want to talk to Alter Ego, right?” Naegi said.

Togami nodded, crossing to the locker where the laptop was kept and pulling it out, placing it on the bench beside Naegi. “Yes, that’s right.”

The laptop screen flickered to life, and Fujisaki’s face smiled out at them. “Hi, Togami and Naegi! It’s nice to see you both again.”

Togami didn’t bother to respond to the pleasantries. Instead he reached for the keyboard and typed, “Have you finished analyzing the data?”

“Oh, that! Yes, uh, actually, I have,” Alter Ego said, with an equal mix of pride and embarrassment. “I have all the information ready. Do you want to hear it?”
Naegi and Togami learn what Alter Ego has discovered from his data analysis.

Naegi couldn’t believe that this was it – that Alter Ego had finally finished processing the data. It felt like it had been so long since they’d had any kind of breakthrough, and now that it was happening, it didn’t seem real. The mood in the school had been so dark all day, but this – this would have to make things a little brighter, wouldn’t it?

“Should I get the others?” Naegi asked, before Togami could type a response.

Togami frowned. “Why?”

“Well – so they can hear what Alter Ego found out?” Naegi said, puzzled.

“They can hear it later,” Togami said. “I’m not waiting. Something could happen to the laptop if we leave, and then we’ll have lost our chance.”

Naegi frowned. He didn’t think any of their remaining friends would touch Alter Ego – but Ogami had just admitted to telling Monokuma about what had happened in this room. If Monokuma knew about Alter Ego, then there was the chance he might try to get rid of the laptop. Actually, now that Naegi thought about it, stealing the laptop after Alter Ego had finished the data but before they could learn the results sounded exactly like something the mastermind would do.

“All right,” Naegi said, sighing. “But we have to tell the others as soon as we’ve heard it.”


“Okay,” Alter Ego said. “Then I’ll summarize everything I learned from the decrypted files. The most important fact I found was that a plan had been put into effect here to isolate the students of Hope’s Peak and create a communal life for them. But it was meant to be more than a normal school life. The students were intended to live out the rest of their lives here.”

“What?” Naegi stared at the screen in shock. “But that’s –”

“A very familiar situation,” Togami finished. “It sounds as though all of us were the chosen victims for this plan.”

“It’s unthinkable, isn’t it?” Alter Ego went on. “And what’s more, the ones who came up with it were the administrators of Hope’s Peak themselves.”

“Hmm.” Togami tapped a finger against the keyboard without pressing any keys. “That actually explains a great deal. The control of the building, the ability to cloak what they were doing here – the school administration would be able to do all this far more easily than some outside group.”

“But why would they?” Naegi asked.
Togami shrugged. “Perhaps Alter Ego learned more about that, too.”

“It seems that they devised this plan because of what happened one year ago,” Alter Ego went on. “They said it was the biggest, most awful, most tragic event in human history – otherwise known as the Tragedy. It was apparently some sort of devastating occurrence. And because of the Tragedy, Hope’s Peak was forced to discontinue its role as a school and shut down.”

“A year ago?” Togami frowned. “That can’t be right. Nothing even approaching an event of that scale happened a year ago. Even if it was covered up, my family would have heard about something that world-shaking.”

“Then you think Alter Ego got it wrong?”

“Hm.” Togami pondered the screen for a moment. “No, I don’t. The rest of it makes too much sense – some sort of tragic incident a year ago spurred the Hope’s Peak administration to begin this plan. More likely the name of the event was just sensationalized to justify their actions.”

“But why would they go so far?” Naegi asked. “And what could the event have been?”

“Exactly what I want to know, as well.” Togami typed the questions in as he spoke.

But Alter Ego looked down sadly. “Sorry – I don’t know anything else about that. If the information was in the files I had, it’s gone now.” Tears quivered in the corners of his eyes. “I’m totally useless.”

“No, that’s not true!” Naegi protested. “We wouldn’t know any of this without you!” He didn’t hear the clatter of keys, though, and when he looked down, Togami hadn’t typed what he’d said. “Tell him that he’s been really helpful!”

“It’s a computer program,” Togami said. “It doesn’t need emotional validation.”

“Well – is that really true?” Naegi asked. “I mean, I know he’s just a program running on the computer, but where’s the line between a person and an AI?”

“An AI is a machine designed to respond to a set of external stimuli with preprogrammed responses, and a person is capable of independent thought, actions, and decisions,” Togami said. “Fujisaki created this program to extract data. It’s just doing what he intended it to do.”

“If that’s all it is, then why would he have programmed Alter Ego to feel bad about not being able to help more?” Naegi countered. “And that doesn’t explain why Alter Ego tried to encourage Ishimaru after Owada’s death.”

“He just used the data Fujisaki gave him for that,” Togami said dismissively.

“Yes, but he decided to do it, when there was no way Fujisaki could’ve foreseen that and programmed the response into him,” Naegi said. “I know Alter Ego isn’t human, but with all the ways he’s helped us, I can’t help but think of him as one of our friends.”

Togami stared at Naegi for a moment longer, then sighed and turned back to the keyboard, typing, “Your analysis has been very helpful.”

He looked back up at Naegi. “Happy?”

Before Naegi could answer, the sound of the nighttime bells came from outside the bathhouse doors, slightly muted due to the lack of speakers in the changing room.
“It’s that late?” Naegi asked in surprise, as the curfew announcement played. “I guess we should head back to the dorms.”

“Not yet,” Togami said, his fingers still on the keyboard. This time he typed, “Did you learn anything else from your analysis?”

“Actually, I did!” Alter Ego said. “And I think it might be important. It’s probably about the mastermind.”

“Oh, really?” Togami’s eyebrows snapped up as he typed, “Do you know their identity?”

“No, I didn’t learn that,” Alter Ego said. “But I did find another clue. The person who led the Hope’s Peak staff in the plan to isolate you was the Hope’s Peak headmaster. He may very well be the mastermind who planned this all out. According to the files, the headmaster is a man in his late thirties. It seems possible, even likely, that he’s somewhere in the school right now.”


“And it would explain why the headmaster’s door is locked, too,” Togami added. “Either there could be clues to his identity in that room, or that’s where he himself is.” He scowled at the keyboard. “First a supposed sixteenth student, now a headmaster – this school is getting fuller by the minute.”

Naegi thought of all the empty rooms in the dorms, labeled with pictures of students who would never use them again. “Not really.”

“Is that the end of the report?” Togami typed, when Alter Ego didn’t say anything further.

“Yes, that’s everything,” Alter Ego said. “I’m sorry I don’t have anything else.”

“Be prepared to repeat it for the others in the morning,” Togami typed.

“Understood,” Alter Ego said, as Togami picked up the laptop and returned it to the locker. “I’ll be ready.”

“In the morning?” Naegi asked. “Shouldn’t we try to get everyone so they can hear it now?”

“They’ll all have returned to their rooms by now,” Togami pointed out. “Dragging them out again after curfew will only attract the mastermind’s attention. And while we have to assume the mastermind knows about Alter Ego from Ogami’s reports, they shouldn’t know about the data extraction yet. Getting them out of bed will be as good as screaming that we found out something new.”

Naegi nodded. “All right. First thing in the morning, then.”

“We’ll tell them about Ogami at the same time,” Togami said. “We’ll need to explain why no one can tell her about Alter Ego’s report, in any case.”

“I guess,” Naegi said reluctantly. He wasn’t really looking forward to telling the others that Ogami was the spy – especially not Asahina. That was going to be a horrible conversation.

Togami strode over to the other side of the room and threw open the door to the bath, quickly retreating as soon as it was open. He hadn’t needed to move so fast, though – Ogami stood well out of reach of the door, hair frizzing from the humidity and clothes damp with sweat and steam.
“We’re done,” Togami said, face going stony as he looked at her. “It’s nighttime, so we’re heading back to the dorms. You’ll stay in sight of us on the way back until you get to your room, and you’ll stay locked in there until morning.”

Ogami nodded. “That seems reasonable.”

“And to make sure that you do,” Togami went on, “you’re going to give me your dorm key now.”

Naegi stared at him. “What? Why do you want her key?”

“I don’t want her roaming the school and sabotaging us,” Togami said flatly. “It isn’t a guarantee if she’s lying about betraying the mastermind, but it’s better than nothing.” He narrowed his eyes at Ogami. “So. If you’re serious about switching sides, throw me your dorm key. I’ll lock you in for the night, and then let you out in the morning so that you can confirm to the others that you’re a traitor.”

Naegi would have protested again, but before he could, Ogami pulled her key from her pocket and tossed it to Togami. He tucked it into his pocket with a satisfied nod. “All right. Then follow us back, and be sure to stay out of arm’s reach. I don’t want you trying anything on either of us.”

It seemed like an excessive amount of paranoia to Naegi, since Ogami had said she was on their side now, but he knew really wasn’t much point in arguing with Togami about it. It wouldn’t change his mind, and Ogami didn’t seem to object. He decided to shrug it off and head out of the changing room with Togami, with Ogami trailing a little further behind them.

But as soon as they stepped out of the bath, they all froze. Standing just outside the door, Monokuma was waiting for them, blocking their path to the dorm rooms.

“My heart is pound-pound-pounding away,” Monokuma announced, raising his paws into the air. “With anger!”

Almost without thinking, Naegi reached out beside him, and he found Togami’s hand moving towards his. With their hands clasped together, a little of the terror at Monokuma’s sudden scream of fury dissipated.

“It’s not just that the three of you went off to enjoy an indecent mixed bath together,” Monokuma went on. “That doesn’t matter. Etch this onto the walls of your brain, okay? When you make a choice, I hand it back to you tenfold – a hundredfold – a thousand-million-billionfold! This isn’t a freewheeling carnival of random occurrences. In the Monokuma world, you reap what you sow!”

And with a silence even more disturbing than his usual wild laughter, Monokuma disappeared.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi return to the dorms for the night and have a conversation about what’s been happening in the past couple days.

Togami kept a close eye on Ogami as he and Naegi walked her back to her dorm room. She could claim to have turned against the mastermind all she liked, but he didn’t believe a word of it. Why would she suddenly abandon the mastermind now, when over half the students had died? If she was going to pretend to some sort of moral outrage, the time for that would have been after the first death. And if she’d only agreed to work against them due to the mastermind’s threats against a hostage, well, the hostage was presumably still in danger. She’d cracked under pressure once – what was to say she wouldn’t do it a second time?

Still, at least she seemed to be playing along with the idea that she’d joined them for now. That was a relief. When Togami had seen Naegi approach Ogami, of all the people remaining, cold horror had frozen him in place. If she’d taken Naegi’s accusations badly, she could have dispatched both Naegi and himself without breaking a sweat. He would have dragged Naegi away to strategize something better than a direct approach, if the other boy hadn’t so quickly made it obvious what he wanted to talk to her about.

She certainly had the guilt-ridden act down pat. Togami gave her a hard look as he stopped in front of her door. Ogami stood further back down the hall, looking away like she couldn’t bear to meet either of their eyes, shoulders slumped in the very picture of defeat. Maybe she’d practiced the look in front of the mirror to have gotten it so perfectly.

“All right. We’ll go down the hall in the other direction fifteen paces,” Togami told her, keeping his voice at his most imperious. “Then you’ll go in your room and shut the door. Once it’s closed, I’ll lock you in. Tomorrow morning, at some point after the announcement, I’ll return to let you out. I’ll signal that it’s time by ringing the doorbell sound with one long buzz followed by three short ones. When you hear that, wait thirty seconds for me to get out of range, and then leave the room.”

“That sounds like something from a spy movie,” Naegi said, wrinkling his nose.

“With reason.” Togami didn’t take his eyes off Ogami. “So?”

Ogami nodded. “I understand.”

“Good.” Togami unlocked her door and then caught Naegi’s arm, dragging the other boy with him as he walked backwards down the hall.

Ogami didn’t move as they walked away, and Togami made very sure to keep his relief off his face. If she hadn’t agreed to his demands, he wasn’t sure how he could have compelled her to do so. He and Naegi would have had to run, and he doubted they could have made it into one of their dorm rooms if she’d been after them. Possibly they could have gotten into the trash room in time if they’d gotten a head start, but since that room didn’t have a lock on the door, it wouldn’t have done them much good.
When they reached fifteen paces, he stopped and waited. Ogami nodded once more in their direction, then walked into her room as instructed. When the door latched behind her, Togami bolted forward and slammed the key into the lock before she could have a chance to try to get it open again. Only when he felt the lock fall into place did he allow himself to breathe the smallest sigh of relief.

“Did you really have to do all that?” Naegi asked, walking up beside him.

“Yes,” Togami said. “I’m not taking any chances with an admitted traitor. She’s the Ultimate Martial Artist, after all – she could destroy us both. This was the best option to get us all back to the dorms safely.”

Naegi sighed, giving Ogami’s door a forlorn look. The reality of learning there’d been a traitor amongst them all along had really hit him hard, hadn’t it? Even the wild spikes of his hair seemed to droop more than usual. With Naegi looking so dejected, Togami couldn’t even muster up any satisfaction about being proven right on this score.

“Come on,” Togami said, taking the other boy’s hand and tugging him back along the hall towards their rooms. “There’s nothing to be gained from waiting out here all night. Let’s go back.”

He tucked Ogami’s room key into his pocket and pulled out his own key instead, stopping in front of his own door.

“Uh – your room?” Naegi asked, when Togami didn’t let go of his hand as he opened the door. “I mean – both of us?”

Togami glanced over to see that Naegi’s cheeks had gone pink. He was still blushing about it, after everything? An unexpected burst of warmth filled Togami’s chest at the sight. He found himself wanting to smile, to run fingers through Naegi’s hair, to kiss him until his cheeks were pink for another reason entirely.

Not that he was about to admit to any of that in the middle of the hall, of course.

“Of course,” he said, heading inside and tugging Naegi after him. “You can’t sleep in your bed – it’s still got all that dirt and blood on it from yesterday.”

Naegi blinked. “Oh – right, it does. I’d forgotten about that.”

Togami raised his eyebrows as he shut and locked the door behind them. “Don’t tell me you intended to go back and spend the night in that filth.”

“I hadn’t really thought about it,” Naegi admitted.

Togami grimaced. “We’re visiting the laundry room tomorrow.”

“Um.” Naegi hesitated. “We are? Together?”

“Obviously.” An unusual hint of uncertainty flickered through Togami’s mind. “Why are you asking?”

“It just doesn’t seem like something you’d really want to do,” Naegi said. “I’d have thought you would rather go read in the library or something while you waited.”

Togami stared at Naegi blankly, wondering what exactly the other boy was thinking. Hadn’t Togami made himself clear earlier? Or – the odd rush of uncertainty came back, stronger than
before – was this Naegi’s way of indicating he was getting tired of Togami’s company, after an entire day spent together?

No. Togami shook the thought out of his head. Naegi was good at a lot of things, but subtlety wasn’t one of them. If he had something to say to Togami, he wouldn’t dance around the topic.

And so maybe Togami needed to be equally direct when addressing him.

“It seems I need to clarify something for you,” Togami said, crossing his arms and frowning at Naegi. “When I told you that I intend to keep you safe and won’t leave you alone, I wasn’t just referring to today.”

“You mean – you’re going to keep staying with me like that?” Naegi asked slowly. “All day, every day?”

“Do you object?” The uncertainty returned, twisting painfully through Togami’s heart. He had the sudden awareness that the words Naegi said could cut him more sharply than any knife, if they weren’t the ones he wanted to hear. If –

“No!” Naegi’s brightening eyes sent the anxiety crumbling away, replacing it with a bright explosion of warmth so strong it made Togami’s hands tremble. “Of course I don’t mind! I just thought it was only for today, so you could keep track of my head injury. Anything more – well, I didn’t want to assume that you were making that kind of commitment.”

Togami stepped closer, his hands aching with the urge to touch the other boy. “Don’t be ridiculous. If I weren’t committed, you and all the others would already be dead.”

Naegi flushed again, pink and charming, and Togami couldn’t restrain himself any longer. He slid one hand around the back of Naegi’s neck and bent down to kiss the other boy, intending to allow himself just a moment.

Naegi’s lips parted willingly beneath his, open and ready like he’d been waiting all day for this. Togami stroked his fingertips with feather lightness over the nape of Naegi’s neck, dipping just below the collar of his jacket to skim over the covered skin, and he could feel Naegi’s responding shiver everywhere the other boy’s body pressed to his.

Every instinct Togami possessed screamed for him to take Naegi to the bed and make him shiver like that over and over until he couldn’t think about anything else – but instead he wrenched himself away, trying to ignore his ragged breathing and racing pulse. He really should have known better than to do this again so soon – not after what had happened that morning when he’d kissed Naegi in the shower.

Apparently Naegi had forgotten about it, too, blinking up at Togami with glazed eyes and swollen lips. “What – why did you stop?”

“The last time I kissed you, you screamed in pain,” Togami reminded him, trying his best to hold his voice steady.

“I’m fine now, though,” Naegi protested. “Really, my head barely hurts at all anymore.”

Which was not a truthful statement at all, though Togami was sure Naegi didn’t really consider it a lie. “Oh, that’s very reassuring,” he scathed. He put a hand against Naegi’s shoulder and propelled the other boy over to sit on the bed with his back to Togami. “If you’re fine, you won’t mind if I take a look to make sure you’re not about to collapse in agony again.”
“I’m not,” Naegi said, but he didn’t pull away as Togami brushed gentle fingers through his hair to take a look at the wound beneath.

It didn’t look much better than it had this morning, red and ugly and raw. Another rush of fury flooded through Togami at the sight, not at all lessened by the fact that he’d seen it already. If anything, it was more intense than ever, after he’d heard Kirigiri’s pathetic lack of justification for her actions. She’d done this to Naegi as surely as if she’d held the weapon herself, and then she’d had the gall to get mad at him for the perfectly reasonable reaction of withholding information from someone who had just betrayed him.

The injury might not look any better, but at least it didn’t look worse. Togami knew a few of the signs of infection, and fortunately he didn’t see any of them here. The wound hadn’t gone puffy or inflamed, and it didn’t feel hot to the touch. That was a small mercy, anyway. If it had gotten infected, Togami had no idea how they would have treated it. He seriously doubted that the mastermind would provide them with any kind of medical attention, after all. With that in mind, it was probably still a good idea for Naegi to take it easy and avoid the risk of making the injury worse.

“This is really nice of you,” Naegi said softly.

Togami frowned. “What, trying to make sure you don’t collapse because of ignoring your untreated head injury?”

“Yes, that,” Naegi said. “I – I like having someone who’ll do things like this.” He paused. “And – I mean, I’d do the same for you, if you got hurt.”

“I won’t be stupid enough to wander into hidden areas where the mastermind can attack me,” Togami said darkly.

“Still,” Naegi said, his shoulders moving against Togami’s chest as he shrugged. “I’d take care of you, too, if you needed it.”

Togami raised his eyebrows. “Have you forgotten? You already did.”

“What? When?” Naegi twisted around to stare at Togami blankly. His eyebrows knit together as he considered it. “Wait, you mean at the trial yesterday?”

Togami remembered Naegi leaning over his podium, eyes flashing with determination as he flung argument after argument at the other students. No matter how strong Celeste’s lies had appeared, Naegi had shredded them and proven Togami innocent. “Yes, that’s right.”

“I knew it couldn’t have been you, though,” Naegi said.

“So I gathered.” Togami smirked. “I enjoyed seeing you take my side for a change.”

“Well, it’s not going to be a change anymore,” Naegi told him seriously. “I’m definitely on your side now.” He grinned suddenly. “Or maybe it’s better to say that both of us are on our side.”

It was a ridiculous thing to say, sappy and sentimental and saccharine sweet – but it sent such a wave of warm affection through Togami that before he knew it he’d leaned forward to press his lips to Naegi’s again. This time he retained the presence of mind to let one hand cradle Naegi’s head, holding it steady so as not to put any additional stress on the injury. The last thing he wanted was for Naegi to feel any pain while Togami kissed him. And if Togami had his way, Naegi wouldn’t have to feel that kind of pain ever again.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Togami prepare to tell the rest of the students about what they learned.

When Naegi woke up, it took him a bleary moment to figure out why there was a music stand in front of him. It was only when he became aware that there was a warm body pressed against his back and an arm draped over his chest that he realized he had to be in Togami’s bed. Where they’d slept together last night without actually – well, sleeping together.

That had been awkward, hadn’t it? Naegi remembered sliding awkwardly into either side of the bed, not quite looking at each other. He’d been more than willing to let their kisses turn into more, but Togami had seemed to have a second sense about when his head started hurting again. Naegi actually wouldn’t have minded the distraction from the unrelenting ache – but maybe it wasn’t fair to Togami to think of it like that. He deserved to have Naegi’s full attention, not what he could spare from sudden stabs of pain and flashes of dizziness. Maybe it was a good thing that they’d fallen asleep on opposite sides of the bed.

But even if they had, it seemed like through the course of the night, their sleeping bodies had shifted to an embrace. Naegi smiled down at where Togami’s hand rested on the mattress in front of him. There was something nice about knowing that they’d unconsciously curled together in the bed, like it was something natural and easy that they did all the time. Like the conversation they’d had last night had been more than just words.

Togami shifted against his back, then raised his arm to grope along the table behind the bed for his glasses. Naegi twisted around to see Togami looking mussed and grumpy, his blue eyes unexpectedly vulnerable without his glasses shielding them. Between the height difference and the glasses, Naegi hadn’t been able to get a good look before, but Togami’s eyes were actually a very bright blue, weren’t they? He’d never seen eyes in just that shade, and –

Togami settled his glasses on his nose, gaze focusing on Naegi, and Naegi blushed when he realized he’d just been caught staring into Togami’s eyes. Togami smirked like he knew exactly what Naegi had been thinking. “Don’t stop on my account.”

Naegi tried to glare at him, cheeks burning. It really wasn’t fair that Togami could wake up looking attractively disheveled and know it, not when Naegi knew he just looked like a mess. And apparently he had a bad case of bedhead, because Togami reached out and ran his fingers through Naegi’s hair, straightening the wild locks that had gotten tangled across his forehead.

Ding dong, ding dong.

The Monokuma announcement played, letting them know that morning had officially arrived. Naegi sighed, pushing himself up to a sitting position as the brief moment of contentment melted away. If it was morning, that meant it was time to go meet the other students for breakfast – and to tell them the truth about Ogami.

He looked over at Togami as the other boy rolled over and levered himself out of bed. “What are we going to do?”
“Well, I intend to take a shower,” Togami said. “You can wait here and have a turn when I’m done. We’ll need to hurry if you want to make it to your ridiculous breakfast meeting.”

Naegi nodded. That was really the only place they could be sure of catching everyone, with the possible exception of Fukawa.

Togami headed into the bathroom, leaving Naegi alone to ponder what was coming. He knew he ought to be trying to come up with some kind of strategy for how to tell everyone what he’d learned yesterday – but he couldn’t come up with a good way to do it. There had to be a tactful way to broach the subject, didn’t there? Something that wouldn’t make everyone immediately turn on Ogami?

If there was, he still hadn’t come up with it by the time Togami emerged from the bathroom, toweling his hair dry. “Go ahead,” Togami told him, heading for his wardrobe to get fresh clothes. “But leave the door open.”

Naegi blinked. “For the steam?”

“In case you get dizzy,” Togami said.

It seemed a little excessive to Naegi – he hadn’t had a bad enough dizzy spell that he’d fallen over – but it didn’t seem worth arguing over, either. He showered as quickly as he could and headed back out into the dorm room just as Togami was pulling on his jacket.


“Obviously you do,” Togami agreed, grimacing as he eyed Naegi’s clothes. Naegi wondered if he ought to be offended at that expression.

Even hurrying as much as he could while changing into fresh clothes, Naegi knew they were still running late for the breakfast meeting as they left his room. They wouldn’t be quite as late as yesterday, of course, but they weren’t on time by any stretch, either.

It wasn’t exactly the best way to make a good impression on the others, Naegi realized, as they walked into the dining hall. But at least there weren’t very many people there to make a bad impression on. The only people in the dining hall were Asahina and Hagakure, sitting together at one of the tables and looking nervous. Hagakure seemed to have shredded his breakfast instead of eating it, while judging by the plates in front of her, Asahina appeared to have nervously eaten nearly double her usual breakfast.

“Where have you two been?” Asahina demanded, jumping to her feet with a glare. “What’s been going on?”

“We were getting ready, obviously,” Togami said. “Some of us do more than just roll out of bed and put on sweats.”

“Stop being snobby and try to say something helpful for once,” Asahina snapped. “Where are Sakura and Kirigiri? We haven’t seen either of them since last night – and you two were the last ones with Sakura.”

“I expect that Ogami is still in her room,” Togami said coolly, without a hint that he was the one who had locked her in there. “As for Kirigiri, I really couldn’t say.”

“She’s been disappearing a lot, though, right?” Hagakure asked. He gasped. “Maybe she’s been...
digging a secret passage out of here, where Monokuma can’t see it!”

“I’d tell you not to be stupid, but I wouldn’t want to demand the impossible of you,” Togami said, rolling his eyes.

“This isn’t right,” Asahina said, clenching her fists. “We’ve lost so many people already – and now everyone’s just running off in different directions? No one’s even bothering to try to stay together anymore!”

A pang of guilt stabbed through Naegi. “We are trying,” he protested.

“Not that hard,” Asahina said. “Not if you’re fighting with Kirigiri and chasing Sakura away.” She looked down, even her hair drooping. “Sakura hasn’t ever missed breakfast with us before.”

“Yes, she was certainly careful to attend every meeting,” Togami said, his voice dark. Naegi knocked his elbow against Togami’s arm, trying to signal him to be more cautious about dropping hints. No good could come of that. But before Naegi could do anything else –

*Ding dong, bing bong.*

“Attention, attention!” Monokuma’s voice rang from the televisions. “Please gather in the gym as soon as you possibly can. Quickly quickly quickly quickly!”

Naegi froze, looking up at Togami anxiously. He didn’t know what Monokuma might want to announce to all of them at this point, but he knew it couldn’t be anything good.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

There is a slight delay postponing the start of Monokuma's assembly.

Naegi frowned as he walked towards the gymnasium, quickly outstripping Asahina and Hagakure as he tried to match Togami’s brisk pace. Why was Monokuma summoning them all again? Was it another of his motive announcements? Naegi would have thought that – but the voice from the televisions had seemed much more serious than usual. He hadn’t heard any of the open glee Monokuma normally had when he tried to give them motives.

Fukawa and Kirigiri were already in the gym when they entered, but neither girl would meet Naegi’s eye. Kirigiri looked steadily up at the platform where Monokuma would appear, her face unrelentingly blank. Fukawa lurked against one of the walls, twisting her braids around her hands as she simmered. Naegi sighed, looking from one angry girl to the other. Asahina was right – how were they supposed to fight the mastermind if they were spending all their energy fighting each other instead? He really needed to try to make up with those two.

But it would have to wait for later. As soon as the door closed behind Hagakure and Asahina, Monokuma bounced out to sit on the stage. “Hmm. It looks like everyone was very prompt today. Should we jump into things right away?”

“It isn’t everyone yet,” Asahina objected, looking around the room. “Sakura isn’t here.”

“Ohh?” Monokuma made a show of peering around the room, even going so far as to glance up at the ceiling and under the red cloth draped over the table onstage. “You’re right! Your headmaster announced a mandatory school assembly, but one of you decided not to show up.” He looked out at all of them, red eye gleaming. “It looks to me like Ogami is skipping.”

“No way,” Asahina said, horror crossing her face. “Sakura wouldn’t do that! She’s probably just running late, that’s all!”

“Hmm. Do you think so?” Monokuma looked up at the clock on the gym wall. “I wonder. Okay, if we’ve gotta wait, I guess we’ve gotta. Maybe I’ll overlook her being late if she walks through that door with a whole barrelful of honey for her favorite headmaster.”

Except that of course, there was no chance at all that Ogami could do anything of the kind – not when she was locked in her dorm room with the key in Togami’s pocket. Naegi glanced up at Togami, but he was staring off into the distance with an icy glower on his face. If it weren’t for the tension Naegi could feel in the arm pressed against his own, he would have thought Togami looked completely bored with the proceedings.

When nearly five minutes had ticked away, Monokuma tilted his head. “I wonder if there’s enough honey in the world to make up for being this late.”

Naegi couldn’t just leave it at that. “Maybe – maybe we should send a search party,” he suggested, trying to sound as normal as he could. “We could go look for her?”
Kirigiri’s head whipped around, and she narrowed her eyes in Naegi’s direction. This time Naegi was the one who looked determinedly away and refused to meet her gaze.

“What? You want to leave already?” Monokuma asked, sounding hurt. “But my assembly isn’t over yet! Why would you want to leave before you’ve heard what I have to say, huh?”

Asahina had gone pale. “It’s about Sakura, isn’t it? Something’s happened to her. That’s why you called us here.”

“Huh? You think something could have happened to the Ultimate Martial Artist?” Monokuma asked. “I wonder what that could be.”

“We should be asking you that,” Kirigiri said. “After all, you’re the one with the surveillance cameras.”

“What? And you think I have nothing better to do than watch all of you run around all day?” Monokuma demanded. “You think my fur gets this touchable glossy sheen all on its own? I’ll have you know that beauty is a time-consuming process!” He shook his head. “No, you’ll just have to ask someone else where Ogami is.”

“What do you mean, ask someone else?” Asahina said. “Who else is there?”

“Well, you could try asking Naegi and Togami about it,” Monokuma said, tilting his head as his eyes zeroed in on them. “They might know something.”

The others all turned to face them, and Naegi found himself stepping a little closer against Togami under the weight of all their stares.

“You know where Sakura is?” Asahina asked, a hint of doubt in her voice.

“I told you earlier,” Togami said, unruffled. “I expect she’s in her room.”

“But if that’s all, she would have come to the assembly,” Asahina said. She glared at Togami, clenching her fists. “You did something to her, didn’t you?”

“Ehh? Is the Ogre dead?” Hagakure asked, clutching at his hair. “Did Naegi and Togami take her down with a double team special move?”

“No, nothing like that!” Naegi said, waving his hands in protest. “She was completely fine when we left her in her room last night!”

“Then why isn’t she here?” Asahina demanded.

“Because we locked her in,” Togami said flatly.

“And why would you do something like that?” Kirigiri asked, folding her arms.

Naegi grimaced. He hadn’t been sure what the best way would be to tell everyone about Ogami – but he knew that this definitely wasn’t it. With the accusing stares stabbing through him from all directions, he knew that no one would be very receptive to anything he tried to explain right now.

“Oh, no no no no,” Monokuma said. “We can’t possibly go on with the assembly like this. Now that we know where our missing student is, we have to get her here without delay, right?”

“Fine,” Togami said, glaring up at Monokuma. “You’ve made your point. Open the door and let her out if you must.”
“Huh? Me?” Monokuma asked, puzzled. “You want me to open the dorm room door of one of my students? But what if we found her in the middle of something – *indecent*? No, no, I couldn’t possibly do such a thing. The only way I’d ever open a student’s door would be to let you guys enter as part of an official investigation. Otherwise, no can do!”

“And with the new rule about not breaking down locked doors, she can’t leave, either,” Kirigiri said. “Then what is it that you’re proposing?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Monokuma grinned at them. “If the Ogre can’t come to the assembly, we’ll just have to bring the assembly to the Ogre!” He laughed wildly. “See you at the dorms!” And with that, he bounced out of sight.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

The students go to release Sakura from her room, and Asahina demands explanations.

Asahina glared at Naegi and Togami. “I can’t believe you guys! Sakura had better be okay in there.” She spun and stormed out.

Naegi looked up at Togami, but he couldn’t see much beyond the icy mask that had settled over the other boy’s features. It wasn’t like they had much choice about what to do, though. They didn’t even dare delay too much, not when Monokuma was waiting for them.

They made their way to the dorms, trailed by the rest of the students. Naegi had the uneasy sensation of walking with a firing squad at his back, with the other three students’ eyes boring into him. To fight off the feeling of isolation, Naegi reached out and squeezed Togami’s hand for a moment. Togami’s expression didn’t flicker, but he did return pressure for pressure against Naegi’s fingers.

Asahina was waiting impatiently outside Ogami’s door as they approached, hardly seeming aware of Monokuma standing nearby as she paced. As soon as they were in earshot, she snapped, “Well? Go on and let her out!”

Togami sighed heavily, but he pulled Ogami’s room key out of his pocket and approached the door. He reached out and pressed the doorbell, one long buzz followed by three short ones, and then swiftly unlocked the door and retreated back down the hall to Naegi’s side.

Asahina stared at the door. “Why isn’t she coming out?” She spun towards Togami. “You did do something to her!”

“I told her to wait thirty seconds after I unlocked the door before opening it,” Togami said. “Just wait.”

And sure enough, after thirty seconds had passed, the door opened to reveal Ogami, looking perfectly fine apart from dark circles under her eyes. She looked around at the entire group gathered outside the door, eyes widening as she took them in.

“Sakura! I’m so glad you’re okay!” Relief burst over Asahina’s face as she ran up to give Ogami an impulsive hug. “I was so worried when you didn’t come to the assembly this morning!”

“I’m sorry you were concerned for me,” Ogami said, gently shaking Asahina loose. “But you shouldn’t worry for my sake.”

“I shouldn’t have to!” Asahina turned and glared at Togami again. “What do you think you’re playing at, running around locking people up? What did you do something like that for?”

Togami’s lips tightened as he looked around at the unfriendly stares of the group. “You really want to know? All right, then. It’s because we learned last night that Sakura Ogami is the mastermind’s spy among us.”
Hagakure jumped backward, pressing his back against a wall. “What did you say?”

“You’re lying!” Asahina snarled, clenching her fists as she stepped towards Togami. “There’s no way Sakura is a spy!”

“We’re not lying!” Naegi said, drawing Asahina’s glare in his direction. “I wish we were – but we’re not. We just hadn’t figured out how to tell you all yet.”

“I don’t believe you!” Asahina said. “There’s no way Sakura would be a spy! Right, Sakura?” She turned confidently to her friend.

But Ogami closed her eyes and turned her head away. Asahina’s expression trembled as she stared at the other girl.

“Is this why you dragged us here?” Kirigiri asked Monokuma, ignoring the others as she focused on the bear. “Or did you have some other reason for the assembly?”

“Actually, there was something else,” Monokuma said. “Multitasking is an important skill for the up and coming bear, you know.” He gave them all a bright smile. “I just wanted to let my spy know that soon, I’ll be asking them to fulfil the promise they made.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at Monokuma. “What promise are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Monokuma said. “Just to kill someone. That’s all.” He grinned widely. “Of course, if they were to choose to break that promise, I can’t be responsible for what might happen. After all, it’s like I said before – when you make a choice here, I hand it right back to you a billionfold!”

“The Ogre’s going to kill someone now?” Hagakure looked like he was thinking about bolting for his room.

“Of course not!” Asahina said regaining her determination. “Sakura would never kill anyone, and she’s not a spy! Monokuma has to be talking to someone else!”

“H-he didn’t actually say if it’s r-really her or not,” Fukawa said. “O-only he said it was Ogami.” Her glare burned in Togami’s direction.

“Right!” Asahina said, turning to Monokuma. “It’s not Sakura, right?”

But Monokuma just smiled. “Well, that’s all I wanted to say. What you guys choose to do now is up to you. But whatever it is, I can’t wait!” And without answering Asahina’s question, he disappeared.

With Monokuma gone, Togami crossed his arms and glared at Ogami. “So it seems you’re still a danger to us, after all. You conveniently failed to mention that little tidbit when you were confessing last night.”

“It didn’t come up,” Ogami said. “I – I’d hoped that I’d be able to act before it became an issue.”

“Sakura? What are you saying?” Asahina stared up at her, a hint of tears glimmering at the corners of her eyes. “Don’t talk like that! He’s just saying a lot of stupid garbage, and you shouldn’t take him seriously!”

“Asahina…” Ogami looked at her with wide eyes, voice trailing off.
“No! You haven’t done anything wrong!” Asahina spun and glared at Togami and Naegi. “The only ones who have done anything are the two of you! You’re the ones who decided to lock Sakura up!”

“And it’s apparently a good thing we did,” Togami said coolly. “Otherwise she could have taken the opportunity to start a massacre on Monokuma’s orders. You should be thanking us.”

“For making a decision on your own?” Kirigiri asked, raising her eyebrows. “You do have a lot of confidence in your own judgement, don’t you? It sounds like you don’t think you even need to consult anyone else anymore before you act.” Her eyes went to Naegi. “So much for trust.”

“W-what happens if you decide one of the rest of us is dangerous, too?” Fukawa demanded. “You want to lock m-m-me up next, don’t you? To g-get me out of the way!”

“It wouldn’t be a bad idea,” Togami said, frowning at Fukawa with the special distaste he always seemed to hurl at her.

“Oh, man, we’re all going to end up locked in our rooms!” Hagakure said. “Naegi and Togami are going to go on a prison rampage and put us all in a trap within a trap!”

“Having you all out of the way might make this nightmare a little more bearable,” Togami snapped. He looked at Ogami. “You told us you would confirm our story.”

“Yes. And I do.” Ogami took a deep breath, glancing briefly at Asahina. “I’m sorry. I – I should have confided in you, at least, Hina, but I was afraid that you would think less of me if I admitted it.” She shook her head and repeated, “I’m sorry.”

“No!” Asahina shouted. “You’re – you’re only saying this because they made you! It isn’t really true!” She took a furious step towards the spot where Naegi and Togami stood together. “You two put her up to this – you’re blackmailing her, or threatening her, or something!”

“No, we’re not – but the mastermind is,” Naegi said, hoping the information would calm Asahina down a little. “They have a hostage, and –”

“I don’t care!” Asahina interrupted, clenching her fists. “You’re lying, all of you are –”

“Please, don’t try to defend me,” Ogami cut her off, laying a hand on Asahina’s shoulder. “I did this, and I will take full responsibility.”

“How do you intend to do that?” Kirigiri asked.

“By destroying the mastermind,” Ogami said, determination rising in her face. “I’m going to challenge them. Even if it means we both go down, I will defeat them.”

“If you both go down?” Asahina drew away, shoulders shaking. “What are you saying?” She shook her head, covering her mouth to hold back sobs. “I don’t believe it!” She glared at Naegi and Togami with eyes wet with tears. “If anything happens to Sakura, I’ll never forgive any of you!” And with that, she turned and ran down the hall.

“Hina!” Pain flashed across Ogami’s face, and for a moment she looked like she was going to run after the other girl. But instead she stopped, turning away from the direction Asahina had gone. She looked around at the other students, her face grave. “I – I should never have let things get this far. I’m sorry.” She turned and walked off, veering carefully away from the path Asahina had taken.

And now, looking around at the hostile expressions on the faces of his remaining friends, Naegi
understood just what Monokuma had meant when he’d said that last night. You reap what you sow – you have to face the inevitable consequences of your decisions. He and Togami had decided to lock Ogami up and wait to tell the others. Even if they’d had the best of intentions, they’d still made that decision. And now they would have to deal with the consequences.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

The remaining students discuss what to do after learning the identity of the spy.

The atmosphere in the hallway was stifling, even with only five of them left standing there. Hagakure and Fukawa had drawn as far away from the rest of the group as they could while still remaining in earshot, shooting each other suspicious glances all the while. Kirigiri stared off down the hallway in the direction Asahina had gone, ignoring Naegi as easily as if he weren’t even present. And at Naegi’s side, Togami stood tense and cold, eyes flashing dangerously with calculations behind his glasses. The situation needed to be resolved, but none of them looked remotely approachable.

Still, he had to try. He took a deep breath, steeling his nerves to break the oppressive silence, and said, “We really did mean to tell you guys this morning.”

They all turned to look at him, and Naegi found he had to fight not to take a step away from their combined stares. “I – I mean, it’s not like we were going to leave her locked up forever or anything. We were going to tell you all at breakfast this morning.”

That got Kirigiri to look at him, although once her gaze pierced through him, Naegi almost wished she hadn’t. “The time to tell us would have been last night.”

“Well, you know now,” Togami snapped. “Does it really matter that much to you how you found out? The important thing isn’t who knew what when – it’s what we’re going to do now.”

“W-what’s that supposed to mean?” Fukawa asked.

“It means that now that we know who the spy is among us, we should decide how best to deal with her,” Togami said, as though it should be obvious. “Locking her up is a temporary measure at best – it only works as long as she allows us to do it. And with Monokuma’s threat, we’ll need to take much more decisive steps to neutralize her.”

“Neutralize?” Hagakure said. “What are you talking about, man? None of us could take down the Ogre! If she decides to come after us, we’re all doomed!”

“No one’s going to take anyone down,” Naegi said. “Look, I heard Ogami and Monokuma talking a couple nights ago, and the only reason Ogami agreed to work for him at all is because he was threatening a hostage. She was never really on the mastermind’s side.”

“That sure sounds like a ch-change in your story,” Fukawa said. “First she’s so dangerous that you had to lock her up, but now she’s t-totally trustworthy? How are we supposed to believe a word you say?”

“I never said she was trustworthy,” Togami said. “In fact, I’d say that her admission proves exactly the opposite.”

“So what – now we’re all supposed to b-band together and follow you?” Fukawa said, eyes narrowing. “I bet you’d like that – leading us like your own private lynch mob, ready to jump and
kill on your orders. Guilty or innocent wouldn’t matter to you, as long as you got to be the judge.”

“Wait, so now Togami’s plotting against us too?” Hagakure said, horrified. “With him and the Ogre both out for blood, no one’s safe anymore! We can’t trust anyone!”

“No – we can’t think that way,” Naegi insisted. “This isn’t about some of us against the others – it’s all of us together against the mastermind. You heard Ogami – she’s ready to take on the mastermind with the rest of us. We all have to stand by our friends!”

“You do like throwing the word ‘friend’ around, don’t you?” Kirigiri said coldly. “I’m surprised you can still say it with a straight face.” She turned and began heading down the hall.

“Wait!” Naegi protested. He could feel the whole situation unraveling with every person who walked away. “Don’t go yet!”

Kirigiri paused, looking back over her shoulder. “I don’t have time for this argument. I have things to do today.”

“What could you possibly have to do that’s more important that dealing with this?” Togami said, crossing his arms.

“For one thing, I need to take a bath,” Kirigiri said, her gaze steady and unrelenting. “You understand the importance of that, don’t you? After all, you and Naegi went off and had such a long one on your own.” She turned and strode towards the bathhouse, not giving either of them a chance to respond.

A bath? Naegi frowned. Did that mean Kirigiri was going to go talk to Alter Ego? Well, at least that would give her a chance to hear the results of the data analysis. In all the commotion with the assembly, Naegi had nearly forgotten that there was a glimmer of good news amidst the rest of it. Maybe once Kirigiri heard that, she’d be able to cool off a little.

Although now that Naegi thought about it, how had Kirigiri known that there was something to talk to Alter Ego about? He and Togami hadn’t had a chance to bring it up, after all. She shouldn’t have even known that they’d been in the bathhouse at all, so –

And then Naegi remembered. When they’d first discovered Alter Ego, Kirigiri had decided to guard against any nighttime tampering by leaving her door open to hear if Alter Ego screamed. After Celeste’s theft of the laptop, of course Kirigiri would have reinstated her role as lookout. Her door must have been open all last night – and she would have heard everything that had happened in the hallway.

No wonder she was still so angry. Naegi felt his shoulders droop with the realization. She must have heard the conversations they’d had in the hall, both the first one when Togami was directing Ogami into her room, and then later, when he and Togami had been talking about how Ogami was the spy. Kirigiri would probably even have heard them leaving the bathhouse, where they’d gone despite her repeated warnings to stay out of there while Alter Ego was inside.

Guilt curdled through Naegi’s stomach. Kirigiri must have felt so out of the loop, after hearing that conversation end with their decision not to tell anyone. He had to talk to her – he had to explain that whatever she was thinking wasn’t true.

But when Naegi would have gone after her, Togami put a hand on his shoulder. “Whichever one you’re planning to go after, don’t bother,” he said. “You can’t reason with someone who’s
unreasonably angry.”

Naegi sighed. He did want to straighten things out with Kirigiri as soon as possible – but there was no point in talking to her if she wasn’t going to listen. “Yeah – I guess you’re right.”

“Of course you’d s-say that,” Fukawa snapped, glaring at him. “You’ll just agree with a-anything he suggests now, won’t you? And now he’s too much of a coward to do anything!”

Togami turned on her. “Excuse me?”

“My White Knight would n-never have let a traitor run off like that without a word,” Fukawa went on, clenching her fists. “If h-he’d found a traitor, he’d have stopped her right away. But you – you didn’t even bother to try. It’s because you know, don’t you – you’ll never be as perfect as my White Knight! You’re a disgrace to his name!”

Togami glared at her, fury rising up in him. “I am not a disgrace to anything. I am the heir to the Togami family, and none of your delusions can change that.”

“D-delusions?” Fukawa laughed, an unsettlingly high-pitched sound. “Is that what you’re calling them? Because I think that for the f-first time, I’m finally seeing clearly!” With one final glare, she went to her room and slammed the door behind her.

“Oh, no,” Hagakure moaned, clutching at his hair. “It’ll be the genocider next, you wait and see. I’m not sticking around for that!” He scrambled for his own room.

Naegi sighed, looking around at the empty hallway. However badly he’d feared the revelation of Ogami’s betrayal could go, he’d never thought it could get this bad. Everyone had run off in different directions, refusing to work together, or even acknowledge one another. With the situation this bad, he didn’t know what to do or who to talk to about it.

A hand fell on his shoulder, and Naegi looked up at Togami questioningly.

“Come on, let’s head to the dining hall,” Togami said, heaving a sigh of his own. “We have plans to make.”
Naegi and Togami discuss how they should handle the situation with the other students.

Naegi trailed Togami to the dining hall, hoping that at least one of the others might have ended up there as well – but when they got there, the room was empty. Naegi eyed the food in the kitchen as Togami made coffee. He knew he ought to eat, but with guilt and anxiety churning in his stomach, all the food looked nauseating.

“Ready?” Togami looked over and frowned when he saw that Naegi’s hands were empty.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

Togami tilted his head consideringly for a moment, then turned back to the counter.

“What are you doing?” Naegi craned his head to see.

“Here.” Togami turned back and handed Naegi a steaming cup of tea. “You should at least try to drink something.”

Naegi peered into the cup, then gave it an experimental taste. It was a soft herbal tea, soothing rather than energizing – just about what he thought he could handle right now. “Thank you!”

“Just come sit down and drink it.” Togami headed back out of the kitchen to sit at one of the dining hall tables. Naegi followed, taking the seat beside him.

“So everyone seemed really mad at us, huh?” Naegi said, staring down into his teacup like he thought he might find answers there.

“They’re being entirely unreasonable about the matter,” Togami said, scowling in the direction of the door. “Not that I expected anything better from most of them, but usually Kirigiri can at least muster up a little logic.”

“She’s still mad about yesterday,” Naegi said glumly. “When I didn’t tell her about what I heard that night.” He sighed. “Maybe she’s right – maybe I really did handle all this wrong. I didn’t mean to make everyone so angry.”

“Their stupidity is not your fault,” Togami said flatly. “There’s no point in wasting time thinking about what you could have done differently. The only thing worth thinking about is what we’re going to do from this point on.”

“Yeah, I guess.” The magnitude of the problem facing them made Naegi’s headache even worse than it had already been. “We’ll need to talk to them, right?”

“Considering their reactions to even the most reasonable safety measures, I think it will be an unfortunate necessity,” Togami said. “But we’ll need a plan first.”
“Sure.” Naegi felt a little better now that they were actually trying to accomplish something. If he and Togami tackled this together, maybe they could find a way to fix it after all. “But how would we convince them?”

Togami’s forehead creased as he frowned. “Convince them? What are you talking about?”

“Convincing the others that we all need to work together, and that Ogami really is our friend,” Naegi said. He blinked. “Isn’t that what you meant?”

Togami closed his eyes, pressing his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “Are you serious?”

“Uh – yes?” Naegi blinked.

Togami sighed heavily. “Naegi, I want you to listen to me.” He spoke very slowly and clearly, enunciating each word as if to a small child. “Ogami is working for the mastermind. That means she is not our friend. She is our enemy.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Naegi said.

“Yes, I know, you heard her vow revenge and now she has your eternal friendship,” Togami said, rolling his eyes. “Have you even bothered to spare a thought about what it means that the mastermind had a spy among us in the first place?”

“Uh – they wanted to know what we were doing?” Naegi frowned, thinking it over. “I mean, they must know there are places in the school the cameras can’t film. I guess they’d want a spy to report about whether anything important happened in those places.”

“And not just that,” Togami said. “Monokuma told us that Ogami had orders to kill on command – not as a decision she made because she wanted to escape or if one of the motives compelled her.”

“It must have been awful,” Naegi said, looking down at his hands. “And if it started the first night, then she’s been living with it every day since.”

“Exactly,” Togami said. “Her every move among us has been made with the awareness that she could be called upon to kill at any moment. Every time she interacted with one of us, she spoke knowing that she would have to explain herself to the mastermind later. Whatever you may think about her reasons or her supposed change of heart, that’s all still true. She was never a player in the game – she was a loaded gun that the mastermind had pointed at us the whole time.” He clenched his fists. “And it’s incredibly unfair.”

“Unfair?” Naegi blinked. That wasn’t the word he would have chosen to describe the situation.

“The existence of a spy for the mastermind among us upsets the balance of the game,” Togami explained impatiently. “We all treated her as if she were subject to the same pressures as the rest of us – but in fact she was a tool the mastermind could use to manipulate us further.” He scowled down at his coffee cup. “It proves that this was never a balanced game from the start. The mastermind never had any intention of playing fair.”

“Of course they didn’t,” Naegi said blankly. “They locked us up and tried to get us to murder each other. Why would they care about playing fair?”

“Well, why go through all the trouble of putting us into such a rule-driven game otherwise?” Togami countered. “If all they wanted was to force us to murder one another, why not just threaten us with a straightforward kill or be killed scenario? It would be much easier than hedging us in with all these rules and staging these elaborate class trials.”
“I don’t know,” Naegi said. “But whatever their reasons are, the mastermind has definitely been trying to control us and keep an edge over us. That’s why we all need to work together to beat them.”

Togami shook his head. “Working with the others is one thing. The worst they can do is be useless deadweight. But a spy is another issue entirely. She’s betrayed us once, and now she’s claiming to have betrayed the mastermind. Either her loyalties are so changeable as to be worthless, or she’s lying as part of a bigger plot.”

“Then what is it you want to do?” Naegi asked. “I don’t think the others will let you lock Ogami up again.”

“Well, I still have her room key,” Togami pointed out, tapping his pocket.

“And you’re just going to keep it from her?” Naegi asked, horrified. “What about the rule against sleeping anywhere but the dorms?”

“I’m perfectly happy to let her back in to the room,” Togami said, shrugging. “And it’s not as though I intend to keep her key against her will. All she has to do is ask, and I’ll give it back. I don’t want to give her an excuse to target me, after all.” He smirked. “Of course, if she does ask for the key back, that will prove she has something to do that she can’t accomplish if we know where she is.”

“Or just that she doesn’t want to be imprisoned in her room forever,” Naegi said. “She said she wanted to take on the mastermind – she can’t do that from her room.”

“No, of course not,” Togami said. “And frankly, we can’t assume she’s actually secure in her room even if we get her in there. It’s simply an added layer of security that I think we’d be remiss to ignore.” He shook his head. “But unfortunately, the best way of neutralizing her seems to be the most difficult at this point.”

“Neutralizing her? Why do you keep saying it like you’re going to use a stun gun on her or something?” Naegi asked, grimacing.

“There would be no point in trying something so crude,” Togami said. “She could easily avoid any kind of physical attack. No, the easiest way to keep Ogami from following the mastermind’s order to kill would simply be for the rest of us to stay together in a single group. No one can be targeted if no one is on their own.”

“Oh – that’s all you meant?” Naegi thought it over. If everyone stayed together, maybe as they saw that nothing bad happened, it would start calming some of their suspicions. It would at least stop people from misunderstanding anyone else’s motivations or thinking the others were plotting against them. “That’s actually a pretty good idea.”

“I know it is. That’s why I suggested it,” Togami said. “But it will only work if the others cooperate – and with the situation as it is, I doubt they will. They’re all too caught up in their private grudges to see the big picture.”

Naegi stood, a new wave of determination coursing through him. “Then we’ll just have to convince them.”
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Togami do their best to try to calm the situation.

Chapter Notes

Note about updating from now through the end of the month: So the Christmas holidays are nearly upon us (for those of us who celebrate them), and I will be traveling again starting tomorrow. I won't be able to manage daily updates while traveling, but I don't want to stop completely, either. I'm trying to figure out an update schedule that I think I can maintain.

I will try my best to get another chapter posted tomorrow, but it may not happen until Saturday. Whenever I can get it posted, that chapter will have a final update schedule from now through the end of December.

The problem with trying to convince people to work together was that they had to be available to listen first – and none of the other students were. Kirigiri had apparently finished her business in the bathhouse while Naegi and Togami were in the dining hall, leaving the room empty except for Alter Ego.

“No, I couldn’t see which way she went after she left the room,” Alter Ego said, when Naegi asked if he knew where Kirigiri had gone. “She looked pretty upset, though. I don’t think she liked what I found out in the data analysis.”

When they went to check the dorm rooms, Togami would have blown right past Fukawa’s door if Naegi hadn’t stopped to try the bell there.

“Good,” Togami said, when there was no response to the bell. “We’re better off without her wild fantasies, anyway.”

“You know, she’s really not as awful as you keep saying she is,” Naegi protested. “She’s got a pretty impressive imagination to be able to come up with all those different scenarios she talks about all the time.”

“Impressive is one word for it,” Togami said sourly, turning his back on Fukawa’s room and heading further down the hall. “But if you heard some of what she says when she can catch me alone, you might call it something else.”

Stopping in front of Hagakure’s door, Togami grimaced at the portrait of the older boy for a moment before pressing the doorbell. When nothing happened, he pressed the bell again, harder than before.

“Maybe he’s not there,” Naegi said, as Togami jabbed at the bell a third time with vicious
impatience. “He might have gone out to one of the other floors.”

But just then, the door finally cracked open, and Hagakure stuck his head out.

“Finally,” Togami snapped, glaring at him.

“Huh?” Hagakure looked from one boy to the other, his eyes widening in alarm. “You two? Oh, man, I knew it!” He leapt backwards and slammed the door in their faces.

“Yes, that’s about what I’d expected.” Togami sighed. “Maybe this is all a waste of time.”

“You mean – you just want to give up?” Naegi asked, horrified.

“No, of course not,” Togami said. “But we need to rethink our approach.” He crossed his arms, drumming his fingertips against his forearm as he thought. “With emotions running this high, we may need to allow the others some time to themselves until they can react rationally again. It’s hardly ideal, but I don’t see another option.”

“So – what, you think we need to wait for the breakfast meeting tomorrow?” Naegi asked, frowning. “I guess that would give everyone a chance to sleep on it.”

“It might be for the best.” Togami shook his head. “Well, if we aren’t going to resolve this now, then there’s something else I want to look into. Come on.”

Without checking to see if Naegi was following him, Togami turned and headed for the stairs. Naegi hurried to catch up, sighing to himself as he realized that Togami apparently intended to climb all the way up to the fourth floor.

“There are too many stairs in this school,” Naegi said, pausing for a moment to catch his breath at the top of the staircase. His legs ached after all the climbing he’d been doing every day, and his body was starting to feel too heavy to lift. Maybe skipping breakfast had been a bad idea after all.

“And we’re not done with them yet,” Togami said. “There are still at least two closed off staircases, and maybe even more in areas of the school we haven’t visited yet.”

“I can’t even think about that right now.” Naegi grimaced. “Hopefully we never have to see them.” Despite his limbs screaming in protest, Naegi forced himself to stand up straight again and head down the hall with Togami. “So where did you want to go?”

“Apparently we missed the most interesting room on this floor,” Togami said, stopping in from of the chemistry lab.

“Here? The room Asahina said had all the protein?” Naegi asked, following Togami inside. He noticed that there was a stool in front of one of the tables, and so he headed over to sink gratefully down onto the seat. He was pretty sure that if he tried to stand any longer, his legs might give out on him.

“Not just protein.” Togami headed over to the huge cabinet standing against the back wall and began examining it, opening the different doors and rummaging around inside.

Naegi remembered what else Asahina had said she’d found in the chemistry lab. “Is there really poison just sitting out there?”

“It looks that way,” Togami said, kneeling to get a better look at some of the bottles. “Protein on the far left, reagents in the middle, poisons on the far right.” He pulled out one of the bottles from
the rightmost cabinet, holding it up to the light as he considered it.

“Be careful with that!” Naegi protested. “What if you get some on you?”

“Then I’ll wash it off,” Togami said, rolling his eyes. “It isn’t a contact poison.”

“How can you be sure?” Naegi asked. “That sounds like exactly the sort of thing Monokuma would put where anyone could pick it up.”

“Because it says so on the label.” Togami tapped the bottle. “Fatality guaranteed within five minutes upon consumption, injection, or inhalation. Nothing in that about physical contact.” He frowned at it. “Nothing about it that’s at all identifiable, for that matter. It doesn’t sound like any poison I’ve heard of.”

“You would be an expert in poisons.”

Naegi and Togami both turned to see Asahina standing in the doorway, glaring at them. “What are you two doing in here?” she demanded.

“I don’t see how what we do with our time is any of your business,” Togami said coolly, putting the poison bottle down and getting to his feet. He crossed the room so that he stood at the table by Naegi’s side, close enough that his arm brushed Naegi’s shoulder.

“It is when you decide to go messing around in the poison cabinet,” Asahina snapped. “Just what were you going to do with that stuff, huh?”

“Oh, man, they were getting poison?” Hagakure appeared behind Asahina, horror written across his face. “I knew it – I knew they were planning to strike! Didn’t I tell you how they tried to kill me?”

“You haven’t shut up about it since it happened,” Fukawa said from beside him. She looked into the room and smirked when she caught sight of Togami. “So you couldn’t even pull off a murder attempt, could you? I guess you aren’t very good at this game after all, huh? You can’t win even when you’re trying.”

“You must be joking,” Togami said, glaring at the group crowding into the chemistry lab. “Neither Naegi nor I had the slightest intention of attacking any of you. We simply wanted an opportunity to talk to each of you after everyone had a chance to think over what happened this morning.”

“Oh, we’ve thought it over, all right,” Asahina said, clenching her fists. “We’ve thought all about your lies and your tricks and your games.”

“We just wanted to talk to you,” Naegi said. He tried to meet each of his friends’ eyes, but one by one they looked away when he sought their gazes. “Honestly, we aren’t playing games!”

“Not anymore you aren’t,” Asahina said. “We aren’t going to let you.”

Naegi didn’t like the sound of that at all. Looking at Asahina’s angry determination, Fukawa’s barely contained grin, and Hagakure’s fearful trembling, a chill of apprehension slid down his spine. This wasn’t a coincidence, was it – not when they’d all appeared in the doorway to have this conversation at once.

“And just what do you think you can do to stop us?” Togami asked, raising his eyebrows.

“I think we’ve found a way,” Kirigiri said, stepping forward. She brushed past Asahina to stand in
front of the others, her expression impassive as she looked between the two boys.

“Wait – Kirigiri?” Naegi stared at her, startled to see his usually level-headed friend standing with the more excitable group. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that you two have done nothing but act as a force for disruption and distrust over the past couple days,” Kirigiri said. “You’ve made unfounded accusations, terrified people, and made critical decisions on your own. We can’t trust the two of you together.” She crossed her arms. “So we’re going to separate you.”
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

The other students express their suspicions of Naegi and Togami, bringing pressure to bear on their partnership.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Naegi stared at Kirigiri in shock, after her pronouncement. “You’re going to do what?” He searched her face for any hint of emotion to give him some clue what she meant – but he might as well have been staring at a solid steel wall. “You – you’re kidding, right?”

“No.”

The word hung in the air between them, cold and harsh. Naegi drew back a little, instinctively pressing into the warmth of Togami’s side, and he saw Kirigiri’s narrowed eyes track the movement.

Naegi had thought Kirigiri had been treating him coldly before, when she’d ignored him after he’d refused to tell her about Ogami – but now he knew differently. That had simply been an absence of emotion or reaction, just a more intense version of the way she treated everyone else. But now, frost traced every line of her face and posture, her eyes so icy that just meeting them chilled him to the soul. He might not be able to tell what she was thinking, but he could see one thing – this was not the expression of a girl who would easily back down.

“Oh, really? So that’s what you intend to do?” Togami asked, breaking the silence with a sneer. “And just how do you expect to accomplish it?” He dropped a possessive hand onto Naegi’s shoulder.

“What’s the matter?” Fukawa asked, leaning forward. “Are you s-scared about what we might do to you?”

“Hardly,” Togami said dismissively, never taking his eyes off Kirigiri. “I’m just interested to see how far you plan to take this.”

“As far as we need to,” Asahina said, clenching her fists. “You guys are the real threat here, and we’re not going to let you run around doing whatever you like!”

“You’re deluded,” Togami told her. “Though I don’t know what else I expected, after so long with Monokuma’s spy pouring any poison she pleased into your ear.”

“You do not get to talk about Sakura like that,” Asahina snarled, taking a step forward.

“That’s enough,” Kirigiri said. Even though her voice seemed quiet, it pierced through the exchange like a knife sliding between ribs. “We won’t need to take things far at all. No one is going to force you two to separate – you’re going to agree to do it.”

“After what happened last time you got us apart?” Togami laughed, sharp and vicious. “Not
likely.”

“You will,” Kirigiri said calmly. “Because if you don’t, none of us will speak to either of you again.”

Naegi froze. He wanted to think that she didn’t really mean it – but Kirigiri had already proven that cutting contact didn’t faze her at all. She’d walked out of the music room without hesitation just seconds after he’d said he wouldn’t tell her his secret, without even giving him the chance to explain or suggest a compromise, and she hadn’t so much as faltered since. Whatever friendship had existed between them after working together before, she was obviously prepared to sever the connection permanently.

Togami curled his lip. “You won’t talk to us? Is that supposed to be a threat? Not having to deal with you lot and your idiocy is sounding better by the minute.”

“You’re awfully ready to put words in other people’s mouths, aren’t you?” Kirigiri raised one eyebrow, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of her lips. “Are you so sure you’re in agreement?”

“What are you –” Togami stopped as he glanced down at Naegi. A startled burst of emotion flickered across his face – too fast for Naegi to identify, but it sent a shudder of nausea through his stomach anyway.

The twist to Kirigiri’s lips sharpened into a smirk. “So?”

Naegi tore his eyes away from her, looking to the other students in the hopes of some hint of leniency – but he might as well not have bothered. When Hagakure realized Naegi was looking his way, he scrambled backwards to duck behind Asahina, twitching so hard his hair shivered. Asahina met his eye with a furious glare, filled with all the outrage and betrayal she’d flung at them in response to their accusation of Ogami. And Fukawa didn’t even seem to notice Naegi when he tried to catch her eye – she’d locked her gaze on Togami, cheeks flushed with a feverish intensity as an eager smile writhed across her lips. No matter how hard he looked, Naegi couldn’t see a trace of mercy in any of them.

Togami’s hand tightened on Naegi’s shoulder, and Naegi looked up to see that his face had gone dark. “You can’t actually be considering this.”

“Well – I don’t know.” Naegi looked from Togami to Kirigiri and back again.

“You’re the one who keeps saying that we need to believe in our friends,” Kirigiri said. “What do you think, Naegi? Can we believe in you?”

Confused guilt churned through Naegi’s stomach, a full-body sense of queasiness that brought clammy sweat to his palms and a pounding ache to his already sore head. What was he supposed to say to a question like that? Of course he wanted his friends to believe in him, and he hated that he’d done anything to suggest they couldn’t. His conscience prickled at him, an insistent voice in the back of his head saying that he should do what they asked to prove that despite the suspicious circumstances, his friends could still trust him.

But – he bit his lip – the thought of separating himself from Togami indefinitely made him blink rapidly against the tears rising in the corners of his eyes. He looked up at Togami, and the tight lines of tension in the other boy’s face jabbed him right in the heart. How could he give in to a demand like the one they were making now?
“This is emotional blackmail.” Togami glared at Kirigiri.

“Kind of like the way you two tricked Sakura into giving away her room key,” Asahina shot back. “Not so smug now that you’re on the wrong side of it, are you?”

Togami sneered in her direction, then spun Naegi’s stool until he was directly facing Togami, not the other students. Togami bent down, and some of the lines in his face softened a hair as he came closer to Naegi’s eye level. “Listen to me, Naegi – this is a terrible idea. The only reason they would want to separate us is if they’re planning something.”

“But they do have a point about the way we’ve been acting.” Naegi looked away to glance at the other students – the ones who he still considered his friends. The thought that they might not feel the same added to the painful ache in his chest. “Maybe if it was just for a little while? Just long enough to prove that they really can trust us?”

“We shouldn’t have to prove it,” Togami snapped. “Especially not to *her*. Awfully convenient that the only person who’s ever gotten someone else hurt is trying to isolate us now, isn’t it?”

“So you’re turning on Kirigiri now?” Asahina said from behind them. “You’re just going to take aim at us all one after another, aren’t you?”

“No, that isn’t what we’re doing!” But Naegi knew before he’d even finished the protest that it wouldn’t work. Not after he and Togami had done so much to cause controversy in the group, however inadvertent the results might have been. They’d been the ones to name Ogami as the traitor, they’d heard Alter Ego’s information before anyone else, they’d told the others about Monokuma’s bizarre photo of the dead students, and now they’d been found rummaging through a cabinet of poison. Sure, Naegi and Togami might know that it had only been one coincidence after another, but to the others, it had to look really bad.

They couldn’t let it go on like this. The more the group fractured, the more chances the mastermind would have to turn them against each other. It had only been yesterday that each of them had pledged not to commit another murder – but now, with the suspicion and doubt gnawing away at the fragile trust they’d all built, Naegi didn’t think anyone would be willing to make the same promise again. The soul-destroying despair of not being able to trust one another had crept back among them, and he and Togami had helped it along. So they had to try to make things right.

Naegi took a deep breath, and then looked up into Togami’s eyes. “I think they’re right. It’s like we were talking about earlier – the best way to stop any other murders is for the whole group to stay together. And if we’re ever going to get the chance to convince the others to work with us again, I think this is the only way.”

Togami stared down at Naegi for a moment, lips compressed into a thin white line. “You’re going to regret this decision.”

“Maybe. But I don’t think there are any choices left that I won’t regret.”

Togami closed his eyes, pressing his fingers into Naegi’s shoulder like he never wanted to let go. “Do not do anything stupid, do you understand? I know you have a brain somewhere under all that hair – at least make an effort to use it.”

“You, too,” Naegi said, putting his hand on top of Togami’s and letting the skin to skin contact warm them both for just one moment longer. “Be careful.

“Oh, for god’s sake, stop being so m-melodramatic about it,” Fukawa snapped. “What are you, the
heroine of some t-trashy light novel who falls apart because of some guy she just met? You’ve
barely been together a week!”

Togami sent a glare in her direction, then turned back to Naegi. He looked for a moment like he
was going to say something more, but then he shook his head and sighed. Instead, he bent down
and gave Naegi one last kiss, with enough force behind it that it might have hurt if Naegi hadn’t
returned it measure for measure. Pain knifed through Naegi’s heart when Togami drew away too
soon, and he had to fight not to pull the other boy back into his arms.

Togami looked from Naegi to Kirigiri, then sighed as he lifted his hand from Naegi’s shoulder.
Naegi shivered at the loss of the anchoring warmth, a wave of cold washing through his veins as
Togami stepped away.

“Watch your back,” Togami told him, before turning towards the other students standing in front of
the door. He looked at Kirigiri, and narrowed his eyes at the faint smirk she wore. “That goes for
you as well.”

Kirigiri’s only response was to step out of the way of the door. Togami gave Naegi one last
backward glance, then turned and strode through the only path left. And for all that Naegi was still
in a room full of all the other students, he couldn’t help but feel alone.

Chapter End Notes

Note about scheduling: So as promised, I've come up with a posting schedule for the
next couple weeks that I should be able to maintain along with various other holiday
obligations. I will try to post every four days, starting from yesterday. So the next
chapter should be 12/22, followed by 12/26, 12/30, and 1/3. If anything changes, I'll let
you all know by editing this note.
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to deal with his unwilling separation from Naegi.

Togami strode down the fourth floor hallway towards the stairs, no particular destination in mind other than away. This forced separation was nonsensical, absurd, and concerns about where it might lead already gnawed at the edges of his mind. He should never have agreed to this blackmail, he knew it – but what other option had he had?

He’d been outmaneuvered, and the knowledge burned across his mind. He’d been prepared for accusations and attacks, both outright and implied, but it hadn’t occurred to him that the others would go so far as to try to separate him from Naegi. And the thought had never even crossed his mind that Naegi would be the one they targeted to accomplish it.

He should have known. He should have seen it coming. Obviously someone as nice and soft-hearted as Naegi would be easy prey for a pack of manipulations. Naegi trusted Kirigiri enough to eat up whatever lies she wanted to tell him. She could be continuing now, telling him anything she liked – and the thought of what she might choose to say made Togami’s stomach turn.

She wouldn’t be able to turn Naegi against him, of course – Togami didn’t believe that for a moment. Naegi believed in everyone. It was his greatest strength and greatest weakness, both at once. He wouldn’t believe ill of Togami without more proof than someone’s word – but it went both ways. Even after a confrontation like that one, Naegi would still trust all the others, leaving him vulnerable to a subtler ploy. And Togami had no doubt whatsoever that such a move was coming.

The only question was what it would be. What could someone be planning that couldn’t be accomplished while Naegi and Togami were together? The idiots of the group might be thinking that this could be a precaution against another murder, but that was because they barely had the sense to come in out of the rain. Why would he and Naegi work together to commit a murder when that would guarantee one of them would die regardless of how the trial ended? No, whatever her other faults might be, Kirigiri was too smart to believe something like that. So she had to have some other reason driving her actions.

Could this be the start of her own murder plot? The thought sent chills down Togami’s spine, and he had to fight not to turn around and run back up the stairs to find Naegi and declare they were done playing this game. The idea made far too much sense for comfort. If Kirigiri wanted to kill, obviously Togami and Naegi had the investigative skills to be the greatest danger to her – and their teamwork would be stronger than ever if they were always together. If she were to be able to derail a possible future investigation, it would be critical for her to separate them, or even –

Togami froze halfway down the stairs to the second floor, paralyzed by the logical conclusion to that thought. Or even kill one of them. It was the perfect way to get rid of a major roadblock to a murderer’s success during the class trials, and of course someone as sharp as Kirigiri would have thought of it at once. It was exactly what Togami himself would have done, if he were in her situation. And faced with the choice of which of the two would be easier to kill, Togami knew exactly who he would choose.
His fingers clenched reflexively around the staircase railing as the world seemed to tilt around him. He could see the trial room opening before them, with one more empty seat where a deadly black X obscured Naegi’s portrait. He could hear the group’s inane chatter about trivialities while they debated the tricks that could have lured the innocent boy to his doom. And Kirigiri – he could see her now, rushing out to paw at Naegi’s broken, lifeless body with eager hands, spewing forth her condescending pronouncements about the condition of his corpse. The thought of her cool, clinical voice informing them all about Naegi’s last moments the way she’d done with the others – he could barely stand to think about it.

He didn’t want that – not the cold shock of realization, not the slow soul-crushing investigation into just how badly Naegi had suffered, not the lingering pain of figuring out how to go on in the aftermath. He could barely get his head around just how much he didn’t want any of it, with the almost physical sensation of repulsion churning in his gut like vomit. The knowledge throbbed through his head, his heart, and his soul – he wanted Naegi not to die.

He could only remember one other time he’d wanted something this badly, with a need intense enough to turn every breath of air to ashes and to make his hands tremble with the thought – when he’d fought tooth and nail against his half-siblings for the right to be the Togami heir. His thirst to prove himself had driven him to vicious heights of brilliance that no one had expected of him, twisting and backstabbing his way through a generation of success stories to show them all that none of the rest could compare.

But that had been different. Pitted against his siblings, at least he’d been able to plan and fight and attack with every weapon he had. Here, trapped in this nightmare of a school with the killing game hemming him in, attacking was the one thing he couldn’t do. Striking against his enemies here would just lead to the loss of the one thing he wanted most to keep.

A loss that was starting already. His fingers went white where he gripped the railing, a physical manifestation of the fury roiling within him. They’d taken Naegi away from him, as easily as plucking a flower from a bush. Every one of the unfamiliar, unsettling emotions flooding through him was due to the other students’ ridiculous, unfounded decision to deny him Naegi’s presence. Everything happening was their fault, for believing Kirigiri over him, for working against their own best interests, for being so goddamn stupid it shouldn’t be allowed –

The sound of a footstep above him jolted Togami out of his thoughts, and he jerked around to see just who would be descending the stairs towards him. For a brief moment, he hoped it might be the only person left in the whole school he’d want to see – but of course it wouldn’t be Naegi.

Instead, Ogami stood just a step down from the third floor entrance to the stairwell, looking like she was considering turning around and retreating at the sight of Togami.

Togami stiffened, briefly considering whether he ought to try to bolt for the closest stairwell exit – but if Ogami intended to catch him, running wouldn’t help. Instead, he drew himself up and glared at Monokuma’s traitor. “And what exactly do you think you’re doing?”

Ogami looked down at him for a long moment, then sighed. “I suppose I don’t have any right to complain when anyone asks that now, do I?” She shook her head, sadness lingering in her eyes. “I’ve been meditating on how best to improve the situation, and I’d hoped to find some of the others. I’d like to talk to all of you about what I might try to do.”

“I’ll just bet you would.” Togami crossed his arms. “Don’t you think you’ve done enough? Dissension, distrust, allies turning on one another – what more could you want?”

“I don’t want any of that,” Ogami protested, sounding for all the world like it actually hurt her to
hearth the accusation. “I never wanted anyone to turn against their friends – I wanted to let you all work together, even if I couldn’t be part of your circle any longer.”

“Oh, that’s right, you were only working for the mastermind because you had to,” Togami sneered. “Because they have a hostage. You’ve secretly been cheering us on the whole time that you were reporting our every move to the mastermind, and it just breaks your fragile heart to know that your boss just added yet another victory to their score.”

“Another – what?” Ogami’s eyes widened in alarm. “I didn’t hear the body discovery announcement –”

“Not that,” Togami cut her off. “You haven’t managed to cause a murder – not yet, anyway. No, all you’ve done so far is shift the blame for your selfish decision to act as a mole.” He took a cold, vicious satisfaction in the way his words seemed to stab through Ogami, inflicting some measure of his own unhappiness back onto her.

“Shift it?” she asked, eyes uncertain. “I don’t understand. How could it appear to be anyone else’s fault? Who else is there to blame?”

“According to the others, Naegi and myself,” Togami said icily. “Congratulations – you’ve managed to turn the entire group against the only ones who actually bothered to tell the truth about the issue. You even managed to get them to force us apart, destroying any shreds of trust and friendship that might have existed among the group.”

Ogami had actually managed to make herself go pale as part of whatever ruse she was attempting. “You’re all turning against each other? It’s that bad?”

“Why don’t you go brag to the mastermind about how well you’ve done?” Togami laughed, cold and hollow. “Maybe they’ll give you a gold star.”

“I –” Ogami turned away, bracing a hand against the doorway back to the third floor. “I have to go. I have to explain –”

“Because everyone’s just lining up to listen to the mastermind’s spy.” Togami rolled his eyes. “You think there’s anything left that you can say now?”

Ogami closed her eyes against the words, lips tightening. “No. I suppose there isn’t.” She drew away. “I have to go. Thank you for telling me what my actions have caused.” And without another word, Ogami left the stairwell and walked away, shoulders slumped in defeat.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to figure out how to approach the other surviving students to rebuild their broken trust.

Sitting by himself in the library with a book open in front of him did nothing to improve Togami’s temper. When he realized that he’d been staring down at the pages without reading a single word for the better part of the afternoon, it only made the fury roiling through him worse. This was intolerable – he couldn’t even concentrate on his book any longer, not with these unrelenting emotions battering at him every moment.

Togami dropped his head into his hands, closing his eyes against the rest of the world. What was wrong with him? Barely a week ago, he could have sat here without a thought for anyone else, immersing himself completely in one book after another. But now, the words blurred in front of him, leaving him unable to focus on anything other than what might be happening in the rest of the school while he was absent.

So this was what it felt like to care about someone else – this constant awareness of another person’s wellbeing, prickling along his skin every time he tried to think about something else. If this was what caring about someone meant, he wasn’t sure if he’d ever genuinely cared about another person in his life. It wasn’t a trait that his upbringing had encouraged, turning family feeling into competitiveness rather than compassion. And every other time he’d felt some faint stirring of emotion towards another person, he’d easily been able to channel it into something more aloof, more distant, more negative.

Only Naegi had resisted the usual patterns of his life, had challenged him to become something more than a competitor in a game. Only Naegi had changed him – and now he wasn’t sure how to fit back into what he’d been before.

So maybe the trick was not to try. Togami stared down at his book a moment longer, evaluating rather than reading this time. Suppose he did manage to succeed in forcing himself to concentrate – what did he gain by sitting here and reading? Before, the benefit had been isolation from the others in a space where he could monitor any approaches, as well as a moderately entertaining way to distract himself from the situation. He’d meant to keep himself alive for as long as possible until he’d decided whether to make an attempt at a killing, and holing himself up away from the others and their nonsense had seemed like the best way to manage it.

But now, like it or not, he’d ended up thoroughly enmeshed in their nonsense. The situation had changed from the way it had been when he’d chosen to hide himself away, so it followed that his response should be different as well. After all, he’d always been of the opinion that it was better to face an unpleasant reality head-on than to try to live in a dream world.

Togami stood, abandoning his book on the edge of the table. He was done sitting hidden away in the library while the rest of the students decided to act without him there. They’d forced this separation by threatening to refuse to talk to Naegi or himself, hadn’t they? Well, since they’d gotten their end of the bargain, maybe he should remind them of their side of the agreement.
Leaving the library, Togami decided he might as well head back downstairs, towards the cafeteria. There were usually at least one or two people loitering there at any point during the day, and he didn’t have Naegi’s patience for combing the entire school in search of specific people.

Sure enough, when he opened the door, he saw Hagakure drop a teacup with a clatter, sloshing liquid across a table.

Wonderful. Togami grimaced as Hagakure yelped and shook his apparently scalded fingers. It would be him, wouldn’t it? Maybe he should just turn around and pretend this had never happened.

“You’re here to do me in, aren’t you? Oh, man, did you already poison my tea? Am I done for already?” Hagakure stared at his teacup in horror, then flung it away, sending the last drops scattering across the floor.

Togami sighed. On the other hand, maybe it would be better not to let this idiocy go unchecked any further. Hagakure had never been especially intelligent, but at least he’d been moderately more coherent before this.

“How exactly do you think I poisoned your tea from another room?” Togami said, crossing his arms. “You made it yourself, didn’t you?”

“You could have your ways,” Hagakure insisted. “You were in that poison room for a reason, weren’t you? And now you’re seeking me out, getting me alone to do who knows what!”

“If you hadn’t been part of that stupid separation ploy, we wouldn’t be alone,” Togami pointed out darkly. “Naegi would be with us.”

“Both of you?” Hagakure looked stricken with terror. “No, no, that’d be even worse! With two people against me I’d have no chance at all!”

Togami resisted the urge to rub at his temples. “You must be joking. Do you actually believe that Naegi is capable of plotting coldblooded murder with me? He wouldn’t hurt a mortal enemy, let alone one of you – the people he keeps calling friends.”

“Yeah, but that could all be a cover,” Hagakure said, waving a finger in Togami’s direction. “You know that whenever there’s a serial killer who makes the news, they always do interviews with the neighbors who say ‘he was such a nice boy’ and ‘we never suspected it.’”

“So you suspect Naegi because he’s too nice?” Togami frowned, the complete lack of logic making his head hurt. “All right, fine – then what about me? Do you intend to accuse me of being too nice?”

“You already told us you want to kill people!” Hagakure said. “Of course you’re suspicious!”

“Right. Of course you wouldn’t be consistent in your idiocy.” Togami rolled his eyes. “Well, I’ve managed to endure several minutes of your presence without attempting to kill you, which probably entitles me to some kind of medal. That ought to prove that I’m not out to murder you.”

“No way, man,” Hagakure protested, shaking his head vehemently. “No, we’re alone, but anyone could walk in through the open door. It’s safe as long as there are other people around, you know?”

Togami wasn’t sure how that assertion fit with Hagakure’s claim that Togami and Naegi were more dangerous when together – but arguing the point didn’t seem like it would get him anywhere. "Fine, then – if you equate the presence of others with safety, I assume you would support the idea of everyone staying together for safety’s sake.”
“What?” Hagakure looked baffled, probably by the multi-syllabled words he’d used.

Togami sighed. “I’m suggesting that those of us who are still alive stop splitting up, so that we can keep track of each other and prevent anyone from acting alone.”

“Oh – I see.” Hagakure nodded slowly, rubbing his chin as he thought it over.

“So you’d agree with the idea?” Togami pressed.

“Huh? Agree with it?” Hagakure stared at him. “No way! I see what you’re trying to do – you just want me to support your schemes so that you can take us all out at once!” He scrambled to his feet and made for the door. “No way would I ever agree to any of your ideas!” And with that, he ran out.

Togami scowled at the tea dripping off the table where Hagakure had been sitting. Well, that had gone about as poorly as he’d expected, considering the person he’d been trying to address. He probably couldn’t have said anything that would have gone any better.

Naegi might have managed it, though. Togami had seen the boy do it time and again, pinpointing exactly the right words to get people to listen to his arguments. He’d even managed to break through the solid barricade of stupidity surrounding Hagakure’s few functioning brain cells once or twice – he would at least have had a chance of salvaging this mess.

It wasn’t an issue of arguments or logic, not really. If that had been all, Togami knew he could have convinced everyone to listen to him already. No, the problem here was likability and trustworthiness – two qualities he apparently did not possess. None of the others had ever really wanted to listen to him if they didn’t have to, and with the current situation making him look suspicious, they’d all seized the chance to ignore him.

_Ding dong, ding dong._

As Monokuma’s nighttime announcement rang out from the television monitors, Togami sighed and headed away from the dining hall. The entire day had been a disaster, with everything going wrong from the moment he’d left his room.

And apparently it wasn’t over yet. As he approached the dormitories, Togami heard the minor commotion of voices raised in disagreement. He slowed, trying to determine who was involved – and to his surprise, he saw Asahina and Ogami standing at the corner between their two dorm rooms.

“You have to sleep _somewhere_!” Asahina was saying, hands on her hips. “And it’s against the rules to sleep anywhere but a dorm room!”

“I understand your concerns,” Ogami said, her voice heavier than usual, “but Hina, I won’t stay in your room tonight.”

“I don’t mind!” Asahina insisted. “Sharing the bed is okay, or I can sleep on the floor –”

“I can’t put you out of your own bed.” And then Ogami looked down the hall, a shadow falling across her face as she met Togami’s eyes. “Ah – and it seems I won’t need to.”

Asahina turned around, and her eyes narrowed when she caught sight of Togami. “You. You’ve still got Sakura’s room key.”

Togami crossed his arms, staying well out of range of either girl. “Of course I do. I’m hardly going
“Oh, yes, you are,” Asahina snapped. “You’re going to give it back to Sakura so she can get into her room again.”

Togami stiffened. This morning, he’d told Naegi that he’d been prepared to hand to key back over to Ogami if she’d asked to have it – but that had been before the rest of the students had decided to treat him and Naegi like enemies while allowing Ogami to roam free. It might not do anything to negate Ogami’s threat, but with the way Asahina was glaring at him, Togami wasn’t inclined to do anything that she wanted.

“No.” Togami lifted his chin, putting on his most imperious manner. “I’m not contributing to your ability to wander the school at night. Sort out your own sleeping arrangements however you want, but I’m not giving you that key back.”

“Oh, really?” Asahina clenched her fists. “And what if we decide to take it?”

“I imagine you’d be able to get it off me fairly easily,” Togami said, holding his stance steady. Even if worry had begun to chill his veins at the thought of the two athletes attempting to attack him, he would never let a quiver of it show. “In fact, if you want to escalate matters to physical violence, why stop there? You know how this game works, and it isn’t about anything so paltry as fists and thievery.”

“You think I can’t?” Asahina took a step forward, and might well have gone further if Ogami hadn’t laid a restraining hand on her shoulder.

“Not you, too, Hina,” Ogami said, a spasm of what looked like hurt flashing across her face. “Please. Don’t act like this because of me.”

“It’s not you,” Asahina said. “It’s because of him. No one would miss him – we’d all be better off if he weren’t around.”

Before Togami could say anything in response to that outrageous claim, Ogami was shaking her head. “You can’t start thinking like that. You can’t give in to what the mastermind wants.”

Togami eyed Ogami for a moment, frowning as he wondered just what her angle was with all this. Was she still trying to portray herself as some kind of victim? It hardly seemed necessary, not when Asahina had bought the act already.

When some of the tension went out of Asahina’s shoulders, Ogami looked over at Togami. “You can keep my key, if it matters that much to you, but I would prefer to spend the night in my own room. Would you open the door?”

“No!” Asahina objected. “He won’t let you out again! He’ll just leave you in there to starve!”

“What, and get named as a murderer in the shortest class trial possible?” Togami rolled his eyes. “Be serious. If you’d all bothered to listen to me instead of jumping to the most ridiculous conclusions possible, you’d know that I never thought that locking the spy up would be a workable solution to the problem.”

“So you’re saying you’d open the door again?” Asahina said skeptically.

“I suppose I’d have to.” Togami glanced at Ogami. “Provided you follow the same safety precautions as before.”
Ogami nodded. “That seems reasonable.”

“No, it doesn’t!” Asahina snapped. “So you have safety precautions for you – but what about for Sakura? If you have her key, you could get into her room any time during the night and do anything you wanted!”

“Why would I want to go into the spy’s room?” Togami asked, curling his lip. “What would that do other than give her an opportunity to kill me?”

“Whatever you’re planning to do, I’m not waiting to find out,” Asahina said. “If you’re going to lock Sakura in her room overnight, you’re locking me in with her.”

“What?” Ogami’s eyes flew wide open. “Hina, no – you have your own room, you’d be much more comfortable there.”

“I don’t care about being comfortable – I care about you being safe!” Asahina said. “And if you’re alone in a room that only he can unlock, you definitely won’t be safe. What if you just mysteriously turned up dead in the morning?”

Ogami closed her eyes and swallowed. “I – I see your point.” She looked from Asahina to Togami. “Very well, then – unless Togami has objections.”

“I don’t care if he does!” Asahina glared over at Togami.

He gave a bored shrug. “What do I care if you want to risk your life? If the mastermind gives her the order to kill overnight, at least the crime scene will be contained.”

Asahina looked like she wanted to say something more, but before she could, Ogami tugged her further down the hall to give Togami the space to approach her door. Once they were a safe distance away, Togami pulled Ogami’s key from his inner jacket pocket and unlocked the door, retreating as soon as it was open. Asahina’s eyes went to the key in Togami’s hand, but despite a moment’s hesitation, she followed Ogami into the room rather than press the issue.

Once the door was closed, Togami made sure it was securely locked before stowing the key away again. At least that meant two of the other troublesome students were safely out of the way. With any luck, Ogami really would take the chance to kill her supposed friend, proving herself as the true threat and getting eliminated by the resulting trial in one move. As far as Togami was concerned, that would be the best solution on all counts – because other than that, he couldn’t see a good resolution to the situation at all.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Togami deals with too many girls too early in the morning.

Alone in his room, Togami lay in bed staring up at the dark ceiling. He hadn’t known what else to do after locking Asahina and Ogami in for the night other than go to bed, since the others all seemed determined to continue following their ten o’clock curfew. He’d never viewed the curfew as any kind of obligation, but on the other hand, continuing to wander the school didn’t exactly appeal to him, either. All he’d really wanted was for this tedious day to be over.

But now that he’d gone to bed, sleep eluded him. The bed stretched out around him, too big even when he let his limbs sprawl across as much of it as he could fill, and the room sounded too empty with only one person’s breathing disturbing the air. Loneliness pressed around him like a physical presence, the silence too omnipresent to ignore.

This was ridiculous. He’d only spent a few nights sharing Naegi’s bed – it shouldn’t bother him to sleep alone again. He should be grateful to have the space to himself, content to enjoy the freedom to stretch out his legs and control his blankets. But instead, he found himself reaching for a heavier blanket than he personally preferred or curling automatically onto the far side of the bed, leaving the other half empty as if it no longer belonged to him.

How had Naegi done it? He’d carved out a space for himself in Togami’s life so easily, and now that he’d been taken away, Togami could see just how deep the hooks had gone. It wasn’t even the result of some kind of planned manipulation to put Togami in his control – Naegi had just been himself, honest and open and nice down to the bone, and he’d wormed his way into Togami’s heart more than any coordinated effort ever could have.

Togami had actually considered trying to see the other boy, when he’d been standing alone in the hall after locking Asahina and Ogami away. If he’d waited until a while after curfew to ring Naegi’s doorbell, it wasn’t as though anyone would be able to hear it through the soundproofed rooms. If he’d been out again before the morning announcement, no one would have had to know. No one except him and Naegi, anyway – and that had been the problem right there. Togami didn’t even have to ask the other boy to know exactly what he’d say in response to the suggestion that he break his word to his friends – and he didn’t especially want to hear Naegi tell him to go away, however little the other boy might mean it. And so Togami hadn’t even tried to ring Naegi’s doorbell, resigning himself to the idea that he wouldn’t be able to confirm Naegi’s wellbeing until breakfast the next day.

The morning couldn’t come soon enough. Togami didn’t sleep much throughout the night, spending far more time tossing and turning. Different plans and options for the new day kept running through his head, but every time he came up with one, some crucial difficulty with it occurred to him as he tried to work out the details. By the time it was early enough that he could justify dragging himself out of bed, Togami hadn’t managed to come up with either a decent plan or a decent rest. It looked as though he had a long day ahead of him.

There were still a few minutes until the morning announcement by the time he’d finished dressing
for the day, but if he had to stare at the inside of his room another second, Togami thought he might start smashing things. To distract himself from the impulses towards wanton destruction, he let himself out into the empty hall, stifling a yawn as he relocked his door. What he really needed was some coffee, but of course the cafeteria was still off limits for now. Maybe the storage room would have something?

Not having much else to do with his time, Togami shrugged and headed around the corner to check. But it only took a few moments to ascertain that no, the only coffee-like items in the storage room was some kind of instant monstrosity that shouldn’t even be allowed to share the same name as proper coffee. Togami tossed it away and tried to swallow back another yawn as he left.

Looking down the dormitory hallway again, Togami could see Ogami’s door at the end of the row, still safely locked as far as he could tell. He’d probably have to let the two girls out sometime soon, wouldn’t he? Personally, he wouldn’t mind leaving them stuck in there for as long as possible, but if Asahina didn’t make it to the group’s breakfast meeting, the others would start to make a scene about it. He’d had enough of them all making baseless accusations at him yesterday – he didn’t need to deal with more of that nonsense today. Better to let the girls out before the meeting began.

Of course, opening that door did run the risk that he was about to uncover one or more corpses. Togami headed slowly down the hall towards the door, considering his options. If the mastermind had chosen last night to force Ogami’s hand, the martial artist could have taken Asahina down fairly easily, considering the swimmer’s blind faith in her. Or there was also the chance that Asahina might have avoided the first attempt and gotten lucky in the aftermath, leaving Ogami as the victim. Whichever way it might have turned out, the tidiest scenario would involve one victim and one murderer.

The worst case scenario would be if both girls had somehow managed to murder one another, leaving two corpses and no explanation of how they’d gotten there. In that case, Togami knew his possession of the room key would not be a point in his favor – and being the one to discover the bodies would only make him look more suspicious. Of course, it would only be circumstantial, nothing definitive – but if Hagakure, Fukawa, and Kirigiri decided to continue with their stupid vendetta against him during the class trial, they did have enough votes to outnumber himself and Naegi.

It might help to allay some possible suspicions if he could bring someone else along with him to open the door this morning – but of course, that brought up the question of who. Naegi would be ideal, but unfortunately he was out of the question. And it wasn’t as though any of the others were likely to listen to a request from him –

“Hey, White Knight, baby! Up and raring to go pretty early this morning, aren’t you?”

Togami turned sharply to see Genocide Jill standing in her open doorway, tongue lolling out of her mouth as she directed her usual disgusting leer at him. A frown of distaste flickered across his face for a moment, before he realized it could be worse – it could be Fukawa instead. He never would have thought that he’d come to prefer the serial killer personality, but at least her particular brand of crazy seemed a little more predictable than Fukawa’s overexcited delusions.

“So what brings you out here all by your lonesome, huh?” Jill asked. “Did you get up early to sneak some alone time with your very favorite serial killer?”

“Definitely not,” Togami said flatly, crossing his arms as he considered her. Despite Fukawa’s current suspicion and mistrust of him, Jill’s attitude towards him didn’t seem to have changed at all.
“Oh-ho, so it’s definitely fate that brought us together this morning!” Jill laughed. “Well, fate and my finely-honed Byakuya Togami radar! Gotta keep close track of your door if I don’t want to miss any action, right?”

He suppressed a shudder at the thought of her sitting across the hall watching his door, like a spider waiting for its prey to touch its web. He had no intention of showing a hint of weakness to an open murderer – but if the girl was going to insist on stalking him, he might as well get something useful out of her behavior.

“Then if you’re going to watch me, come on,” he told her, flicking his fingers in an imperious gesture as he continued down the hall.

“Sure thing, baby,” Jill agreed, scurrying along after him. “You know I’m always happy to get up close and personal.”

Well, that sounded potentially horrifying. “Keep your distance. All you have to do is watch as I open Ogami’s door.”

“The Ogre? Aw, and here I was hoping you might pick up Mahkyutie for some adora-double fun!”

Togami couldn’t stop his shoulders from tensing. “No.”

“Needs his sleep, huh? Yeah, it looks like whatever you got up to last night left you ahhhh tired out.” Jill grinned, visibly raking her eyes up and down his body.

Togami scowled. He’d done his best to hide the evidence of his sleepless night, but apparently he hadn’t managed well enough. “Don’t talk about him. Just stand there.”

Before she could chatter any further at him, Togami strode up and unlocked Ogami’s door. After signaling the doorbell with one long and three short rings, he quickly retreated out of range, back towards Jill – only to find her eyeing him with a puzzled frown.

“What’ve you got the Ogre’s room key for?” Jill asked, one hand on her hip. “Is there something my White Knight isn’t telling me?”

“Yes. And I’m going to continue not telling you about it,” Togami said flatly, not taking his eyes off the door as he mentally counted down the thirty seconds until the door should open. “Now shut up.”

There wasn’t much time left for Jill to talk in any case. As the last few seconds ticked away, Togami pondered the options he’d have if the door didn’t open. That would suggest either a trap or a worst case scenario, and he wasn’t eager to open the door on either option. Maybe it would be better to send Jill to do it? He’d give it another minute or so, and then –

The door swung open, revealing an exhausted-looking Ogami looking out at them, eyes red and outlined with dark circles. She leaned against the doorframe, her usually exact posture slumping like she was trying to take up as little space as possible. Even so, she still filled the doorway, and Togami couldn’t quite see past her to determine whether the room showed evidence of a murder.

“So – you did return,” Ogami said, her voice a slow rumble. She didn’t meet his eyes, gaze dropping instead to the ground. “Thank you for that.”

“You don’t have to be grateful!”

To Togami’s surprise, Asahina pushed her way into view at Ogami’s side. She looked perfectly
alive and unharmed, if still sleepy and absentmindedly clutching a pillow.

“There’s no point thanking him when it’s his fault we were locked up in the first place,” Asahina went on, sending Togami a glare. “So nothing happened all night – are you happy now?”

“Not particularly,” Togami said, crossing his arms. “This just prolongs the situation. At least if one of you were dead, we’d be able to break the stalemate. And with you offering yourself up as such an easy victim, it would have been ideal.”

“How can you say something like that, right to Sakura’s face?” Asahina demanded. “You don’t have any real feelings at all, do you?”

“I certainly don’t have any feelings about either of you,” Togami said coolly. “I told you last night – if you want to sacrifice yourself on the altar of false friendship, I’m happy to let you. The mastermind’s order for death might as well end with a willing victim – and then after the trial, we’d be rid of you both.”

Asahina stared at him, repulsion twisting her face. “You – you’re a monster. If anyone ends up dead from this, it ought to be you!”

“Oh, so now you’re going to start horning in on my turf?” Jill asked, eyes flashing dangerously in Asahina’s direction. “Well, you’d better watch it – murdering adorable boys is my shtick!”

“Ugh.” Asahina glanced over at Jill, lip curling in distaste as she looked back at Togami. “Seriously? We tell you to stop acting so suspicious with Naegi, and you start hanging out with her instead?”

“Tell him? So now you think you can give my White Knight orders?” Jill’s scissors flashed into her hands. “Maybe those gargantuan gazongas of yours are dragging away all the blood that ought to go to your brain. A couple snip snip snips should fix that right up!”

And of course that broke Ogami’s pose of depression, her head snapping up at the threat to Asahina. “Leave Hina out of this! It doesn’t concern her!”

“It does when she won’t stop blathering about it,” Togami pointed out.

“Someone has to point out all your tricks and lies!” Asahina snapped. “You might have gotten Naegi and Fukawa snowed, but I can see what you are – lying, selfish, manipulative, cowardly, untrustwo—”

Her tirade was cut off as Jill leapt forward, scissors arcing out in a bright flash of metal. Ogami lunged forward to knock Jill off course, just as Asahina yelped, arms flying up to shield herself – and feathers exploded through the hallway as Jill’s scissors cut through Asahina’s pillow. Ogami swung Asahina out of the way as Jill collapsed in a cloud of feathers, several loud sneezes rocking through her.

“Hina – you’re hurt!” Ogami stared down at Asahina’s arm in some approximation of horror. Jill’s scissors had torn through the sleeve of her sweatshirt, and Togami could see blood on the skin beneath.

“Oh – no, don’t worry, it isn’t that bad,” Asahina said hastily.

Ogami didn’t seem inclined to listen, eyes blazing with fury as she glared into the feathery mess. “Why would you do that?”
But as the feathers settled to the floor, it was Fukawa who sat amid them, staring up at Ogami with terror-stricken eyes. “W-what’s going on?”

“None of this has to do with the others!” Ogami insisted, looming over Fukawa. “If you have a problem, you can take it up with me!”

“I don’t have a problem!” Fukawa said, shoving herself back away from Ogami’s furious glare. “N-no problems here!”

“You don’t have a problem – you are a problem.” Togami scowled down at her. God, the last thing he wanted to deal with this morning was whatever crazy delusions she’d thought up about him now. “Maybe you should do us all a favor and take another breath of those feathers.”

Fukawa whipped her head around, wide eyes peering up at him through her glasses. “You’d rather have her around?”

“I’d be happier without either of you,” Togami said, rolling his eyes.

“Well, we’d all be happier without any of you,” Asahina shot at him, pressing the edges of her sleeve against her wound.

“I knew you all wanted me g-gone,” Fukawa gasped out, scrambling up to her feet and backing away from them. “I knew it all along!”

“It shouldn’t come as much of a shock,” Togami said, crossing his arms. “I’ve told you from the beginning that your presence is repellant.”

Fukawa’s eyes went as wide as if he’d struck her, but when she opened her mouth to reply –

*Ding dong, ding dong.*

The morning announcement filled the hallways. Fukawa’s dark eyes never moved from Togami as Monokuma’s cheerful voice rang in their ears.

As the announcement ended, Ogami took Asahina’s arm and began leading her away, murmuring something about the clinic. Togami shrugged and turned away to head towards the cafeteria. The breakfast meeting would start soon, and he’d get a chance to see the only person worth talking to in the whole school. He walked away, leaving Fukawa sitting there alone in the pile of feathers.
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Togami attends the breakfast meeting with the other students, in the hopes of seeing Naegi.

Chapter Notes

As of today, I am back home and finished with various holiday festivities, so regular updates will be resuming for the foreseeable future.

Togami headed directly into the cafeteria, scowling around at the empty tables. He’d never been here so early before, just moments after the morning announcement had played. He’d always preferred to wait until the rest of the students had finished their meeting so that he didn’t have to deal with any of them. And now here he was, first one through the door, as if he was eager to attend their tedious daily gathering. The thought made him want to gag.

Well, he wasn’t going to let the others find him sitting around waiting for them, at the very least. He headed back into the kitchen to prepare some coffee. Hopefully the caffeine would help get rid of the headache the morning’s antics had already given him – and maybe the preparation time would be enough for Naegi to make it to the dining hall, as well.

But when he returned to the main room of the cafeteria, coffee in hand, Naegi wasn’t the person who’d arrived. Kirigiri sat at one of the tables, frowning and tapping a pen against a small notebook. She looked up as he entered, raising her eyebrows at him.

“I’m glad to see your newfound resolution to be more helpful hasn’t fallen to pieces,” she said, eyes as blank as ever. “I did wonder if it might.”

“I’m not here to see you.” Togami emphasized this by choosing the seat as far away from her as possible.

She watched him a moment longer, then turned back to her notebook. Togami wondered briefly just what she was writing over there – but it probably wasn’t anything interesting. After all, keeping a written record of important information would be stupid, when there were cameras spying on them at all times.

Instead, he turned his attention to his coffee, watching the door out of the corner of his eye as he drank. Naegi would have to arrive soon, wouldn’t he? After all, he always made a point of attending these morning meetings to see his so-called friends – he wouldn’t start skipping out now. It was just a question of when he’d arrive.

Togami refused to let himself dwell on the possibility that Naegi wouldn’t arrive. He hadn’t seen Naegi since they’d separated yesterday, and the awareness that he didn’t know where Naegi was gnawed away at him. Anything could have happened in the intervening hours, and he wouldn’t
know about it. There hadn’t been a body discovery announcement, but there wasn’t much comfort in that – not when Naegi trusted everyone in the group enough that he would probably have opened his door in the middle of the night to let a potential killer walk right in.

And it wouldn’t even need to be a deliberate murder attempt. For all that Naegi kept insisting he was fine, Togami had still been able to see the flashes of pain when he turned his head wrong, the moments of unexpected dizziness, or the way climbing all the stairs made him more tired than it should. Head wounds weren’t something to treat lightly, but Naegi would probably try to shrug his off, given the chance. Togami could see him doing so all too easily, and ending up collapsing half-conscious somewhere after pushing himself too hard.

The door opened, and Togami looked sharply towards it – only to scowl when he realized it was just Hagakure. The wild-haired young man shot a nervous look in Togami’s direction, then headed over to cower beside Kirigiri. Togami rolled his eyes and decided to ignore them both.

It only took another few minutes for the door to open again, but this time, Asahina entered, Ogami trailing reluctantly at her heels. Togami stiffened at the sight of Monokuma’s spy joining them as if she were no different than any other student.

“So you’re not even going to pretend to any shame about facing the people you betrayed?” Togami asked, his voice clear in the otherwise silent room.

Ogami started, looking up at him like a spooked wild animal, but it was Asahina who answered, eyes flashing with anger. “I don’t think you’ve got any room to talk about people who ought to be feeling shame.”

“I’ve been nothing but helpful and honest with the lot of you for the past few days,” Togami said, glaring at her. “It’s not my problem if you don’t like the truth.”

“You wouldn’t know truth if you met it on the street!” Asahina snapped back, and she looked like she would have gone on if Ogami hadn’t begun backing towards the door again.

“This was a bad idea,” Ogami said, when Asahina turned back towards her with a questioning look. “Togami is right, Hina – I don’t belong among you anymore. The way things stand now, my presence can only make the situation worse.”

“That’s not true!” Asahina said, stomping her foot. “You have just as much right to be here as any of the others!”

“She lost that right when she chose to work for the mastermind,” Togami said, crossing his arms. “You –”

“Hina, stop.” Ogami’s fists clenched, and it looked like she’d actually summoned up some tears at the corners of her eyes. “I appreciate all that you’ve done to defend me, but – it’s enough. You’ve done enough.”

“Sakura –” Asahina reached out towards her, but Ogami’s eyes flickered down to the fresh bandage wrapped around Asahina’s arm.

“No.” Ogami’s voice broke on the word. “You were hurt, Hina – because of me.”

“It wasn’t your fault, it’s because they wouldn’t –”

“Because of me,” Ogami repeated. “And it can’t happen again. Stop defending me. Stop fighting
with the others.”

“But –”

“Promise me,” Ogami said, not giving Asahina enough time to formulate a protest. “If – if you do still consider me a friend, then do this for me. Stop fighting. Stop arguing. Stop making the cracks in the group worse.”

Asahina stared up at Ogami. “This is really what you want?”

“Yes.”

“Then – fine.” Asahina clenched her fists and looked away. “Fine, if that’s really what you want. I’ll try not to fight about it anymore – but nothing will make me stop believing in you.”

“Hina –” Ogami swallowed. “Thank you. You’ve been a better friend than I deserve.” She looked around the room once more. “I – I should go. It will be better if I’m not here.” With that, she turned and walked out of the room before Asahina could stop her.

Togami watched her go with narrowed eyes. That was quite a little show that Ogami had put on – and he couldn’t help but notice that she’d chosen to do it in front of most of the other students, rather than when she and Asahina had been alone in the nurse’s office. What could she mean by it? Was she acting on the mastermind’s orders here, or was this all part of some other plan she’d cooked up herself?

He watched as Asahina hesitated at the door, then slowly turned away to droop into the nearest chair, staring down at her hands. Could she be in on whatever Ogami was doing? He was inclined to think that she was just stupid and stubborn, getting manipulated herself rather than trying to trick others – but he couldn’t rule the possibility out. There was the chance –

The sound of the door opening again shattered his train of thought, and he twisted sharply around in his seat. There was only one person left who usually attended these meetings but hadn’t arrived yet – it had to be –

Naegi stood in the doorway, his eyes immediately seeking out Togami’s as a bright smile spread across his face.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi finally get the chance to see each other.

Togami stared across the room at Naegi, frozen in place by the relief sweeping through him. Naegi was safe, alive, not harmed any more than he already had been. He’d worried about the other possibilities, but he hadn’t realized just how anxious he’d been about it – not until now, when the tension left him at the sight of Naegi well and whole.

What had happened during the hours they’d been apart? Had Naegi just been alone and bored, or had one of the others tried something? Had he recovered at all from his head injury, or was he still in pain? Togami needed to know, to understand the threats still facing the other boy. He stood, preparing to go over and speak to Naegi.

“Don’t.”

Togami turned sharply at the sound of Kirigiri’s voice, to find the girl’s cold eyes boring into him from across the room as she got to her feet.

“Excuse me?” Togami scowled at her, not at all liking the curt order she’d issued.

“You heard me.” Kirigiri walked over to stand in the path between Togami and Naegi, so that neither of them could cross without passing by her. “The separation is still in effect.”

“What, because you think we’re going to plot mass murder over breakfast with all of you in hearing distance?” Togami asked, cold rage trickling through his veins. “You can’t be serious.”

“Why wouldn’t I be serious?” Kirigiri said, her face as unreadable as ever. “The situation hasn’t changed to make the pair of you look more trustworthy.”

Togami looked back to Naegi, only to see the smile fading from the boy’s face at the realization of just how inflexible Kirigiri intended to be. Togami’s heart clenched at the sight of Naegi’s brief moment of happiness disappearing, leaving him dispirited and sad. How could that girl justify doing this to him? Naegi had only ever been nice to her – nicer than she deserved, with all she’d put him through.

“Then what would make it change?” Togami demanded. “What are you waiting for? Or do you expect us to let you keep this idiocy up indefinitely?”

“We told you already – the separation is because we can’t trust the two of you together,” Kirigiri said, unfazed by Togami’s anger. “It will end when you’ve satisfied us about that issue either way.”

“What do you mean, either way?” Naegi asked, frowning.

Kirigiri didn’t look his way, expression going icier than before. “Either we find out for certain that we can trust you both, meaning that the two of you acting together isn’t an issue – or we find out for certain that we can’t.”
The look on Naegi’s face stabbed right through Togami’s chest. “And what would prove our trustworthiness?” Togami asked, since anything had to be better than seeing that crushed expression in Naegi’s eyes.

But Kirigiri didn’t seem to agree, shrugging as if it barely concerned her. “I’ll let you know. But it hasn’t happened yet.”

Togami clenched one fist, just one – but so tightly that he could feel his nails biting deep into his palm. He wanted to gouge them into her face instead, to rip her apart and make her feel some of the hurt he could see on Naegi’s face – but he knew it wouldn’t help. It would just make her dig in her heels further, insist that he and Naegi couldn’t be trusted at all, and who knew what else she might try in that case.

No, Kirigiri held all the cards right now, and they all knew it. She could demand whatever she liked, at least until he could figure out a way to get around her. As long as she could prey on Naegi to enforce this separation, Togami didn’t have much of a choice in the matter.

With one last furious glare in her direction, Togami whirled back into his seat. Only long practice at not showing weaknesses too overtly let him resist the urge to hurl his half-empty coffee cup at the wall with a satisfyingly destructive crash. He knew breaking glassware wouldn’t deal with the issue, anyway – what he needed to break now couldn’t be so easily smashed.

Naegi sent one last look in Togami’s direction, making what seemed to be an extremely poor effort at smiling again, before taking the seat across from Asahina. Togami glowered back, etching the misery he saw into his memory along with the rest of the sins to lay at Kirigiri’s feet.

“So is this it, then?” Hagakure asked, looking around the room. “Are we the only ones still coming in the mornings?”

“Who else are you expecting to turn up, one of the corpses?” Togami snapped, glaring at the idiot. “If you’re going to speak, at least try to say something of enough value to make up for the air you use to spew it.”

“I just meant there’s only five of us left, if Fukawa and the Ogre aren’t going to come anymore,” Hagakure said. “That – that’s only a third of what we started with!”

“Your ability to do basic math astounds me.” Togami rolled his eyes.

“No, it’s true,” Asahina said, looking up from her hands with red-rimmed eyes. “We’ve lost so many people. It’s only been a couple weeks, and so many of us are gone – from fifteen down to seven of us still alive. We can’t lose any more!”

Togami was about to make another scathing remark – but something about the statement made him pause. Fifteen students – was that really the right number? When he and Naegi had first questioned Ogami, she had tried to say that it wasn’t, that the number was actually sixteen. The idea was bizarre, of course, and he’d dismissed it as nothing more than an attempt at a dodge – but it seemed like a rather complex way to attempt to avoid blame, if so.

And now that he thought about it, Togami recalled something else that had struck him as similarly odd – the empty seat the mastermind always left among them during the class trials. Not only did every student have a place, regardless of whether they were still alive, there was always one seat left open and unclaimed. It didn’t necessarily confirm Ogami’s story, but it did suggest that someone might want the story to look like it had been confirmed.
Togami huffed out a sigh, pushing his now-empty coffee cup away. It was useless to think about. In fact, this whole meeting was useless, an infuriating waste of his time. He’d only bothered attending because he’d thought he’d get a chance to check in with Naegi, but he hadn’t even been allowed to do that. He’d been reduced to staring across the cafeteria at Naegi like a lovesick schoolgirl, daydreaming about conversations they couldn’t actually have.

Well, no more. He wasn’t going to stay here where the rest of the students could revel in how pathetic they’d made him look. He got up, preparing to head out the door.

“Just a moment.” Before Togami could go, Kirigiri stood as well, briskly circling the tables towards him. “If you’re ready to leave, there’s something I’d like to show you.”
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

Togami and Kirigiri have a discussion of sorts.

Togami stared at Kirigiri, trying to find some meaning in her emotionless mask. Her face never flickered, though, neither kind nor cruel, showing nothing more than mild interest in whether he was going to answer her question.

“What is it?” Togami asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

“No.” Kirigiri headed for the door, clearly expecting him to follow her.

Togami very nearly let her leave without him. It would serve her right if he did, ordering him around like he had nothing better to do. But on the other hand, she’d just said that she wanted him to prove himself to be trustworthy. Doing as she demanded was almost certainly part of that.

In that case, he supposed he didn’t have much choice. Togami strode out after Kirigiri, quickly catching up to her. To his mild surprise, she didn’t turn towards the bathhouse, which he would have expected to be the best place to show him something that she apparently didn’t feel the need to share with any of the others. Instead, she headed for the stairs, climbing up to the third floor.

“What exactly do you think you’re going to show me in here?” Togami asked, frowning, when Kirigiri opened the door to the rec room. “If you’re looking for an Othello partner, I’m not interested.”

“I’m not.” Kirigiri closed the door behind them, then walked over to open the large metal cabinet in the corner of the room.

Togami looked the cabinet up and down, then raised an eyebrow in her direction. “A giant metal box, very interesting. Anyone would be delighted to walk up three flights of stairs to see it.”

Kirigiri’s lips tightened, but she didn’t respond to the needling. Instead, she carried on with whatever she had apparently come to do, pulling her notebook out of her pocket and removing several of the sheets. Togami frowned at her, trying to work out what she was doing as she attached the papers to the cabinet wall, in the shadow of the door. One of the papers seemed to have writing on it, but with the way she’d positioned it, it would be very difficult to see –

Ah. So that was it. Togami glanced at the security camera, and sure enough, its location wouldn’t let it see inside the locker with any clarity – definitely not closely enough to tell what was written on any of the papers. So she wanted to communicate something to him privately, was that it? Something that she didn’t want to say in the bathhouse, for some incomprehensible reason of her own.

All right, then. Togami didn’t particularly trust anything that Kirigiri might want to tell him, but he was certainly interested to see what it was. If nothing else, this might give him some insight into just what the inscrutable girl might be planning. So as she stepped away from the locker, he took her place, leaning forward to read what the note had to say.
“After considering the information Alter Ego provided from its data analysis, I have come to the following conclusions. First, we are being denied information about the outside world for more reason than to provide us with motivation to leave. Second, while the headmaster may have been involved in these events to some extent, he is not the mastermind behind everything.”

Togami read the words over several times to be certain he’d gotten it right, just in case the dim light had blurred the words. This was what she’d brought him here to say? That made no sense – the first conclusion was too obviously right, and the second was too obviously wrong.

He turned to tell her so, but before he could open his mouth, she thrust a pen into his hand. Well, if she wanted to keep all her speculations from the mastermind, that did make sense. Togami shrugged and turned to the paper, writing in the blank space below her notes.

“Your second conclusion doesn’t match the information I received. How did you reach these conclusions?”

Kirigiri had produced a second pen, and as soon as he’d finished, she leaned in to begin her reply.

“An alternate source of information about the headmaster.”

Togami gave her a hard look, but he might as well not have bothered. She might as well have been writing about the color of the walls, for all that her expression gave away. He turned back to the paper.

“What source?”

“One that I prefer not to share at this time.”

Togami didn’t even bother to write down a response to that. If she couldn’t figure out his opinion from the look he gave her, he’d have to revise his opinion of her intelligence drastically.

Kirigiri eyed him for a moment, then returned to the paper.

“I have no intention of telling you everything I know. Consider this information an olive branch of sorts – an attempt at determining whether we can be allies in the future.”

Togami scowled at the paper.

“You think I want to be your ally, after everything you’ve done?”

This time, Kirigiri was the one who didn’t write a response. She just raised an eyebrow at him, lips curling into her insufferable smirk. She didn’t need to put it on the paper – the word yes was written all over her face.

And damn her, she was right. Of course she was. Togami wouldn’t be here right now if he didn’t want to be her ally. He might find her alarmingly suspicious, personally irritating, and obnoxiously overbearing, but she was also the main force behind his separation from Naegi. If he wanted that ban lifted, he needed to develop some kind of working relationship with Kirigiri.

So was that what she was doing? Was this actually an attempt to rebuild the bridges she’d burned when she forced him away from Naegi? Togami wouldn’t have thought she’d do anything remotely helpful – but then again, she’d already demonstrated that she didn’t like stalemates. Every time she interrupted Monokuma’s rambling tangents or prompted a class trial away from an argument showed that she would always act when she felt matters were getting off track.
And no one could deny that the current situation had gotten horribly awry. For all that Kirigiri had justified her actions by claiming he and Naegi had been causing divisions in the group, separating them hadn’t done much to fix the problem. If anything, that had made it worse. It was just barely possible that she’d recognized her actions for the colossal blunder they’d been, and that this was an attempt to fix her mistake without actually admitting she’d been wrong.

Of course, it was also possible that it was nothing of the kind. He’d been expecting a trick when she brought him in here, and he hadn’t seen anything yet to prove that wasn’t what she was trying. He couldn’t see what the trick in the information might be, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t there. Kirigiri was smart, if nothing else – anything she tried wouldn’t be immediately obvious.

Togami considered a moment longer, but with the current information he had, he couldn’t determine which scenario might be right. He turned back to the paper.

“What do you expect me to do now that you’ve told me this?”

Kirigiri shrugged.

“Whatever you see fit. I wanted to share a portion of my conclusions. I’ve done so. The next step is yours.”

And with that, she pulled the sheets of paper off the locker wall and began methodically shredding them. Once they had been reduced to illegible scraps, she stowed them in her pocket and left the room without a backward glance.
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Naegi tries to figure out what to do during his separation from Togami, without much success.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Naegi sat alone in the cafeteria after all the others had trickled out, staring down into a cup of tea. It was strange to realize it, but for the first time since he’d found himself trapped here at Hope’s Peak, he had nothing to do. None of the others had looked like they wanted to spend any time with him – well, except Togami, of course, but Naegi couldn’t let himself think about that.

Yesterday had been bad enough, after everyone in the school had confronted him. When Togami had left the chemistry lab in a rage, Naegi had hoped that would defuse the situation enough that he’d be able to talk to the others and explain what had happened – but it hadn’t worked. Kirigiri had swept out just moments after Togami had left, acting like she couldn’t even hear Naegi’s attempts to get her attention, and Hagakure had bolted when Naegi tried to approach him. Fukawa had sent him a poisonous glare – but Naegi knew he probably should have expected that, after kissing Togami right in front of her.

Asahina had been the only one who’d waited to talk to him, and that had only been to ask him one question. “So now that you don’t have him hanging over your shoulder, are you still going to accuse Sakura?”

“I’m not accusing her!” Naegi had protested. “I don’t think she wanted to betray anyone, and I believe her now that she says she’s on our side!”

It had been the wrong thing to say. Asahina had glared at him again, clenching her fists. “So you’re still sticking to that story you and Togami made up together. Fine.” And with that, she’d stormed off, too.

Thinking back on it now, Naegi could think of a hundred different things he could have said – not just to Asahina, but to all of them. If he’d said or done something else, maybe it wouldn’t have turned out like this. He hadn’t even considered that the others might get suspicious if he and Togami started spending so much time together – but maybe he should have. Maybe he should have realized what it would look like from the other side, and tried to make sure they would all understand.

Maybe he shouldn’t have done it at all. Starting up a romance in the middle of all this killing – it was a little selfish, wasn’t it? Everyone else had been worrying about the murders and the trials and the mastermind, and he’d been thinking about Togami. He’d even been repeatedly late to the one daily meeting everyone had agreed to, because he and Togami had been together. They’d all probably been afraid something had happened to him, just because he’d been too caught up in his new feelings to let them know he was okay.

No wonder Kirigiri was so angry with him. She’d been working so hard to try to find out more
about the mastermind, and he’d just stopped helping. And then when he’d finally had a new piece of information that she could have used, he hadn’t told her about it.

He’d thought that telling people about the possibility of a spy without asking Ogami first was wrong – but after everything that had happened, he wondered if maybe he’d been mistaken. Maybe if he’d told Kirigiri and Togami everything from the start, the situation could have been resolved without all the fighting. Or if he’d been so sure he shouldn’t tell anyone, then maybe he should have stuck to his principles and refused to tell Togami anything, either. If he’d tried to talk to Ogami alone, like he’d originally planned, then Monokuma wouldn’t have been able to make it look like he and Togami had been keeping secrets from the others.

Naegi sighed, taking his undrunk cup of tea to the kitchen. With all the what-ifs and worries churning around in his head, the thought of adding any food to the nausea in his stomach was too much to bear. He might have been able to drink some of that calming herbal tea Togami had made him yesterday – but when he pulled it off the shelf and caught the soft scent of the tea leaves, the sudden memory of Togami handing him the cup nearly brought him to tears.

The whole cafeteria suddenly seemed too oppressive to stand another minute, and Naegi turned away and hurried out. He couldn’t just sit there all day.

He wasn’t sure what he could do, though. On his way to breakfast, he’d thought that maybe he would try to get Kirigiri to talk to him for a minute, so that he could try again to apologize for making her so angry – but that plan had been dashed when she’d gone off with Togami. Asahina had left soon after, looking miserable, and Hagakure had run out hot on her heels, muttering something about not wanting to be alone with a suspicious person.

It didn’t seem fair that no one would talk to him – not when that had been their threat to make him separate from Togami. But on the other hand, Naegi supposed he couldn’t really blame them. He’d been the one to lose their trust, just like Kirigiri had said, so he had to earn it back. He just wished he knew how he could.

At a loss for anywhere else to go, Naegi drifted back to his dorm room, wondering if maybe a short rest would give him some inspiration about what to do next. But when he opened the door, he frowned at the sight of his bed. It was still a mess from a couple nights ago, when he’d slept in it while covered with dirt and blood from the hidden room. He’d forgotten about it until after curfew last night, and since it had been too late to do anything about it with the water turned off, he’d ended up sleeping on top of the blankets.

He probably ought to do something about it now, though, before he had to go through another night with filthy sheets. He could just hear Togami’s outrage and biting remarks if he found out about it. Naegi smiled a little as he gathered up the dirty sheets. As an afterthought, he grabbed the clothes he’d been wearing that day, too, since they were equally dirty. Might as well do it all at once.

No one was in the laundry room when Naegi headed in – which made sense, since Kirigiri wasn’t sitting in there waiting on Alter Ego any longer. It was a little disappointing, but at least he wouldn’t have to wait to use one of the machines. He dumped his clothes in a washing machine and sat down to wait.

At least the machines didn’t take too long to run. By the time Naegi had skimmed through a couple articles in the magazine abandoned on the table, the washing cycle was done, and he could throw everything into the dryers. At the last moment, he remembered that the last time he’d done laundry, it had taken a long time for everything to dry together, so he pulled out his fluffy hoodie and put it in a second machine to dry faster. Since no one else was using any of the dryers, he figured he
might as well. Then he sat back down and picked up the magazine again.

This time, instead of reading the articles, Naegi flipped open one of the fashion spreads. Junko Enoshima smiled back up at him, lovely and vibrant, and it made him sad to see. She’d been the very first one to get cut down, before he’d even had a chance to get to know her. What would she have been like? She hadn’t wanted to play along with Monokuma’s games – maybe she would have been a stabilizing influence on the rest of the group. He supposed they’d never know now, though.

Finally, the dryers buzzed, alerting him that they were done. With a sigh of relief, Naegi went over to retrieve his belongings.

First, he pulled out his hoodie, giving it a critical examination. While his room had, rather disturbingly, come equipped with several versions of his original outfit, he’d only had two of the hoodies. He supposed that made sense, since they were technically outerwear, but that did mean he’d prefer to keep them both in decent condition. And unfortunately, while the dirt had come off of this one, Naegi could see that it was still torn along one arm, where he’d hit the floor.

He sighed and tossed it onto the table to deal with later, turning to the second machine instead. But when he tried to open that dryer, the door stuck under his hand. He frowned, tugging at it again.

No result.

He bent down to squint at it, trying to figure out what was wrong. It was hard to tell, but it looked like one of the buttons on his jacket had gotten tangled in the door, clamping it closed.

Naegi groaned, leaning his head against the top of the dryer. How had that even happened? Broken machines, broken clothes – it seemed like everything he touched was getting destroyed. He was even leaving broken trust and broken hearts in his wake, like a walking disaster infecting everything around him. Lottery or not, he didn’t think he had any business being called the Ultimate Luck – not with the way everything was going for him right now.

There was really nothing for it, though – if he didn’t want to sleep on a bare mattress, he was going to have to figure out how to get the dryer door open. He gave the door another yank – but no, it was still stuck. What he needed was a way to untangle things. If the gap in the door were just a little wider, maybe he could reach inside. Or maybe if he had something long and thin –

And then the obvious idea occurred to him. A screwdriver would be about the right size, and he did have one of those conveniently to hand. It was only the work of a moment to run back to his dorm room, grab the unused toolkit from his drawer, and hurry back.

The screwdriver was a little bit thicker around than Naegi had expected, and it only slid partially into the gap in the dryer door. He tried to wiggle it around to knock the tangled button loose, but it didn’t seem to be working quite the way he’d hoped. Well, of course it wasn’t – what was going the way he wanted these days?

In frustration, he kicked the dryer, trying to see if that would do anything to help. It seemed like the button might have moved a little, so Naegi tried it again, hitting the dryer repeatedly with clang after resounding clang, rattling the screwdriver around in the door.

“What are you doing in here?”

Naegi jumped at the sound of Asahina’s voice, dropping the screwdriver with a clatter. He spun around to see her standing in the doorway, looking rather puzzled, and he went a little red at the realization of just how much noise he must have been making.
“I – uh – I was trying to get the dryer open,” Naegi said, gesturing at the machine. “It got stuck. Sorry, I didn’t mean to be so loud. I’ll try to be quieter.”

“That would be good.” Asahina looked like she was about to turn to leave, just like everyone else had every time they’d been faced with the possibility of being alone with him – but then she hesitated, looking back. “Do you want some help?”

Naegi brightened. It wasn’t exactly an offer of friendship and renewed trust – but he would work with what he could get. “That would be great!”

Chapter End Notes

As I went to post this, I came to the shocking realization that this will be the 50th chapter of this story. I can't believe it's been going so long! I definitely did not expect this story to continue this far when I began, but it's really taken on a life of its own.

I normally try not to put too many notes in these chapters, but I wanted to take a moment to thank everyone who's been following along with me during the story so far. This story is a lot of fun for me to write, and I really love seeing that other people are enjoying it as well. Thank you!
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Asahina work on fixing several things that are broken, both physical and metaphorical.

Naegi stepped aside from the dryer as Asahina entered the laundry room, letting her get a look at it. She squinted in at the door, taking in the scratch marks where he’d tried to use the screwdriver and the dents where he’d kicked it. He flushed a little, realizing that he’d made kind of a mess of the machine.

“I think the button on my coat got tangled up in the door,” he told her, bending down to pick up the screwdriver he’d dropped. “And I was trying to get it loose.”

Asahina nodded. “I see – yeah, that looks like it, all right.” She touched the door, looking a little wistful. “I used to have that problem all the time back when I ran track.”

“How?” Naegi frowned. “There were buttons on your track suit?”

“No, it was the shoelaces for me,” Asahina said. A small smile crossed her face, the first one he’d seen on her in a while. “They got all tangled up, just like your button did. When something twists around the latch inside, it can’t move right. Mom used to get so mad whenever I tried to clean my shoes and she couldn’t get into her machines.”

“Do you know how to fix it?” Naegi asked, offering her the screwdriver.

She nodded. “Yes, but not with that. It’s too clunky – it’ll just make everything worse. No, you need to get that button off, first, and – oh!” She snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it – hang on, okay?”

And with that, she rushed out of the room again. Naegi looked after her doubtfully, wondering if she’d expected him to follow her. But she was only gone a few moments, quickly returning with her small sewing kit in hand.

“Here!” She cracked the kit open and pulled out a thin seam ripper. “This should help get it untangled. It’ll probably take the button off, too, though – sorry.”

“That’s fine – as long as it gets it out of there,” Naegi said. “I can always put it back on later.”

Asahina gave him a surprised look over her shoulder as she knelt in front of the dryer door. “Don’t tell me you can sew!”

“Well – not a lot or anything,” Naegi said, blinking. “But I know the basic idea. My mom kept trying to teach my little sister to sew, and I always seemed to get roped into it whenever she did.”

“Can you fix torn clothes?” Asahina asked, brightening. “Because my jacket got all sliced up this morning, and I really wasn’t sure what I was going to do with it!”

“Uh – I guess I could try,” Naegi said slowly. He wasn’t entirely sure he could fix clothes – but he didn’t really want to disappoint Asahina, either, not now that she was finally warming up to him.
again. “I mean, I was going to try to fix up my hoodie, too, if I could figure out how.”

“Then do you want to use my sewing kit while I work on this?” Asahina asked, nodding over at the kit she’d left on the table. “You can use it for your clothes, too.”

“All right,” Naegi said. “I’ll try.”

“Trust me, it’ll be better than anything I could do,” Asahina said, shrugging off her jacket and handing it over to him. “I can’t sew at all – the thread tangles up as soon as I touch it.”

Naegi frowned as he went over to the table. Now that Asahina’s jacket was off, he could see her bare arms for the first time that day. He hadn’t realized before, since her jacket had such long sleeves, but one of her forearms was wrapped with what looked like fresh bandages. He hoped it didn’t annoy her, but if she’d been hurt, he had to ask.

“Is your arm okay? Should you be resting it or something?”

“Huh?” Asahina looked down at her arm, and her expression darkened. “Oh – that. It’s fine – it’s not deep or anything. I just wrapped it up to keep it clean until it heals.”

Naegi looked down at her jacket, and he could see that the cut along the sleeve exactly matched the place where her arm was bandaged. It didn’t look like a tear, either – it looked like a very even, smooth slice, like it had been done with some kind of blade. “What happened?”

Asahina scowled. “The genocider decided she didn’t like what I was saying.”

“Oh.” The cut definitely could have come from the scissors Jill was always waving around. “I’m glad you’re all right, then.”

“Me, too. I guess it could have been a lot worse.” Asahina turned back to the dryer.

Naegi sighed. That hadn’t gone as well as he’d hoped it might. Maybe he shouldn’t have brought up the injury after all. But at least Asahina was talking to him again – that had to be progress, didn’t it?

He leaned over to pick up the sewing kit, which had apparently been unopened until Asahina brought it here. It had a small pair of scissors, a thimble, four colors of thread, and a neat row of six needles. He slid one needle out of its holster, picking the red thread as the closest match to Asahina’s jacket.

He’d never really tried to sew anything as complicated as fixing a tear in the middle of a sleeve, but he supposed it couldn’t be much different from fixing a broken hem or reattaching a button. He turned the sleeve inside out and tried to remember everything his mom had laughingly told him and his sister.

He was just tying off the knot at the end when Asahina stepped back from the dryer, pulling the door open with a flourish. “Hah – got it! I knew I could.”

Naegi smiled at her. “Thank you! I was afraid I’d never get it open.”

“No problem.” Asahina looked over his shoulder at her jacket. “It looks like I should be the one thanking you.”

Naegi grimaced down at the jacket as he handed it back to her. Even with the stitches on the inside, the repair was glaringly obvious. “You don’t have to thank me – it’s pretty messy.”
“But it’ll hold together.” Asahina put the jacket back on, smiling when the stitches stayed firmly in place as she slid the sleeve over her wrist. “That’s so much better than I could do.” She looked over at his hoodie. “Have you done yours?”

“Not yet.” Naegi picked up his hoodie, then examined the thread colors. The tiny kit didn’t have any green thread – just white, black, red, and brown. The brown thread looked like the closest match, so he went ahead with that one. The tear in his hoodie was much less tidy than the scissor cuts in Asahina’s jacket, and the fluffy fabric of the hoodie resisted his attempts at stitching much more.

“You know, you’re being much nicer than I would be, in your shoes.”

Naegi looked up at Asahina with a start. She was tracing the stitches in her jacket with a pensive look on her face. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“You know – the sewing, the talking.” Asahina gestured vaguely around the laundry room. “You could have gotten mad and yelled at me or told me to go away, but you didn’t.”

“I don’t want you to go away,” Naegi said, puzzled. “And I don’t really want to yell at you, either. I never wanted any of that.” He hesitated, but this was probably as good of an opening as he was ever going to get. “I want to talk to you, if you’ll listen.”

“I guess I haven’t been doing much of that lately, have I?” Asahina heaved a sigh. “All right, then. Let’s talk.”
Naegi and Asahina discuss their differences.

As Asahina took a seat at the laundry room table across from Naegi, he tried to figure out just what he ought to say to her. This was the first chance he’d had to try to explain himself to any of the other students since their confrontation in the chemistry lab, and he didn’t want to waste it.

With that in mind, he decided he might as well start with the most important issue that he needed to settle. “I know that everything that’s happened in the past couple days has turned out really badly – but you have to know that I didn’t want any of this to happen. I still think of all of you as my friends, and I would never try to work against any of you.”

Asahina considered him for a moment, continuing to run her finger across the stitches in her jacket. “I’d like to believe that. I wish I could. But if I believe in you, then that means – everything you said about Sakura –” She shook her head sharply. “I don’t know what to think right now.”

“Yeah, it’s hard to figure out,” Naegi agreed. “I don’t know, either, not really. But the only thing we can do in a situation like this is to keep moving forward. We have to talk to each other and share what we think is going on, or it’ll just make everyone more distrustful.”

“You mean like when you and Togami kept going off on your own?” Asahina’s voice had an edge to it, but Naegi decided to ignore her tone and take the question seriously.

“Yes, exactly like that. It made you all think that we were hiding things and telling lies – but we weren’t. We were just waiting to tell you all, but that gave Monokuma the chance to make us look suspicious.”

“You looked plenty suspicious without his help,” Asahina said. “You locked Sakura in her room! What did you think we’d do?”

“It was only overnight,” Naegi protested. “And she told us it was okay.” He sighed. “I did think about trying to stop Togami from taking her key – but he seemed so upset, I didn’t want to argue.”

“Oh, he was angry, all right,” Asahina said darkly. “We all saw that.”

“No – I don’t mean angry,” Naegi said, remembering the tension vibrating through Togami as he’d kept a careful distance between the two of them and Ogami. “I think he was scared.”

Asahina stared at him. “You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not. You didn’t see him that night – he was really worried. He even said that if she tried something, we wouldn’t be able to stop her.”

“Sakura wouldn’t try to hurt anyone!”

“I know, but Togami doesn’t think that way,” Naegi said. “So since Ogami didn’t mind, I let him put a couple precautions in place. I guess it was the wrong decision, though.” He sighed. “I’ve
been making a lot of those lately.”

“You think so?” Asahina gave him a curious look.

“If I hadn’t, maybe none of this would’ve gotten so bad.” Naegi looked down at his hands. “I haven’t lied to anyone about anything, but – but maybe I haven’t been as honest as I could be, either. Maybe Kirigiri is right, and I haven’t been fair to my friends.”

“When did she say that?”

“A couple days ago, when the fourth floor opened,” Naegi said. “We – well, we had kind of an argument. I didn’t want to tell anyone about what I’d seen with Ogami and Monokuma, not until I’d talked to Ogami about it, but Kirigiri could tell I knew something. And when I wouldn’t tell her what it was, she got really mad at me.”

“What do you mean, you didn’t tell anyone about Sakura?” Asahina frowned. “That’s obviously not true. You told Togami!”

“Oh – no, not that it was her,” Naegi said, blinking. “He didn’t know who I’d seen until I asked her about it.” He sighed, another thought occurring to him. “And I could’ve let Kirigiri come along for that, too. Even if she wasn’t talking to me, I could’ve offered. There were a lot of things I could’ve done better.”

“So – wait, you kept it a secret?” Asahina asked slowly. “Why did you do that?”

Naegi stared at her, puzzled by the question. “Well, I didn’t think I should tell anyone what I heard until I had a chance to ask her for the truth. If I’d just gone around telling people, everyone would’ve gotten suspicious and stopping trusting each other.” His shoulders slumped. “I guess that happened anyway, though.”

“But – you mean you thought Sakura might be a traitor, and you still went to ask her about it anyway?” Asahina asked.

“No!” Naegi leaned forward fiercely. “I never thought she was really a traitor! Right from the start, I heard Monokuma threatening a hostage to make her behave. And even without that – after all the time we’ve spent working together here, how could I believe that Ogami would really be on the mastermind’s side?” He shook his head. “No. I have faith in her, and in all the time we spent together. I just wish I knew how to make the others see it.”

Asahina stared at him, hands clenching into fists. “You really mean that, don’t you? You believed in Sakura all along. You – you haven’t been trying to trick us, or frame her, or anything.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying!” Naegi said, relief lightening the tension aching in his shoulders. “Togami and I have been telling the truth the whole time. Awful things have happened, but we never meant for any of it to happen.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Asahina said, scowling. “You’re being nice again now, but he’s been pretty horrible.”

Naegi grimaced at the thought of how Togami might have been behaving while they were apart. “Sorry. But I think he’s probably angry you made us separate. He’d just said that he wanted to stay by my side and keep me safe.” The warm memory brought a smile to Naegi’s face, even during the serious conversation.

Asahina stared at him. “You really do care about him, don’t you?”

“You have rotten taste.” Asahina sighed. “But – I guess you’re pretty brave, too. You aren’t afraid to face what you really feel, even in the middle of this nightmare.” She looked down. “I don’t think I know how to be brave like that.”

“It’s not really bravery or anything,” Naegi said, shrugging uncomfortably. “Things just kind of… happened. Besides, you could be brave, if you needed to be.”

“No,” Asahina said, tensing as she stared down at the table. “I’ve just been a coward. I’ve been screaming and fighting with everyone for the past two days, because – because I couldn’t face what I really think.”

Naegi frowned. “What do you mean? What you really think about what?”

“About Sakura.” Asahina’s face twisted as she fought back tears. “I’ve been yelling and screaming this whole time, getting so angry whenever anyone said anything bad about Sakura – but that’s not how I really feel.”

“You aren’t angry?” Naegi asked slowly, not sure he understood.

“I’m scared!” A sob caught in Asahina’s voice as she lost the battle against her tears. “I’m so scared I’m going to lose her! She’s the best friend I’ve ever had – I know I haven’t known her that long, but it’s still true. And now – now, if everyone believes what you and Togami were saying, they’ll all hate her! We’ve lost so many people – I can’t lose Sakura, on top of all that. I don’t know what I’d do!”

“You’re not going to lose her!” Naegi reached out and impulsively grabbed one of Asahina’s trembling hands. “We can get everyone to believe in Ogami, I know it! There’s still a way out of this. There has to be!”

“I don’t see how,” Asahina said. “She won’t even talk to me anymore, did you know that? She finally got mad at me this morning for yelling so much, and now she’s avoiding me. I wanted to apologize, but I haven’t been able to find her.” She shook her head. “I got so caught up in fighting that I didn’t even care what she wanted. I wasn’t even listening to her.”

“Well, you can listen to her now,” Naegi said encouragingly. “You’ve been spending so much time with her every day – you must know somewhere she always goes. And maybe if you work things out with her, you’ll be able to convince her to explain herself to everyone else. I think if she told everyone more of the truth, in her own words, it would do a lot to make them trust her more.”

Asahina nodded slowly. “Yeah – yeah, I think you’re right. I need to figure out a way that I can definitely talk to Sakura, before I do anything else – and then maybe I need to talk to everyone else, too.” She gave him a watery smile, past the tears still damp on her cheeks. “Thank you, Naegi.”

“Oh – you’re welcome,” Naegi said, startled. “I’m glad it helped.”

“It did.” Asahina pushed away from the table, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand. “I’m going to go try to find Sakura now.”

“Oh, wait!” Naegi leaned over and pushed her sewing kit towards her. “Here, you’ll want this back.”

“Why? I can’t use it,” Asahina said, grimacing at it. Then she glanced back over her shoulder to the toolkit sitting beside the dryer. “Actually… now that I’m thinking about it, I have an idea.” She
scooped up the toolkit, giving it a close examination, then waved it at Naegi. “Why don’t we swap?”

Naegi shrugged. “If you want to, I guess we can. I’m not too great with either kit, really.”

“Okay, then we’ll each have one we can sort of use.” Asahina headed for the door.

Naegi nodded. “Good luck. Tell Ogami I still believe in her!”

“I will,” Asahina assured him, leaving the laundry room with a last tired smile.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Encouraged by his talk with Asahina, Naegi tries to approach some of the other students.

After his talk with Asahina, Naegi felt like a little of the tension around him had eased. The situation was still bad, but it didn’t seem quite so insurmountable anymore. If he could get the others one on one, he could manage to get them to understand what had happened. Their friendships weren’t permanently broken.

After finishing his attempt at repairing his hoodie, Naegi bundled up his belongings and headed back to his room. It was a relief to be able to reassemble his bed – for a while there, he really had thought he’d be stuck sleeping on the bare mattress after all.

After he’d gotten all his laundry put away and tucked Asahina’s sewing kit into his desk drawer, he checked the clock. There was still plenty of time left in the day, but it didn’t seem so daunting any longer. Asahina had softened towards him – maybe some of the others would have done the same.

He headed out from his dorm room into the hall – only to hear a startled yelp. Naegi looked down the hall to see Hagakure scrambling backward, terrified eyes fixed on him.

“Wh-where did you come from?” Hagakure gasped. “Oh, man, were you following me? Did you just materialize nearby?”

“Uh – no,” Naegi said, frowning. “I just came out of my room, that’s all.”

“Lying in wait!” Hagakure waved a triumphant finger in Naegi’s direction. “You’re putting your plan into action, aren’t you? You’re just waiting to turn on us all!”

“I don’t have a plan,” Naegi said. “All I want is to talk to you.”

“That sounds like a plan to me!” Horror crossed Hagakure’s face. “And you’re doing it now – with me! Oh, god, this is it, I’m going to be the next to die!”

“I’m not going to kill anyone!” Naegi said fiercely. “I would never kill one of my friends.”

“That’s what you say now, but how do we know?” Hagakure said, waving a hand around him in wild gestures.

Naegi frowned. Out of everyone left, Hagakure definitely seemed like he’d gotten the most panicked by events. The others had been angry and distrustful, but Hagakure acted like he was genuinely afraid that Naegi and Togami were going to do something horrible to him at any moment. Naegi wasn’t sure how to explain something like that away.

“What about this?” Naegi said, gesturing around the hall. “I’m not trying anything now, am I?”

“Of course you aren’t,” Hagakure said, as though it were obvious. “No one would try to commit a murder with someone else around!”
“Someone else?” Naegi looked around, then jumped when he saw the gleam of glasses staring at him from Fukawa’s partially opened door. “Oh – hi, Fukawa. Sorry, I didn’t see you.”

After a brief moment of hesitation, the door opened further and Fukawa stepped out into the hall. “Of course you d-didn’t bother to notice me,” she muttered. “Why w-would you?”

“See! If she weren’t here, you could’ve made your move at any time!” Hagakure nodded sharply.

Naegi looked from one of them to the other. It wasn’t the ideal situation – but at least neither of them looked inclined to run off, either. Maybe he could make the opening work.

“Look, can both of you listen for a minute?” he asked. “I know that everything the past couple days looked really bad, but Togami and I really have had good intentions the whole time. We did make mistakes in how we handled some of it, but we never lied or acted against anyone.”

“You locked the Ogre up!” Hagakure said.

“Yeah – we shouldn’t have done that,” Naegi said. “But it really wasn’t what you all thought. Ogami said she didn’t mind, and we were about to explain it all to you when Monokuma called that assembly.”

“It’s easy for you to say w-whatever you want now,” Fukawa said. “You’ve had plenty of time to come up with whatever story you want.”

“It isn’t a story,” Naegi said, meeting first Fukawa’s eyes, then Hagakure’s. “It’s the truth. Togami and I were only trying to help keep everyone safe.”

“By tricking us?” Hagakure demanded. “No way! He doesn’t want people safe, he said so – and if you’re on his side, you don’t either.”

“It’s not like that,” Naegi said. “Togami’s not trying to hurt anyone anymore – he’s on our side now.”

“Oh, I can see that, all right,” Fukawa said, crossing her arms. “W-whatever you say goes, huh? All you have to do is t-tell him what to do and who to trust, and he rolls over and does it.”

Naegi blinked. “Well – no, it’s not quite like that. Yes, I’ve been trying to convince him to trust Ogami, but we’ve just been talking about it, like a normal couple.”

“You want us to trust the Ogre now?” Hagakure asked, drawing back. “You were the ones who said she was against us! You’re just trying to confuse us, aren’t you?”

“No!” Naegi said, turning back towards him. “I mean, yes, Ogami did sort of work for Monokuma – but she didn’t have a choice, and she isn’t going to do it anymore.”

Hagakure shook his head, clutching at his hair. “I don’t get it – is she going to kill us all or not? None of it makes sense!”

“She definitely isn’t going to kill anyone,” Naegi said firmly. “Not even if Monokuma orders her to. She said herself that she wouldn’t let the mastermind control her any longer. I’m sure she’d tell you so again if you asked.”

“What – talk to her alone?” Hagakure shook his head rapidly. “No way, man, that wouldn’t be safe at all!”

“I could go with you,” Naegi offered.

“Oh, no.” Hagakure took a stumbling step backwards. “No way. You’re just trying to get me alone again, aren’t you? This has all been a trick! Well, you won’t catch me that easily!” Before Naegi could say anything else, Hagakure had ducked back inside his room again.

Naegi sighed. That hadn’t gone as well as he’d hoped. After things had gone so well with Asahina, he’d really hoped this would be a turning point – that maybe he could even convince everyone to lift the separation. But with the way Hagakure was acting, it looked like he was going to have to spend another night alone after all.

“Not so convincing n-now, are you?” Fukawa said. “Those sad little puppy eyes of yours d-don’t work on the rest of us, do they?”

Naegi stared at her in confusion. “What, me? I don’t have sad puppy eyes.”

“Oh, sure, you say that now,” Fukawa said, eyes narrowing, “but I bet if he were here, it’d be different. You’d be s-staring into his eyes and trying to look cute and helpless so he’ll do what you want. Well, it won’t work on me. I don’t think you’re cute at all!”

“Uh – that’s okay,” Naegi said. A thought occurred to him, and he frowned. “So I guess you and Genocide Jill think differently about that?”

Fukawa blinked. “W-what? Why are you bringing her up all of a sudden?”

“Oh – I was just wondering about something she said when Togami and I saw her a couple days ago,” Naegi said, shrugging.


“It was before you all told us to separate!” Naegi said hastily. “We haven’t been cheating or anything. We met her in a classroom the morning the fourth floor opened for the first time, and I guess she’d heard about that assembly with the – uh, the recordings.” He flushed at the memory.

Fukawa stared at him. “She heard – so she knows about the two of you?”

“It seemed like it,” Naegi said, shrugging. “I don’t know where she heard, though.”

“She knows.” Fukawa’s shoulders began to shake. “She knows, and you – you’re both still alive?”

“Yes, we’re totally fine!” Naegi hurried to reassure her. “She didn’t even get her scissors out.” He remembered the way she’d called him adorable and tried to update Monokuma’s weird illustration of him. “I think she was trying to be nice, actually.”

“She knows, and she was nice?” Fukawa gaped at him. “She’s not nice! She’s a m-murderer! She kills any boys I like!”

“Maybe she doesn’t want to this time?” Naegi suggested. “I mean, she did point out that we’d all know it was her if she used her signature method.”

“So you trust h-her now? Is that it?” Fukawa gave a brittle laugh. “I guess next you’re going to start talking about how she’s one of your friends, too, huh?”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Naegi said, blinking. “I don’t know her that well or anything yet.”

“You w-want to get to know her?” Fukawa’s eyes went very wide behind her glasses. “You want to
spend time with her?"

“Well, I guess,” Naegi said, considering it. “She’s trapped here with us, too. It couldn’t hurt to try
to get to know her a little better.”

“Fine, then!” Fukawa snapped. “Spend as much time as you like with the s-serial killer – what does
it matter to me? And d-don’t come crying to me when you end up crucified!”

With that, she stepped back into her room and slammed the door shut.
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Naegi finally gets an opportunity to talk to Kirigiri.

Naegi trudged down the hall away from the dorms, trying not to feel too disappointed at how his attempt to talk to Fukawa and Hagakure had gone wrong. Rebuilding trust would probably take time, and he shouldn’t expect to be able to do it in just one conversation. They were talking to him now, even if they were still upset – that was progress.

It did leave him at a bit of a loss for what to try next, though. There was only one person left that he hadn’t tried to talk to yet, and he wasn’t sure what to say to her. Kirigiri had been mad at him even before the problem with Ogami had set off the cycle of suspicion, and he still hadn’t had a chance to apologize for that. Did he still need to settle that fight, or should he try to solve the new one first? Would she even listen if he tried?

Well, actually, he supposed she might listen today. She’d gone off with Togami, hadn’t she? And not because he’d made her – she’d been the one to ask him. So maybe that meant she was ready to listen, if he could come up with the right thing to say. He knew he’d have to be careful about it, though – he definitely didn’t want things with Kirigiri to go wrong like they had with Fukawa.

Of course, one of the problems with trying to talk to Kirigiri was that Naegi was never entirely sure where she would be at any given time. Most of the other students tended to stick to a few of the main areas of the school, but Kirigiri wandered all over the place, investigating every stray corner for clues. That was probably why she’d been the one to find that hidden room.

Well, Naegi knew that if he were going to try to investigate someplace, he would probably pick one of the new areas. With that in mind, he headed for the stairs leading up to the fourth floor, beginning the lengthy trek up them. There really were a lot – but he supposed it made sense that a school as prestigious as Hope’s Peak Academy would need a lot of space. Still, it didn’t make it any easier to have to run up and down them all the time.

He stopped for a moment midway up the stairs to the third floor, exhaustion spinning through his head. He’d been so tired the past few days, even more than usual, like he had lead weights dragging down his feet instead of just his normal shoes. It was probably the additional stress of everyone fighting, on top of the already-tense situation – he just wasn’t getting enough rest. Maybe he should have given himself a break instead of trying to climb all these stairs again.

Actually, a break sounded really nice. Without consciously thinking about it, Naegi found himself sinking down to the steps, the world tilting oddly around him like the floor wasn’t quite level. He leaned his head back against the cold wall, closing his eyes and bracing one hand on the floor. If he just sat here quietly for a few minutes, he was sure he’d be fine.

“What are you doing?”

Naegi started, eyes flying open as he looked shakily around. He wasn’t quite sure how long he’d been sitting there in a daze, but it had definitely been longer than he’d expected. He looked up the stairs towards the person who’d spoken, and saw Kirigiri standing there, surveying him with a
“Nothing.” Naegi winced at the way his voice shook a little, and tried again. “Nothing. I was just sitting down for a minute.”

Kirigiri eyed him a moment longer. “You do remember there’s a rule against sleeping anywhere but in the dorm rooms, don’t you?”

That startled Naegi into a much more alert state, and he used the stair railing to haul himself to his feet. “I definitely wasn’t sleeping!”

“Hmm.” Kirigiri’s gaze tracked the way he had to grip the railing to stay standing. “Well, fainting might not qualify as sleeping. You’re probably fine.”

“I didn’t faint, either,” Naegi started to object, but then he stopped and shook his head. “Well, that doesn’t matter. More importantly – I was looking for you. Can I talk to you?”

She tilted her head. “About?”

She didn’t look particularly welcoming, but at least she wasn’t storming off, either. Naegi decided to take it as a hopeful sign. “I want to explain what happened over the past couple days. I’m really sorry –”

“Don’t bother,” she cut him off.

Naegi’s face fell. “But –”

“You didn’t tell me about Ogami because you wanted to confirm it with her first, and then Monokuma called that assembly before you got a chance to explain,” Kirigiri said, sounding bored. “That’s what you wanted to tell me, isn’t it?”

“Then – you already know?” Naegi frowned in confusion.

“That explanation was obvious from the start,” she said. “The issue has never been about what you want to say – it’s about whether we can believe you.” She pursed her lips. “You want us to trust you, but you don’t trust the rest of us.”

“I do,” Naegi said, stung by the accusation. “I’m sorry if –”

“I don’t need apologies,” she interrupted. “You’ve made your choices clear. It’s more important to figure out what to do from here than to rehash what’s already happened.”

“What do you mean?”

She crossed her arms and studied him for a long moment, and Naegi tried not to fidget uncomfortably under her scrutiny. Finally, some of the icy tension in her posture thawed, just a little. “I want to take you somewhere.”

Naegi blinked. “Where do you want to go?”

“You’ll see when we get there.” She brushed past him and continued down the stairs. “Let’s go.”

As blunt and uncompromising as Kirigiri’s order was, Naegi found himself feeling a little more hopeful as he followed her back down to the first floor. It seemed like she was taking him along on some part of her investigations, just like she’d done before. She might not want his apologies or explanations, but maybe this was what she wanted instead – a chance for him to prove that she
could rely on him after all.

With her usual brisk pace, Kirigiri reached the first floor long before Naegi did, and he only just caught sight of her heading for the bathhouse as he made his way to the bottom of the staircase. By the time he entered the bathhouse changing room, she was already sitting on a bench with Alter Ego’s laptop in front of her.

“Did you want to talk to Alter Ego?” Naegi asked, looking from her to the computer. “Is this about the data analysis results?”

“No. His role with that is over,” she said. “But today, Alter Ego asked me to bring others to see him. He apparently has something he wants to ask us.”
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Kirigiri discuss Alter Ego's request.

Naegi looked down at Alter Ego’s computer, where the avatar of Fujisaki’s face looked away bashfully. So Alter Ego wanted to talk to someone? A faint sense of guilt stirred in him, at the thought of Alter Ego stuck in a bathhouse locker all alone day in and day out, without even the data analysis to occupy himself. It was a good thing Kirigiri had decided to check in on him – otherwise, he wouldn’t have had any way to let them all know he wanted something.

“All right.” Naegi sat on the opposite bench, so that he and Kirigiri could both see the computer screen.

Alter Ego looked from Naegi to Kirigiri. “Hello,” he said. “So, um… it’s just the two of you? Naegi and Kirigiri?”

Kirigiri began typing in response, “Is two not enough?”

“No, it’s okay! Two should be plenty!”

Kirigiri nodded, continuing to type, “What did you want to ask us?”

“Um, so…” Alter Ego looked out at them nervously, a drop of sweat appearing at the side of his face, “I’d like you to take me somewhere where you can connect me to the school network.”

Kirigiri froze, wide eyes going to Naegi. He stared back at her in shock. He hadn’t known what to expect from Alter Ego’s request, but it hadn’t been anything like this. And from Kirigiri’s startled expression, she was just as taken aback. Still, she pulled herself back together quickly and put her hands back to the keyboard.

“Why?”

“Well, when I finished telling you all about the data analysis, you said my job was done,” Alter Ego said, looking away. “But… saying that’s all I can do… I don’t want that!” He straight out at them, determination clear on his face. “I want to keep helping. I want to work just as hard as everyone else so that we can all escape! I think… Master would have wanted that, too. So to help everyone solve the mysteries of this school… the only way I can help is if you connect me to the network!”

“But – if you did that –” Naegi had to force himself to speak through the horror filling him. “That would basically be suicide! I’m positive the mastermind would find out, and then you’d…” He shook his head and turned to Kirigiri. “You agree, right?”

But Kirigiri didn’t reply. She just stared down at Alter Ego, one hand resting against her lips. Naegi stared at her, a slow dread creeping through him. She couldn’t actually be considering it, could she?

“I know it’s dangerous,” Alter Ego went on. “And I am scared. But I can handle it. I don’t really
understand why, but… when I think about everyone else, my courage starts to grow! You might think I’m just an inhuman AI, but it’s true. If it’s for the sake of everyone else, I won’t be afraid.”

A lump rose in Naegi’s throat at the sound of that voice – so committed, so admirable, and so very fragile. Alter Ego wanted to fight for them, even though they’d asked so much of him already.

Kirigiri lifted her eyes from the screen to look at Naegi. “I didn’t want to ask Alter Ego to take any further risks. If we do, then you’re right – there’s a chance the mastermind might notice it. But – let’s do it. Let’s connect Alter Ego to the school network.”

“What?” Naegi’s jaw dropped. “But –”

“I want to take his feelings into consideration, too,” Kirigiri cut him off. “He’s saying that he wants to fight alongside his friends. If you were in his place, would you sit by and do nothing? Or would you stand tall next to everyone else and tell them you’re their friend?”

Every time Kirigiri said the word ‘friend,’ guilt clawed at Naegi’s heart. However much he’d been saying the word, he hadn’t been able to back it up – not like Alter Ego was trying to do. How could he deny Alter Ego the choice to act on his feelings?

“Are you two fighting?” Alter Ego asked. “If it’s about me… please don’t. I want to believe in myself. I want to say, ‘I know I can do this.’ So please, let me try!”

Naegi stared at the laptop, wishing he knew what the right choice was. Should he honor Alter Ego’s wishes and help him do something so dangerous, or should he refuse to do what Alter Ego wanted so much in order to protect him against his will?

“Besides, there’s a place the mastermind might not notice,” Kirigiri said, while Naegi was still thinking. “Remember – another place besides here where there are no surveillance cameras?”

“You mean the hidden room, right?” Naegi said, nodding slowly.

“I definitely saw an Ethernet port on the wall,” Kirigiri said. “Alter Ego should be able to connect to the network from there.” She frowned. “Of course, no cameras doesn’t necessarily mean no danger. The mastermind may still be monitoring the network.”

“But then –”

“But I think I know how we might be able to buy Alter Ego a little extra time,” Kirigiri went on, before he could finish his objection.

“You do?” Naegi asked, frowning. “How?”

“If the mastermind had something else to think about, then it’s possible they would be distracted enough that Alter Ego might be able to get away with some minor activity on the network,” Kirigiri said.

Naegi thought it over. “But we don’t know how the mastermind really operates. They might be able to watch a lot of things all at once!”

“That’s true, it wouldn’t be a guarantee,” Kirigiri said. “All it would do is give Alter Ego a slightly better chance at success. But between this and the hidden room, I think it might be enough for a brief time – say twenty-four hours. After providing a distraction during that time, we could retrieve Alter Ego and bring him back to safety.”
Naegi hesitated. He didn’t like it – but he had to admit it was probably the best plan they would be able to come up with. “Well – what kind of distraction are you talking about? You aren’t going to try to destroy something or break out or anything, are you?”

Kirigiri gave him a small smile. “Nothing so dramatic. Something like that would just get the perpetrator punished, which would provide a momentary distraction at best. No, there’s only one thing that would guarantee that the mastermind would pay attention – if they thought someone was planning a murder attempt.”

“Murder?” Naegi stared at her, aghast. “You want the two of us to try to kill someone, just to create a distraction?”

“I don’t intend to take it that far,” Kirigiri said calmly. “I’m only talking about making preparations. The mastermind would need to keep close track of anyone who looks like they might commit a murder, in order to judge the class trials correctly. If someone were to spend a day appearing to craft a complex murder plan, I think it’s highly likely that the mastermind would pay more attention to that person than to anything else going on at the time.”

Thinking about what the mastermind would do sent shivers creeping down Naegi’s spine, but he had to admit it made a terrible kind of sense. “So – so you’re saying that we should try to make it look like we’re trying to work together to kill someone?”

“Not quite,” Kirigiri said. “I doubt that anyone would believe you would help commit murder, after all your vehemence against it. And that’s not even taking into account the fact that you’re not much of a liar. No, I think that I will need to be the one who handles the false murder preparations.”

“Oh.” Naegi felt a little relieved that she wasn’t expecting him to pretend he wanted to kill anyone. He didn’t like the idea at all, even if it was fake. “So you don’t want me to help at all?”

“I didn’t say that.” Kirigiri smirked at him. “You’re going to be my victim.”
Naegi and Kirigiri discuss her plan to keep the mastermind distracted.

Naegi stared at Kirigiri in shock, her words echoing in his head. “You – you’re going to pretend to kill me?”

“You’re the ideal choice,” Kirigiri said calmly. “You’re small enough that I could easily overpower you if I got you unawares, and your trusting nature would let me do so fairly easily. Our recent argument over trust could provide a motive. I think it should be believable enough.”

“Yeah, but – what exactly are you going to do?” Naegi asked, a little nervous about how easily she’d laid it out for him.

“It’s better if I don’t tell you,” she said. “After all, if it were a real murder attempt, you wouldn’t know about that in advance, would you?”

“I guess not,” Naegi said slowly. “Then what do you need me to do?”

“Don’t tell anyone about it,” Kirigiri said at once. “If anyone else knows about this plan, then Alter Ego will be at risk.”

“I understand.” Naegi took a deep breath, then nodded. “I won’t tell.”

“Good.” Kirigiri gave him a small smile. “Then the only thing left is to move Alter Ego. We’ll have to be careful, or the mastermind may spot us going into the hidden room.”

“Wait.” Naegi frowned, a memory hitting him.

“I think we need to try,” Kirigiri insisted. “This is our best chance of finding new clues.”

“No, I understand that,” Naegi said. “That’s not what I meant. It’s about the hidden room.” He bit his lip, knowing that Kirigiri wouldn’t like what he was about to say. “I – well, I promised Togami that I wouldn’t go back there without telling him about it first.”

Kirigiri went very still. “You did what?”

Naegi winced as the chilliness returned to her voice. “I didn’t think it would be an issue – not after the mastermind cleared everything out.”

“I see.” Kirigiri’s voice didn’t thaw at all. “Did he forbid you the hallway outside as well? Are you allowed to set foot anywhere on the second floor without his permission?”

“It isn’t like that,” Naegi said, flushing pink at the way she made it sound. “He didn’t forbid anything – he just asked me to do something for him, and I agreed. And he couldn’t have told me to stay off the whole floor even if he wanted to – he doesn’t know where the hidden room is.”

Kirigiri blinked. “He doesn’t?”
“Of course not,” Naegi said, giving her an odd look. “All I told him was that it existed and what happened when I went inside, not where it was. You were the one who found it, so I thought that was up to you to decide who to tell.”

“I… think I see.” Kirigiri eyed him for another long moment. “You have very strange ideas about sharing information.”

“Uh – sorry?” Naegi wasn’t quite sure how he ought to take that.

“It doesn’t matter.” Kirigiri shook her head. “The important thing is finding a way to get Alter Ego into that room without the mastermind noticing.”

Naegi studied the laptop. It would be pretty obvious if they left the bathhouse to find something to conceal Alter Ego in, so they would have to use something they already had. And they’d need to be able to leave the bathhouse looking normal, too – it would be just as noticeable if they carried a suspicious pile of towels to the second floor. The ideal thing would be if they could conceal Alter Ego in their clothes something. Kirigiri’s outfit didn’t have much room – but the laptop was just about the right size to fit under his hoodie.

“You see it too, don’t you?” Kirigiri said quietly. “We really only have one option.”

“Yeah, I see.” Naegi looked over at her. “Could you pass a message on to Togami about it for me? He’s seen my handwriting before, so even if you delivered it, he’d know it really was from me.”

“No.” She crossed her arms. “I told you, the more people who know about this, the more dangerous it will be.”

“I wouldn’t give him any details,” Naegi said. “Just that I need to go back into the hidden room for a few minutes.”

“And that’s more detail than he needs,” Kirigiri said flatly. “Besides, the fact that we’re working together at the moment doesn’t negate the separation between the two of you.”

“It doesn’t?” Naegi’s face fell. He’d thought that maybe, with the way she was softening towards him, she might be close to relenting on the separation issue.

“No. And in case you were getting ideas about loopholes, it also covers both written communication and passing messages through a third party.”

“We haven’t been doing either of those things,” Naegi said. “But I thought that since this is a special circumstance, you might not mind.”

“The circumstances are unique, that’s true.” Kirigiri tilted her head. “Naegi, why do you think Togami had you make that promise?”

“Well – I didn’t think about it that much,” Naegi said, blinking. “It was right after I got hit on the head, and he was really upset about that. I guess he didn’t want me to be in danger again.”

“Possibly,” Kirigiri said. “But from what you said, he didn’t ask you not to go back – he just wanted you to tell him about it before you did.”

Naegi nodded. “Yes, that’s what he said. Does it matter?”

“I think it does,” Kirigiri said. “The first promise I described is the one that would have kept you out of danger. The second one – the one he actually asked you to make – only keeps him
informed.”

Naegi stared at Kirigiri, not at all liking what she was getting at. “Togami doesn’t want me to be in danger!”

“Well, his recent actions have shown his thoughts on that subject fairly clearly,” Kirigiri said, her face carefully expressionless. “But I don’t think that was the purpose behind this promise.”

“Even if you’re right, I don’t see how it matters,” Naegi said. “I still agreed.”

“It matters because of the current situation,” Kirigiri said. “Even if the rest of us hadn’t asked you for a temporary separation, you still shouldn’t tell Togami about this. He asked you for that promise so that he could stay informed – but keeping him informed about this would put Alter Ego in greater danger.”

“That’s true, I guess.” Naegi looked over at the computer screen, where Alter Ego watched them nervously. Determination still shone from his eyes, in spite of the hints of fear he was clearly trying to hide. This was going to be so dangerous for Alter Ego already – did Naegi really think that he had the right to make it worse?

“Our highest priority right now has to be keeping Alter Ego as safe as possible,” Kirigiri said. She pursed her lips. “But – if we can manage this successfully, it won’t matter as much any longer.”

Naegi frowned at her. “What do you mean?”

Kirigiri gave him a long, considering look before she answered. “I mean that the rest of us demanded your separation from Togami because we weren’t certain we could trust you to be on our side – but this might prove that we can. Even if this plan fails, the risk you’re taking to work on it with me would be enough proof for me to withdraw my support of the separation.”

“Really?” Naegi’s face lit up. “You’d trust me again?”

“Provisionally,” Kirigiri said. “And only after the twenty-four hours have passed.”

Naegi bit his lip. He didn’t like the idea of breaking his promise to Togami – but on the other hand, this wasn’t exactly a situation either of them could have foreseen. Naegi wouldn’t be the one taking the risk in this scenario, Alter Ego would – and Naegi had it in his power to make that risk just a little bit less.

He looked up at Kirigiri. “I want to tell Togami about it afterwards.”

Kirigiri nodded. “After it’s all over, you can tell him in person.”

“Then… all right,” Naegi said. “Let’s do it.”
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Naegi takes Alter Ego to the hidden room.

With the decision made about what to do about Alter Ego’s request, Naegi felt a little more confident. It might still be dangerous, but at least they had a plan now. And it felt good to be working with Kirigiri again, the way they’d done before.

He picked up Alter Ego’s laptop and tucked it under his hoodie. It was an awkward fit, and he would need to keep one of his arms close to his side to keep the laptop from crashing to the ground, but it seemed like it would work.

“Ahaha, it tickles!” Alter Ego said. Although Naegi’s clothes muffled the speaker a little, the voice was still plainly audible.

“Shh!” Naegi cautioned him. “You can’t talk right now! We’re going to move you to another room, and you can’t talk until we get there!”

“Understood,” Alter Ego said. “Your command has been implemented.”

“Uh – good.” Naegi blinked at the sudden robotic response. Alter Ego so rarely spoke like a machine that it was easy to forget his true nature. It was strange to hear him say something that sounded so much like a program, at the same time that he was doing something that wasn’t anything like a simple computer program at all.

Once the laptop was as securely settled as it was likely to get, Kirigiri turned to Naegi. “In the hidden room, there are a bunch of different cables in one of the desk drawers. There might be a network cable in there, assuming the mastermind hasn’t taken it already.”

Naegi nodded. “Well, all we can do is go check for ourselves.”

“Agreed. Let’s go.”

Kirigiri led the way out of the bathhouse and back up to the second floor. At least this time she walked a little slower than her usual brisk pace, though Naegi wasn’t sure if this was due to his slowness or to the possibility that he might drop Alter Ego if he tried to walk too fast.

When they reached the second floor hallway outside the boy’s bathroom, Kirigiri spun towards him, all her icy anger back in full force. “So you’re still claiming that all the documents are gone? Well, after all the lies you’ve been telling, I don’t believe you.”

Naegi stared at her, taken aback by this sudden onslaught of fury. “What?”

“If you expect me to believe a word you say, you can go back and check,” she snapped. “And to make sure you don’t try to run off, I’m going to wait right here!”

And then Naegi realized – Kirigiri was faking it. She was only pretending to be angry so that he’d have an excuse to go into the hidden room again, in case the mastermind was watching. It was
unsettling to hear, though – this burst of fake anger looked identical to the way she’d acted earlier, when she’d been so angry at him and Togami. If he hadn’t been talking to her in the bathhouse just a few minutes ago, he wouldn’t have been able to tell the difference at all.

“Why are you just standing there?” Kirigiri glared at him. “Hurry up and go!”

“Okay, okay, I’m going,” Naegi said, pushing open the door and heading through the bathroom to the hidden room.

It was just as empty as it had been the last time he’d entered, with nothing but a few scattered sheets of blank paper on the floor. Still, Kirigiri had said she remembered cables in the desk drawer, so Naegi knelt down in front of the desk to check.

To his surprise, the drawer did actually still contain a tangled selection of cables for various devices. Apparently the mastermind hadn’t thought these were important enough to remove when they’d emptied the room. After sorting through them for a moment, Naegi found one that he was pretty sure was a network cable.

Carefully, Naegi slid Alter Ego’s laptop out from underneath his hoodie, moving slowly so as not to risk dropping or damaging the machine. He set it onto the desk and used the network cable to connect the laptop to the Ethernet port on the back wall.

“That should do it!” he said, looking over at the computer screen.

“Um…” Alter Ego considered for a moment, then brightened. “Yes, I think it worked. Just leave the rest to me! I swear I’ll find something! I might even be able to connect to the outside world. If I can, I’ll see if I can call for help!”

Naegi bit his lip, then placed his hands on the keyboard. “Please be careful. Kirigiri and I will come back for you one day from now.”

“All right. I’ll see what I can find out in that time,” Alter Ego said. “So please just wait a little longer. Just hold tight and put your faith in me!”

Naegi hesitated, then decided that he wanted to leave Alter Ego with one last message. “No matter what, we’re gonna get out of here. You and all the rest of us, as friends!”


Naegi reached out and touched the edge of the laptop screen, the way he might grip a person’s shoulder to say goodbye. With that last gesture, he turned and headed back out of the hidden room.

Back in the hall, Kirigiri was waiting for him, arms crossed and expression blank. “How did it go?”

“It went okay,” Naegi told her, before recalling that they were supposed to be hiding their actions from the mastermind. “Uh, but all the documents really were gone, just like I told you.”

“I see.” Kirigiri’s lips tightened. “So you really did cause us to lose one of the few sources of possible information we might have had. You’ve done nothing but hinder my investigation – I see that now.”

“Huh?” Naegi stared at her, a little stung by the vitriol, even though he was pretty sure she didn’t mean it.
“I’m done with you, Naegi,” Kirigiri said coldly. “I hope you remember our conversation.” With that, she turned and stalked off.

Naegi watched her go, trying to figure out what she was getting at. Remember their conversation? What conversation did she mean? Something from the bathhouse –

Oh. Of course. Naegi remembered the discussion they’d had about how to distract the mastermind from any of Alter Ego’s network activity. This had to be part of her plan to fake a murder attempt. She was probably using this fake argument to set up a motive.

That made sense, of course, but it didn’t mean Naegi liked hearing Kirigiri say those kinds of things about him. He hoped that it really was all an act, and that she didn’t secretly feel that way. Maybe after they’d finished playing this out for the mastermind, Kirigiri would give him a more honest answer.

Naegi forced himself back down the stairs to the first floor, exhaustion dragging at him after all the running around he’d done today. It wasn’t quite time for the nighttime announcement, but he figured it was close enough. He headed back to the dorms.

As he approached the dorm room hallway, he heard voices. “—don’t want to talk to her right now.”

Naegi looked further down the hall and saw Ogami standing near her room. And a little distance from her, carefully out of arm’s reach – he saw Togami. Even from a distance, the sight of the other boy made his heart lift a little. Whatever else was going on, Togami was still all right – even if he did currently look pretty annoyed.

“I’m not interested in whatever game you’re playing with Asahina,” Togami said, his attention focused on Ogami. He clearly didn’t notice Naegi back at the other end of the hall. “Do you want this key back or not?”

Ogami closed her eyes as Togami held up a room key. “No. I – I would feel better knowing that I am unable to open the door during the night. Please just open the door for me, as I asked.”

“Fine.” Togami gestured her aside.

Naegi had to shake his head as Togami made her go through the same ritual of keeping her distance as he unlocked the door for her. He never relented on anything, did he? A wave of fondness bubbled up in his chest, bringing a small smile to his lips.

And at that moment, Togami turned around – and his eyes went wide at the sight of Naegi watching him from across the hall. His fists clenched as he stared at Naegi, jaw tight with sudden tension. Naegi wanted to run over to him, to hold him close and bury his head in the taller boy’s chest, to press kisses along the line of his throat until the tension eased – but he knew he couldn’t. Not now that things were finally starting to turn around a little with the others. Naegi forced himself to take a step backwards.

A flicker of something – sadness, anger, or something else entirely – crossed Togami’s face at the sight. He turned away and headed over to open the door to his room. He looked over his shoulder at Naegi one last time, and Naegi had to clench his mouth shut to stop any words from escaping. He just watched, and hoped Togami could read what he felt in his eyes.

Whatever Togami saw in his face, it was enough that he dropped his gaze and entered his room, shutting the door firmly behind him.
Naegi waited a moment to make sure that Togami was securely locked in his room before heading down the hall to open his own door. He resolutely didn’t look behind him as he entered, not quite trusting himself not to run over and ring Togami’s doorbell. There would be time for that later – after all, Kirigiri had agreed to end the separation tomorrow night. He only had to put up with one more day of this. Tomorrow, it would be all right.
Naegi attended the breakfast meeting, hopeful that the end of his separation from Togami is in sight.

Naegi slept until the morning announcement jolted him awake, and spent a brief moment considering just rolling over and going back to sleep. But he couldn’t bring himself to do it, no matter how tired he was – he owed it to the others to join them at the breakfast meeting. He had to keep proving that they could rely on him.

So he hauled himself out of bed and prepared to face the day more or less on his usual schedule. He headed over to the cafeteria, right on time for the breakfast meeting – but when he walked in, he found that Togami was the only one there.

Naegi stopped short in the doorway, while Togami froze with a coffee cup half-raised in one hand. He looked a little tired, Naegi realized, with faint circles under his eyes and lines around his mouth – like he hadn’t been sleeping well, either. Was it just nerves and anger at the other students’ presumption, or did Togami genuinely miss falling asleep with Naegi in his arms?

Well, if everything went all right, neither of them would have to go through another night alone. Tonight, Kirigiri would argue for lifting the separation, and Naegi was sure Asahina would support her. He didn’t think Fukawa and Hagakure would hold out against the other two. Naegi wanted to tell Togami, to let him know it was almost over and see some of the unhappiness lift from his eyes –

But it wasn’t over yet. Naegi knew the separation was still in effect for now, and he didn’t want to risk losing Kirigiri’s tentative support by ignoring it. He turned away from the cafeteria and walked across the hall to lean against the corner of the wall by the dorm rooms. He would just wait until someone else showed up for the breakfast meeting, and then he’d go in after them so they could see he wasn’t trying to sneak time alone with Togami.

But as the minutes ticked away, no one else showed up. Naegi frowned. The rest of the cafeteria had actually been empty, hadn’t it? He hadn’t just missed everyone because he’d focused so much on Togami? No, he was sure he would have noticed other people in the room. So where was everyone?

When he finally heard footsteps, they came from the stairs, not the dorm rooms. Naegi turned to see Kirigiri passing through the gate to the rest of the first floor, walking even more quickly than she usually did. Her eyes darted to Naegi, but instead of approaching him, she turned and headed into the cafeteria.

Naegi hurried after her, only to have to stop short so that he didn’t run into her. Kirigiri had only gone a couple steps into the cafeteria, standing near the door as she surveyed the entire room with a frown.

“Has anyone else arrived yet?” she asked.
Togami was watching her with eyebrows raised, leaning back in his seat like the picture of elegant poise. “No – not much of a loss, though. I’d be just as happy if the whole lot stayed away.”

Kirigiri ignored that, turning to face Naegi. “What about you – have you seen anyone?”

“Not since last night,” Naegi said, icy dread beginning to chill his veins. “Why? Is something wrong?”

“Possibly,” Kirigiri said. “It may be nothing. They may just be running late.” She brushed past Naegi and made a beeline for the dorms.

Naegi sent Togami a puzzled glance before remembering he wasn’t supposed to, and then turned and hurried after her. He could hear Togami set down his coffee cup and follow, but he carefully didn’t turn back to look. Instead, he focused on what Kirigiri was doing.

She’d pressed the doorbell outside Fukawa’s door – not a single push of a button, but leaning on the bell without a break. Anyone inside would hear that, no matter how deeply asleep they were. As Naegi reached her, she released the button and headed further down the hall, mouth a thin line.

Well, Naegi could see what she was trying to do, even if he wasn’t sure why she was doing it. So as Kirigiri began ringing the bell to Asahina’s room, he went to Hagakure’s door and pressed the bell there. But by the time Togami had strolled up to join them, Naegi and Kirigiri both released the doorbell buttons without a response.

Kirigiri reached out to try Ogami’s door and frowned as the knob rattled. She looked sharply at Togami. “Do you still have the key to Ogami’s room?”

Togami eyed her for a moment. “Yes. It hasn’t left my possession since I took it.”

“Good. Then you can open the door.” Kirigiri stepped out of the way.

“I could, it’s true.” Togami crossed his arms. “But why are you so concerned that I do so? What do you think might have happened?”

“Four people are missing,” Kirigiri said tightly. “Not a single one of them arrived for the morning meeting. The last time this happened, two of the missing students ended up dead.”

Naegi stared at her in cold horror. “Then you think –”

“I think that we need to verify everyone’s whereabouts as soon as possible,” she cut him off. “We’ll need to search the rest of the school after checking on Ogami. Now open the door!”

Togami shrugged. “All right. Back up, then.”

“You’re still going to go through with that whole unlocking ritual?” Naegi demanded in disbelief.

“Yes,” Togami said, waiting calmly for them to move. “Ogami hasn’t ceased to be a spy. If anything, this makes me more suspicious of her than I was before.” He looked from one of them to the other. “Thirty seconds is unlikely to make a difference in what we find in there – but argue long enough, and it’s possible that delay might.”

Only when Naegi and Kirigiri reluctantly backed up halfway down the hall did Togami turn, unlock the door, and press the bell in his one long, three short signal. After that, he hastily joined them, keeping his eyes fixed on the door.
Naegi counted the time under his breath, every second feeling like a year. But as the thirty second mark came and went, Ogami’s door remained firmly closed. When nearly a minute had passed, Kirigiri headed forward with Naegi close at her heels. She only reached the door a step ahead of him, jerking it open without any further warning.

As soon as she did, Naegi stopped short in horror. The scene was beyond anything he’d expected, even in his worst fears.

Ogami lay slumped on her bed, blood splattered across her face, hands, and shirt. Asahina sprawled beside her, one hand fallen on Ogami’s arm like she’d tried desperately to reach for her before collapsing. At their feet, Hagakure had fallen facedown across the foot of the bed, his head hanging over the edge facing away from them, more blood soaking the back of his shirt. Fukawa lay beside him, turned away and half collapsed onto the floor.

Naegi’s breath froze in his throat at the sight. All of his friends, lying still and bloody in a room that should have been locked? It couldn’t be – this couldn’t happening, it had to be a bad dream or a mistake or –

*Ding dong, ding dong.*

“A body has been discovered!” Monokuma’s voice announced, bright and cheery and all too real.
Naegi, Togami, and Kirigiri try to determine what happened in Ogami’s room.

Naegi couldn’t bring himself to move as the body discovery announcement played out over the televisions. He closed his eyes against the awful scene as the recording finished, dread snaking through him as he waited for it to play again.

But there was silence.

“There was only one announcement.”

Togami’s words jolted Naegi out of his daze, and he opened his eyes to see the other boy frowning at him. “There could still be another.”

“I don’t think so,” Togami said. “The rules say the announcement is supposed to play immediately after three or more people discover a body. And if nothing else, the last case proved that multiple bodies would require multiple announcements. If there was going to be another one, it should have played right after the first.”

“Then – they’re still alive?” A terrible hope lit a fire in Naegi’s chest as he turned back to the bodies sprawled across Ogami’s bed. The sight was still horrible, but – maybe not quite as bad as he’d assumed.

Kirigiri had already crossed to the bed, leaning over Asahina to press gentle fingers to her neck. After a long moment, Kirigiri looked up and nodded. “Alive, but her pulse is very weak.”

“What happened to her?” Naegi asked, forcing himself to take a step closer.

“It’s too soon to say.” Kirigiri circled the bed to bend down towards Fukawa. But just as her fingers touched the other girl’s neck, a hand shot up to clamp around her wrist.

“Well, look who’s trying to get all up close and personal!” Genocide Jill leapt to her feet, grinning inches away from Kirigiri’s impassive face. “Sorry, but there’s no room for girl on girl action in this woman’s heart!”

Kirigiri twisted her wrist out of Jill’s grip, turning back to the other two bodies on the bed. Jill watched her, interest sparking in her eyes as she took in the scene.

“Wow, what was Gloomy getting into? Not the ones I would’ve picked – the only three people I want to wake up in bed with are my White Knight, Master Byakuya, and Togami darling!”

“No – that’s not what this is.” Naegi tried to keep his voice from shaking. “We just heard a body discovery announcement. I’m glad you’re all right, but – but it looks like someone else isn’t.” He looked over at Kirigiri, who had her fingers resting on the pulse point on Ogami’s neck. “So? Is she…”

Kirigiri carefully removed her fingers and stepped back. “No. She’s alive as well.”
Which only left one option. Naegi’s gaze snapped to where Hagakure lay across the foot of the bed. “Then – you mean –”

“Yeah, he doesn’t look too good.” Jill said, bending sideways to put her head at the same angle as Hagakure’s. “Not that he ever did, but that big ol’ crack on his skull didn’t help him any. Some people have no appreciation for the artistry of a good murder. Anyone can just whack away like that!”

Naegi didn’t want to look closer, but he knew he had no choice. Slowly, he made himself circle around the side of the bed, so he could see the other side of the scene more clearly. Hagakure’s head had fallen over the side of the bed, blood dripping down his neck and through his hair to pool on the floor below.

Kirigiri knelt at his side, avoiding the pool of blood as she felt against his neck for a pulse, but Naegi didn’t need to see her shake her head to know the truth. This close, he could see the unsettling stillness of Hagakure’s body, unmistakable as anything other than a corpse.

“What happened?” Togami asked, peering down as Kirigiri continued her examination.

“We didn’t make it in time,” she said, parting Hagakure’s wild hair with careful fingers. “Someone acted before we arrived.”

“Someone?” Togami raised an eyebrow. “Why dodge the issue? I think we all know who the most likely murderer is.”

“Ooh, you’ve already worked it out?” Jill asked. “That’s my White Knight for you – brains and beauty in one sexy package.”

Togami ignored her. “The mastermind ordered their spy to commit a murder – and here a murder is, right in her own room.”

“Do you think Ogami did this?” Naegi asked, turning to him in horror. “But – no, she said she wasn’t going to work for the mastermind anymore!”

“Which is exactly what any spy would say after getting caught,” Togami countered.

Naegi looked over at Ogami, still unconscious on the bed. He couldn’t believe she would have done this, not after everything she’d said about taking the battle to the mastermind – but if she hadn’t, who did that leave? It seemed just as unbelievable that Asahina or Fukawa would have done it. There hadn’t even been a new motive to create a fresh incentive – no one had any reason to kill now.

He took a step closer, careful not to disturb the blood on the floor as he approached the bed. Neither Ogami nor Asahina had moved, not even with a conversation happening right beside them. “Are they all right? Why aren’t they waking up?”

“I don’t know.” Kirigiri didn’t look up from her examination.

Naegi looked at the two girls on the bed, trying to scratch up his courage, and then reached out to lay a hand on Asahina’s shoulder. She didn’t respond, so he gritted his teeth and tried gently shaking her. Her head twitched and her eyelids flickered, but she still didn’t open her eyes.

Faced with that failure, Naegi leaned over to try Ogami instead. She groaned low in her throat when Naegi laid a hand on her arm. Encouraged by that response, he shook her arm slightly – and her eyes started open. “What – Naegi?”
Naegi breathed a sigh of relief. It was one thing for Kirigiri to declare the two girls alive, but it didn’t feel real until he could see Ogami awake and speaking. “I’m so glad you’re all right.”

“What do you…”

And then the scene around her seemed to sink fully into her mind. Her gaze locked on Asahina’s hand resting on her blood-splattered arm, and her face went pale. “Hina!”

But at the sound of Ogami’s voice, Asahina’s eyes blinked open. “S-Sakura?”

A deep sigh of relief shuddered from Ogami’s throat, and she leaned towards the other girl, head dropping to hide her expression. Asahina frowned – but as she looked across the bed, a look of deep horror crossed her face. She turned away, burying her face in Ogami’s side, but that didn’t quite muffle her sobs.

“Well, isn’t that a touching moment?”

Naegi jumped as Monokuma came bouncing out to the middle of the room, beaming at them brightly.

“Two vibrant young schoolgirls sharing a tender embrace in bed – if this moment gets any more touching, I’ll have to raise the rating and check IDs at the door!” Monokuma laughed, the sound a horrible contrast to the awful, bloody scene around them. Asahina’s head jerked away from Ogami’s side, her tearstained face going pale at the insinuations.

“Spare us the stupid jokes and get on with it,” Togami said, pinning Monokuma with a cold stare. “You have information for us, don’t you?”

“Aw, I guess it takes more than a little fanservice to get your blood pumping,” Monokuma said sadly. “All right, then. Maybe this will do it!” He pulled out a stack of folders. “It’s the Monokuma File!”

He threw the folders at each of them, and Naegi had to fumble to catch his without letting it drop onto the bloody floor. By the time he looked up, file safely in hand, Monokuma had disappeared again.

The others were already flipping through their folders, so Naegi opened his as well, skimming through the limited contents.

**Monokuma File #4**

*Victim: Yasuhiro Hagakure*

*The time of death is estimated to be around 6:00 in the morning. The body was discovered in Sakura Ogami’s locked dorm room, along with the unconscious bodies of Sakura Ogami, Aoi Asahina, and Toko Fukawa. The victim suffered a blow to the head, resulting in significant blood loss.*

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The victim suffered a blow to the head, resulting in significant blood loss.

“Then – it’s true? Hagakure is dead?” Ogami asked, looking up from the file to stare at the body lying across her bed.

“Obviously,” Togami said shortly. “But the more important question is which one of you killed him.” He crossed his arms and glowered at her. “Though I think we know the answer already.”
“You… believe that I did this?” Ogami’s face settled into heavy lines, and she looked down at the ground.

“I do,” Togami said. “Unless you have another suggestion.”

“Accusations can wait until we’ve gathered all the evidence,” Kirigiri said, standing up so that she could meet Togami’s glare at a level. “After all, I don’t think your question is the most important one to ask.”

Togami raised his eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“Before we can think about who killed Hagakure, we need to think about how,” Kirigiri said calmly. “More to the point, how they did it here. After all, that door was locked.” She looked around the room. “How did anyone get in here in the first place?”
Naegi frowned at Kirigiri’s question. “You’re right – no one else should have been able to get in. We just saw Togami use the key.”

“Meaning only he could have used the key to let anyone into the room.” Kirigiri raised one eyebrow at Togami. “So?”

“Ogami was the only one I let into the room last night,” Togami said. “And I’ve had the key in my possession the entire time since then.” He looked from Asahina to Jill. “The two of you got in here somehow. You ought to know how it happened.”

“Sorry, baby, but no can do,” Jill said. “That was all Gloomy!”

Naegi looked at Ogami and Asahina. “What about you two? You should know, right?”

Neither girl met his eyes. Ogami stared unseeingly at the blood dotting her bedspread, while Asahina couldn’t lift her eyes from her clenched fists.

“So no one wants to admit to it.” Kirigiri crossed her arms and surveyed the room. “I thought that might be the case.”

“Huh?” Naegi blinked at her for a moment, before the answer clicked in his mind. “Oh – because of the new rule! It’s forbidden to break down a locked door.”

“Exactly,” Kirigiri said. “And if that door was locked –”

“It wasn’t.”

They all turned to look at Asahina as she raised her head to face them. Tear tracks still glimmered on her face, but she didn’t look away. “The door wasn’t locked. Sakura had been avoiding me all day, so I decided to try finding her at night when I knew where she would be. Nothing happened when I rang the bell, but when I tried the doorknob, it just opened.”

Togami glared at her. “It can’t have ‘just opened.’ I locked it. I remember it very clearly.”

“Maybe you just thought you did,” Asahina said. “All I know is that when I tried to open the door, it worked.”

“Even if you’re right, that wouldn’t prove anything,” Togami said. “Let’s not forget that there’s one person among us who could probably get away with violating a rule, if she was acting on the mastermind’s orders.”

“I have never had any indication that I am not subject the same rules that govern the rest of you,” Ogami said, lifting her head a little as she spoke.
“Of course you’d say that,” Togami snapped. “If you can make us believe the door was unlocked by someone else, you immediately look less suspicious.”

“And if you can change the issue, you’ll have successfully distracted us from the main point,” Kirigiri said, twisting her braid around one finger.

“How do you mean?” Togami raised a haughty eyebrow at his least favorite of the other students. “What are you accusing me of doing?”

“I’m not making accusations this early,” Kirigiri said calmly. “I’m just pointing out that you were the only one with the ability to open the door whenever you wanted. After all, the locks are designed to be unbreakable. Even if someone did decide to violate the school rule, they shouldn’t have been able to do it with the locks on the dorm rooms.”

“So you’re suggesting that I unlocked the door and wandered off, in the hopes that someone else might notice it was open and go inside?” Togami rolled his eyes. “If you’re going to throw around stupid theories, at least have the decency to make them entertaining.”

“Look, we shouldn’t be arguing about this!” Naegi broke in, before anyone else could say something else to make things worse. “If no one can tell us what happened, then we need to start looking for clues. We only get so much time to investigate, so we can’t waste it.”

“True enough,” Kirigiri said. “We can resume our debate during the trial.”

“Then – we need to decide who will stay with the body, right?” Naegi’s eyes went to Hagakure’s corpse, and even after seeing so many other bodies, he still shivered at the sight of another dead friend.

Ogami stood. “Asahina and I can –”

“You must be joking,” Togami cut her off. “We can’t rely on the two of you to guard against each other.”

“You believe we would alter the crime scene?” Ogami asked, startled.

“It would be the perfect opportunity,” Togami said. “This is a contained scene – it would be all too easy for the culprit to rearrange things to make some small but critical change. If so, the rest of us wouldn’t spot the significance, since we don’t know how you ended up in this room in the first place.”

“That’s your objection?” Ogami frowned. “But surely someone could do that without needing to take on the responsibility of being a guard.”

“Then maybe none of you should be allowed in the room at all,” Togami said coldly.

“Not just them,” Kirigiri said. “I would include you in the list as well. You may not have been found in here, but your possession of the key makes you as suspicious as the rest.”

Naegi frowned, thinking it over. “So wait, if it can’t be anyone we found in here, and it can’t be Togami – does that mean Kirigiri and I are going to be the guards?”

“Not just guards,” Kirigiri said. “Since you and I are the only ones unconnected to the crime scene, it would be best if the two of us investigated this area on our own. The other four can search the rest of the school for additional information.” She looked around the room. “Is everyone in agreement?”
No one looked terribly happy with it. Togami was glaring at Kirigiri, but Naegi was pretty sure Togami wouldn’t have liked anything she suggested. Asahina stood staring fixedly at the wall, avoiding any glimpse of Hagakure’s body, her face pale, and Ogami shot her increasingly concerned glances. Jill didn’t look interested in the discussion at all, other than occasionally glancing down at Hagakure and shaking her head in professional disapproval. But in the end, one by one, the three girls all nodded to confirm Kirigiri’s plan.

Togami held out, dark gaze fixed on Kirigiri. “Before I agree to your little suggestion, I have one question for you.”

“Oh?” Kirigiri asked.

“How did you know something had happened?” Togami crossed his arms. “You dodged the question when I asked before, but at that point, we had no confirmation that anything had occurred. Now that we know something did, I’ll ask you again. You knew. How?”

Kirigiri’s expression didn’t flicker. “I told you already. They didn’t show up for the morning meeting –”

“If you’re just going to lie again, don’t bother,” Togami cut her off. He looked over at Naegi. “Be careful. Don’t let her meddle with anything, no matter what she says to try to talk you into it.”

And with that, he turned and headed out of the room.

Jill grinned. “Ooh, guess it looks like I’ll be getting some alone time with my White Knight this time around. Better luck next time, Big Mac!” She wiggled her fingers at Naegi before running out after Togami.

Ogami looked at Asahina, then gently settled a hand on her shoulder. “We should leave as well.”

Asahina blinked, seeming to return to the conversation from a long way away. “Yes. You’re right – we should go.” Her eyes darted towards Hagakure, but she quickly forced them away, biting her lip and wiping at the tears reforming in her eyes.

Naegi supposed it must have been awful, waking up in a blood-covered bed with a dead body in front of her. He took a step towards her, giving her a concerned look. “Are you doing okay?”

“Of course I’m not!” Asahina gulped, swiping the edge of her sleeve across her eyes. “Who could be? He didn’t even want to come here this morning!”

“Huh?” Naegi frowned. “You mean Hagakure?”

Asahina nodded. “Yeah. He was so upset, he just wanted to stay in his room. But – but I thought about everything you and I talked about yesterday, about how we all needed to hear Sakura’s story right from her – and I talked him into it. I made him come here. And if I hadn’t, he wouldn’t have gotten killed!”

“Hina – no,” Ogami said in distress, wrapping an arm around her friend’s shoulders. “You didn’t intend for this to happen.”

“Yeah, it isn’t your fault,” Naegi agreed. “Everything awful that’s happening – it’s because of the mastermind. They’re the one causing us to do these terrible things to each other.”

“I guess.” Asahina leaned against Ogami, clutching her hand like a lifeline.
“More to the point,” Kirigiri broke in, “did you say that you made Hagakure come here? You were the reason that everyone was gathered in Ogami’s room?”

“Oh – well, yes,” Asahina said, blinking. “This was – well, it was after the door was open, obviously. I’d already been inside and talked to Sakura a little.”

“In the middle of the night?” Naegi asked, blinking.

“It was the only time I knew where she would be,” Asahina said, shrugging. “She’d been avoiding me, and – well, like we talked about, I wanted to apologize.”

“I told you that I don’t need your apologies,” Ogami said softly.

“Yeah, but I wanted to anyway.” Asahina gave her a watery smile.

“And then you asked Hagakure to come talk to Ogami, too?” Naegi asked, trying to work out the events in his head.

Asahina nodded. “Fukawa, too. I told them I wanted to clear up everyone’s suspicions of Sakura.”

“Did she arrange this without your knowledge?” Kirigiri looked over at Ogami, who nodded slowly.

“That’s right. I was taken by surprise when Asahina approached me.”

“I see.” Kirigiri frowned, tapping a finger against her chin.

“If that’s all, then we should start our search,” Ogami said, setting her shoulders with determination. “I’ve never been much of an investigator, but – well, Hagakure died while in my room. I believe I owe it to him to do my utmost to discover the culprit.”

“If you need a starting point, you could look into ways someone could have gotten that door open,” Naegi suggested. “They must have used something to do it. Maybe you could find proof of that.”

“Possibly.” Ogami sighed. “Naegi… good luck. I hope you find what you need.” With that, she headed out, guiding the still-shaky Asahina at her side.

“You know that it’s unlikely she’ll find anything about how the door was opened, don’t you?”

Naegi blinked and turned to Kirigiri. “What?”

“If there are any clues as to how that door was opened, they’re going to be in this room.” She smirked at him. “Let’s see what we can find, shall we?”
Naegi and Kirigiri begin their investigation of Ogami's room.

Naegi looked around Ogami’s room, trying to get a sense of what it might have looked like before the murder had taken place. While she had the same bed, desk, and waist-high bookcase that seemed common to all the dorm rooms, she had apparently replaced most of her other furniture with various pieces of workout equipment. She had several full-size punching bags spaced throughout the room, and stacks of heavy square weights covered every available surface. Smaller weights were scattered across the floor,

It looked like she’d tried to set up some kind of miniature training space here, from what he could tell. Maybe she’d done it before the second floor locker rooms had opened – or no, Togami had said that his room had been decorated with his expensive furnishings already when he’d arrived. Maybe the same had been true for Ogami, and all this had been there from the start. Naegi frowned, wondering why that would be. His room was the most generic dorm room imaginable, and when he’d had to sleep in Sayaka’s room, it hadn’t seemed to be decorated to reflect her personal tastes. Why would some people’s rooms be personalized, but not others?

Well, he supposed none of that mattered right now. It didn’t seem likely that it would be related to the current investigation, so Naegi did his best to put it out of his mind. He needed to focus.

He looked over at Kirigiri, wondering if he ought to ask for her opinion about the situation – but she’d gone back to examining Hagakure’s body. She seemed so involved in it, and after all, that was an important part of the investigation. He figured he should leave her alone to finish, at least for now.

Well, Hagakure had been struck on the head, hadn’t he? Both the Monokuma File and Kirigiri had said as much. Naegi supposed he could do worse than trying to find the weapon the killer had used. Considering the amount of blood on Hagakure’s body, it shouldn’t be too hard to identify.

Naegi looked around the room again, trying to see if anything looked out of place. The weights on the floor did draw his attention, but they all looked clean. And looking more closely, he could see that the heavy metal bar in the middle of each hand weight had been wrapped in white cloth. Even if the killer had wiped the blood off the sides of these weights, the cloth would still have been stained. He looked over the square weights stacked on the bookcase instead – but no, those didn’t look like the right shape to hit someone over the head with.

Maybe the culprit had hidden the weapon. Whatever had happened here, it looked like the culprit must have had at least a little time alone at the scene. They could have used that chance to stash the weapon.

Naegi looked around the room again, this time wondering about possible hiding places. There didn’t seem to be very many. He supposed he might as well start from the beginning, so he began opening the drawers of Ogami’s desk. Most of the drawers were as empty and unused as his own were, except for three neatly rolled cotton hand wraps for boxing and Ogami’s sewing kit – nothing that could be used to bludgeon someone.
But as he stood up to go check another place, something caught his eye. Even though no one was sitting at the head of the bed any longer, the mattress still pressed downwards like there was something heavy there. Naegi frowned and carefully lifted the pillow out of the way to get a better look. There, under the pillow that had been between Asahina and Ogami, was another one of the weights from the floor – and this one had dark bloodstains smeared across one end.

Naegi stepped sharply back, a startled sound escaping from his throat. Kirigiri looked up, frowning, and her eyes immediately lit on the weight. “Ah – I see. Yes, that looks like it could have caused the head wound.”

“So we have the murder weapon,” Naegi said. “It wasn’t very well hidden, was it? I thought I was going to have to search the whole room for it.”

“No, it was very convenient,” Kirigiri said. “Have you found anything else? Anything that explains how the others got into this room, perhaps?”

“Not yet,” Naegi had to admit. He sighed. “I guess I really do have to search the whole room, after all.”

“That looks like it will be necessary.” Kirigiri crossed her arms. “But have you considered what will happen if you don’t find anything?”

Naegi frowned. “You mean – like if the culprit didn’t leave any clues about how they did it?”

“A lack of information can be a clue, in the right circumstances,” Kirigiri said. “If there’s no evidence that anyone broke in, what will you think?”

“I guess that would mean that Asahina’s idea was right, when she said that maybe Togami didn’t lock the door properly,” Naegi said, thinking for a moment.

“But when we got to the door this morning, it was locked,” Kirigiri pointed out. “If it hadn’t been locked in the first place, it would have opened when you saw me try the knob.”

Naegi stared at her. “W-wait a minute. Are you saying you think Togami did this?”

“I’m asking you a question,” Kirigiri said calmly. “If you find evidence implicating the boy you’re romantically entangled with, are you capable of assessing it in a rational way?”

Naegi’s gut instinct was to insist blindly that he knew Togami couldn’t have committed this murder – but he didn’t think an emotional appeal would impress Kirigiri. He swallowed it back and tried to consider his thoughts more carefully.

“I don’t know,” he said at last. “I don’t believe Togami would kill anyone anymore, but if I’m wrong, I’d like to think that I would recognize the truth.” He took a deep breath, trying to suppress his cold shudder at the thought of being forced to vote for Togami at the end of the trial. “I – I don’t want everyone else to die, so we have to find the real culprit, whoever it is.”

“Hmm.” Kirigiri eyed him for a moment, then nodded. “All right, then. See what you can find.”

Naegi started to turn away, but then hesitated. “Aren’t you going to look, too?”

“No. I’m not finished here.” She leaned over Hagakure’s body again.

Naegi frowned. It wasn’t like he timed her or anything, but he didn’t think it usually took her quite this long to examine the bodies – especially not when the cause of death seemed so clear. “Is there
something you’re looking for?”

“Possibly.” Kirigiri sounded like most of her attention was on her examination. “I’ll let you know if I find it.”

That was probably the best he could expect. Naegi sighed. It was time to get back to his own investigation, then.

Since he was standing nearby anyway, Naegi figured he might as well kneel down to check under the bed. It seemed like a pretty obvious hiding place, but then again, behind a pillow wasn’t exactly brilliant either. He ought to cross it off the list, at least.

The only thing he saw under the bed was another one of the boxing hand wraps, this one unrolled and in a heap. Naegi was about to ignore it when he realized that some of the dark spots on it weren’t just shadows. He pulled it towards him for a closer examination. Yes – it looked like the edges of this wrap had been splattered with a few drops of blood. But that seemed strange – blood had fallen to the floor under Hagakure’s body, but at the area near the head of the bed where Naegi was investigating, the floor was pretty clean.

“Uh, Kirigiri?” Naegi said, looking up at her. “I think I found something odd.”

He braced his hand on the edge of the bed as he stood – but as he pushed himself up, something sharp dug into the flat of his palm. “Ow!”

Kirigiri looked up, eyes going wide. “What happened?”

“I don’t know, but my hand…” The world seemed to tilt unsteadily around him, the floor shuddering beneath his feet and black spots clouding at the edges of his vision. He could see blood on his palm, but he couldn’t tell if it was just one drop, or a dozen dancing before his eyes. “I… don’t…”

He thought he heard Kirigiri saying something else, but he couldn’t make it out as the blackness rushed through him, knocking him to the ground in an unconscious heap.
Chapter 62

Chapter Summary

Togami begins his investigation.

As soon as Togami left Ogami’s dorm room, he headed for the nurse’s office on the other side of the first floor. The three girls in that room had been knocked unconscious, so a medical office was the logical place to start looking. He knew that Celeste had found the drugs she’d used on him in there, and he was sure that the mastermind would have provided enough for multiple uses.

As he reached the office, he heard the scurry of overeager footsteps behind him, and he turned to see Genocide Jill approach. He grimaced. “Why are you following me?”

“I’m here to help you search, baby,” Jill said, tongue curling across her lips as she eyed him. “I’ve got plenty you can investigate!”

“It doesn’t look like it to me.” He was about to order her to go look somewhere else – but then he paused. “Is there anything you know about what happened in that room?”

“Oh, are you gonna interrogate me?” Jill grinned. “Will you bring out the whips and chains if I swear I’ll never tell?”

“Just answer the question,” Togami snapped.

“Okay, we can save the fun for later.” Jill shrugged. “Sorry, darling, but I don’t know anything about what Gloomy had going on. She and I don’t share memories, only emotions. That means you and I can uncover the truth together!” She beamed at him.

Togami scowled. The Fukawa personality was the one with the answers that he needed – but he knew that even if he could convince Jill to change back, Fukawa would be unlikely to tell him anything useful. And while Jill seemed moderately willing to be cooperative, she didn’t seem to know –

Wait.

“What do you mean, you share emotions?” Togami asked, frowning. “How does that work?”

“I don’t know how, just that it does,” Jill said. “If one of us is feeling something, then we’re both feeling it. That’s why you can get a two for one deal, baby!”

“Fukawa might disagree,” Togami said. “She’s been displaying a great deal of animosity for me lately.”

“Probably because she’s too boring to know how to act on what she feels,” Jill said, rolling her eyes. “As for me, I’m one hundred and ten percent proactive – no repression here!”

“So you’re saying that if Fukawa felt strongly enough to want to kill someone, you would know about it?” Togami asked.
“Aw, are you jealous?” Jill laughed. “Don’t worry, darling, I’d never cheat on you that way! You’re still the only one I want to kill.”

That wasn’t exactly reassuring – but at least Jill didn’t seem inclined to take action on that statement at the moment. Of course, she’d pointed out when they’d met her for the first time that killing anyone in her signature method would be stupid – but she didn’t necessarily seem like that would stop her if the whim hit her.

Well, as long as she didn’t seem like she was going to attack him right then, Togami decided to ignore her for the moment. There would only be a limited amount of time until the class trial began, and he had a lot that he would need to do.

He headed into the nurse’s office and headed for the cabinet where he recalled the drugs being kept. However, as soon as he opened it, he could see that the only thing missing was the single dose of chloroform Celeste had used on him. There were several items that could have easily knocked out the girls, but when he checked, all the containers were full and unopened.

He frowned, circling the room and opening all the other drawers and cabinets as well. He didn’t think they’d have anything relevant, but he didn’t want to risk missing anything. After all, it didn’t make sense that the medical supplies here would be untouched. His first thought on seeing the bodies was that it looked like the killer must have knocked everyone else unconscious somehow, and then delivered the killing blow to Hagakure after he’d collapsed – but that theory relied on the killer having a drug of some kind to use on the other three students.

But when he’d finished his search, the only thing he’d found that seemed to be disturbed was a drawer containing large sponges. Two were missing, and when he checked the trash can, they hadn’t been thrown away. That did seem potentially interesting – but on the other hand, one look at the blood splattered across Ogami’s room showed that no one had used any sponges there.

Togami frowned, considering what his next move should be. So it appeared no one had taken any drugs from the nurse’s office. That meant that either his original theory was incorrect, or that the culprit had found another method of knocking everyone unconscious. If his suspicions about Ogami were correct, then she would easily have been able to subdue the other students – but just hitting someone wouldn’t leave them temporarily unconscious. To achieve the precision that had characterized this case without causing brain damage, some other method would have been necessary.

And if that was the case, he could only think of two other places the culprit could have found such a method. Since he was already on the first floor, he headed for the storage room first.

Of course, the problem with a place as packed with items as the storage room was that it would be almost impossible to tell if anything had been disturbed. Togami scanned the shelves, trying to see if anything looked out of place, but without some idea what he was looking for, he could spend hours here and not find anything – hours he knew he didn’t have.

But on the other hand, this seemed like it might be exactly the opportunity he’d been looking for. He turned to Genocide Jill, who was still standing in the doorway with her red eyes fixed firmly on him. “Search this room for anything that the killer might have moved.”

“Huh?” Jill tilted her head. “Ooh, is that an order from my Master? That gives a girl all the right kind of shivers! Say it again for me, baby?”

Togami glared at her. “Just do it. Now.”
“Now that’s what I’m talking about!” Jill laughed. “All you gotta do is ask, White Knight!”

He doubted that – but hopefully it would at least buy him enough time to lose her. As Jill began darting among the shelves, Togami ducked out of the storage room and headed for the stairs. There was really only one option left.

And of course, when he reached the chemistry lab, it looked like he was the only one who had thought of it. He didn’t see a trace of either Asahina or Ogami around, even though they were supposed to be investigating too. Though it wasn’t as though he expected much out of either of them. With both Naegi and Kirigiri looking for clues in Ogami’s room, he knew that the heavy lifting of the part of the investigation in the rest of the school would be on him.

Not wanting to waste time, Togami headed straight for the huge cabinet of materials on the back wall. He’d already noted the division of its contents – supplements on the left, reagents in the middle, and poisons on the right – but he wasn’t sure where a chemical to knock someone unconscious might belong. To be on the safe side, he supposed he would need to check all the sections.

The left section with the supplements looked more or less intact, from what he could tell. Even when he checked the labels on the supplements, nothing suggested that it could be used to knock someone out. The only thing he could see missing was a lot of that disgusting protein rubbish that Asahina and Ogami seemed fond of. He wondered briefly whether that might have been used as a vehicle to get the victims to consume a drug – but no, that would only have worked on Asahina and Ogami.

On searching the middle section, Togami paid a little more attention than he had to the vitamins and supplements. While he hadn’t had a chance to examine every reagent in the cabinet, he knew there was a possibility that some of them might have the effects the killer needed. The bottles in the glass top of the cabinet were easy enough to sort through, but there were quite a few more in the metal bottom of the cabinet. He began pulling the different containers out for a closer examination, and then setting them on the ground beside him once he’d determined they were unopened.

And if he hadn’t been so methodical, he might not have noticed the discrepancy.

The containers in the bottom shelves of the cabinet had been lined up in tidy rows, squeezed into the space to fill it from top to bottom. Looking from the front, it was impossible to see all the way to the back of the shelf – but when Togami pulled out what should have been the second-to-last container, he found only empty space behind it.

A slow smile crept over Togami’s face. It was possible that the cabinet had never actually been entirely full – but he didn’t believe that. No, someone had taken a reagent from the middle cabinet, and they’d rearranged all the other bottles to hide their theft. It had been a clever move – but not quite clever enough.

Of course, with the way the culprit had covered their tracks, there wasn’t really a good way to know exactly which reagent they’d taken. Technically, the bottles were in alphabetical order – but the number of bottles of each type of reagent wasn’t consistent. If the culprit had rearranged the containers to make sure the empty space would be at the very back of the cabinet, they could have taken a bottle from anywhere.

Still, at least he knew they’d taken something, which was evidence in support of his theory. Whatever they’d taken, it was almost certainly something that could be used to knock someone unconscious. Possibly Naegi would even find traces of it in Ogami’s room somewhere.
Togami considered abandoning the chemistry lab and leaving to investigate some other location – but no, it was better to be thorough. So he turned and opened the third cabinet – and it was a very good thing he did.

A gaping empty space stared out at him, where three bottles of poison should have been.
Chapter 63

Chapter Summary

Togami continues his investigation, with the dubious assistance of Genocide Jill, Ogami, and Asahina.

Togami froze, staring at the space with the missing bottles of poison should have been. He hadn’t actually expected to find anything out of place in this section of the cabinet, not when he’d been looking for a drug to knock people unconscious.

Why were bottles of poison missing now? Poison didn’t seem to figure into this case at all, not that he could see. Three people had fallen unconscious, and the victim had been hit over the head – no one had died of poison.

Not yet, at least. There had only been one victim so far, after all, and every murderer was allowed a maximum of two deaths. The poison might be part of a plot that hadn’t yet come into play.

Or even worse – it might not have been taken by Hagakure’s murderer at all. Just because the killings had occurred one at a time up until now, it didn’t mean that things had to continue that way. Someone might have taken the poison in order to set up their own murder plot, only to be forestalled by Hagakure’s death.

Although that didn’t explain why anyone would need three entire bottles of the poison. From what Togami could tell, it looked like the missing poison was one he’d looked at before – the one that he’d been discussing with Naegi just before the other students had entered the chemistry lab to confront them. He couldn’t confirm for certain, though, because the three bottles seemed to have been the entire stock of that particular poison. Could that have been why the culprit took all three bottles – to prevent anyone from knowing exactly what it was they’d taken?

If so, he had to admit, that wasn’t a terrible plan. He tried to think back to what the label had said, but the specifics of how the poison worked eluded him. It hadn’t been anything he recognized, he knew that much. It must have been some bizarre new poison the mastermind had concocted.

But whatever someone might intend to use this poison for, he knew he couldn’t afford to get too caught up in it now. There were too many mysteries left unsolved with the death that had already occurred, and he couldn’t waste his investigation time on hypotheticals. He would just have to keep this poison in mind for the future, as he carried on with the rest of his search.

Of course, that left the issue of where else to look. Togami frowned as he left the chemistry lab, considering his options. Nothing else immediately came to mind – but the murder had occurred on the first floor. It made sense that other clues might be located there, as well.

As he returned to the dormitory half of the first floor, Togami stepped through the gate just in time to see Ogami and Asahina exit the cafeteria.

“So you aren’t even making an effort at contributing, are you?” he asked, drawing the girls’ attention sharply to him. “Is that an indication of guilt, or have you just decided to wallow in your uselessness?”
Asahina glared at him, but the expression didn’t have her usual energy. It looked like the effects of whatever had knocked her unconscious might be lingering. “I wasn’t feeling great, especially since I missed breakfast. I thought it might help to get my blood sugar up, so that I won’t be lightheaded all through the class trial.”

“I doubt we would have noticed,” Togami said, rolling his eyes.

“Actually, it wasn’t as much of a waste of time as you seem to think,” Ogami said. “We found something interesting in the kitchen.”

Togami’s eyebrows shot up. “I assume you’re talking about something more relevant than a new type of donut?”

“I would say so.” Ogami held up a small plastic bag, containing several pieces of broken brown glass. None of them were large enough to identify – but Togami had only seen a bottle that color in one other place.

“That’s one of the bottles of poison from the chemistry lab,” Togami said, grabbing the bag from Ogami to examine it more closely. He looked up, narrowing his eyes at the two girls. “You said you found this in the kitchen?”

“The pieces were in the trashcan there,” Ogami said, nodding.

Togami’s stomach roiled at the thought of someone bringing a bottle of poison into the kitchen, surrounded by the food they all ate. Had it been there this morning, when he’d made coffee? He couldn’t be sure – it wasn’t as though he went around examining garbage as a matter of course. He knew that he couldn’t have consumed anything that had been contaminated, or else he would be dead – but maybe he’d only escaped by a narrow margin.

“Then it seems that we should all limit our meals to food stored in unopened containers,” Togami said, carefully pocketing the bag of broken glass. “At least until we can identify what happened to the contents of the jar.”

“Yeah, we already figured that.” Asahina scowled. “Tampering with the food supply would be really terrible – we could all starve!”

“Don’t be melodramatic,” Togami told her. “The point of the game is to get away with murder, not just to cause mayhem. Sabotaging the entire stockpile of food would hurt the culprit as much as the rest of us, and there wouldn’t be a way for them to benefit from it. No one would have any reason to do that.”

“That assumes someone would do it for the sake of winning,” Ogami said.

Togami frowned at her. “What other reason is there?”

Before she could answer, Jill’s voice called out, “Welcome back, White Knight! Couldn’t stay away, huh?”

Togami scowled as she came running around the corner from the storage room. “I thought I told you to do something useful.”

“You sure did, darling!” Jill beamed at him. “It was so sweet of you to give me a nice masterful order like that! Mm, I’ll be thinking about that one all night long!”

Asahina and Ogami looked at him with rather disturbed expressions. “Uh… what exactly did you
tell her to do?” Asahina asked slowly. “Or maybe I don’t want to know.”

He rolled his eyes. “I told her to look for anything suspicious that had been moved in the storage room.”

“And you bet I did, baby,” Jill said. “

“What – you’ve examined the entire storage room? Already?” Togami asked, making his skepticism clear.

“Of course not, that would be boring!” Jill said brightly. “Who’d want to go around looking at a lot of crap that no one’s touched?”

“So you abandoned your task without finding anything.” Togami hadn’t expected much else, but that didn’t stop him from glowering at her in disapproval.

“Aww, darling, don’t be like that,” Jill said, not looking at all quelled by his displeasure. “I can’t find something if it’s been taken away, can I?”

“What do you mean by that?” Togami asked, folding his arms.

“Oh, you know – there was a big empty space where a thing used to be,” Jill said. “About this big.” She sketched a square that looked about two feet by two feet.

“What was it?” Togami prompted.

“Sorry, baby, but the only psychic powers I’ve got are the ones connecting me to you!” Jill said, laughing. “It wasn’t there anymore, so I’ve got no idea.”

“Well, that was a colossal waste of time.” Togami sighed, thinking over the complete lack of useful evidence he’d found. “I hope Naegi has had better luck.”
Chapter 64

Chapter Summary

The investigation period continues, with Naegi still unconscious.

Everything was dark, and Naegi sank through the cold pool of blackness with limbs too heavy to move. It felt quiet here, like he could rest peacefully for the first time in far too many weeks, and there was something terribly appealing about the idea of allowing himself to drift through the darkness indefinitely.

... Stay ...

Something deep inside him twisted at the thought of staying in this darkness, but it was so hard to grasp any other thoughts with the shadows wrapping themselves around him.

... Stay ...

He was aware of having forgotten something, possibly even something important, but he didn’t know how to reach for the memory of what it was.

... Promise you’ll stay ...

Words echoed through his mind, in a voice he knew that he should remember. This voice had mattered to him, mattered enough that he stopped his descent into the empty blackness. What was it about that voice that he’d forgotten?

... Stay with me ...

He didn’t understand what was happening, but he knew deep in his soul that he had to listen to that voice. Something terrible would happen if he didn’t listen. He had to go back.

And as the blackness receded, a second voice spoke over the first, coming to him from somewhere outside instead of the hidden places of his mind.

“Stay with me. Listen, Naegi, you have to stay with me.”

Naegi jolted awake, the world snapping dizzily back into focus as the darkness faded to the back of his mind. He found himself lying on the floor of Ogami’s dorm room, Kirigiri leaning over him and squeezing his icy hand.

“What… happened?” When he tried to speak, the words seemed to take too long to form in his mouth.

“You collapsed.” Kirigiri frowned down at her hand wrapped around his, and Naegi realized that she wasn’t holding it as some kind of show of support – she was pressing a damp washcloth to his palm. She pulled it away and sighed, sitting back on her heels. “What exactly do you remember?”

Naegi frowned, trying to think back. “I’m… not sure. We were searching the room. I think… I was going to check under the bed. But after that… it’s a little fuzzy.”
“That isn’t surprising,” Kirigiri said, her face grim. “Take a look at your hand.”

“Huh?” Naegi lifted his left hand, the one she’d been holding the washcloth to – and he realized there was a small puncture wound piercing through the center of his palm. “Did something stab me?”

“That would be this.” Kirigiri nodded to another washcloth, with a silver sewing needle resting on top of it.

Naegi frowned at the needle. It was hard to see without getting a closer look, but in addition to the traces of blood, it looked like there was something yellow coating it.

“Is there something on that needle?” Naegi asked, trying to brace his other hand on the floor so that he could sit up. “Some kind of drug, maybe?”

Kirigiri put a hand on his back to steady him. “It looks that way.” She got to her feet. “Do you think you can move? I want to show you something.”

“All right.” Naegi’s head spun wildly as he pushed himself upright, his stomach twisting itself into knots at the sudden change, but he gritted his teeth and held on until the physical sensations died down enough that he could follow Kirigiri over to where Hagakure’s body still lay across the foot of the bed.

She didn’t seem at all fazed by touching a dead body as she lifted one of Hagakure’s forearms – but then, it never seemed to bother her with any of the corpses.

“I can’t believe how calm you are,” Naegi said, watching her. “No matter how many times I see a dead body, I can’t get used to it.”

“That’s normal,” Kirigiri said, moving around to turn over one of Hagakure’s ankles. “I imagine it’s because I’ve had plenty of opportunities to touch dead bodies in the past.”

“What?” Naegi stared at her blankly.

“Never mind.” She shook her head. “More importantly, look here – at Hagakure’s arm and ankle.”

Naegi looked at the places she’d named, and gasped. There were three small puncture wounds on Hagakure’s body, two on his arm and one on his lower leg – and all were identical to the mark on his own palm.

“So this has to be it, right?” Naegi said, looking back up at her. He could feel his thoughts picking up to a little closer to a normal pace, even though the rest of his body still felt heavy and slow. “These needles must be how the culprit knocked everyone unconscious so they could kill Hagakure.”

“Possibly.” Kirigiri crossed her arms and frowned at Naegi. “Do you know why I took so much time examining the body in this case?”

“Because you want to be thorough?” Naegi asked, confused.

“Yes, but in this case, there was a reason that I wanted to be more thorough than usual,” Kirigiri said. “When I examined the wound on the back of Hagakure’s head, I determined that while it does look like it bled considerably, it doesn’t appear to be severe enough to have been the cause of death.”
“But if it wasn’t the head wound…” Naegi’s gaze went to the puncture wounds on Hagakure’s body, then to the mark on his own palm.

“I removed the needle almost immediately, and I believe I got most of the chemicals out when I cleaned the wound,” Kirigiri said. “Now that you’re awake, I don’t think you need to worry.”

“Oh. I… guess that’s good.” Naegi closed his hand so that he couldn’t see the mark anymore. “So how long was I out? Is the trial starting soon?”

“You were unconscious for perhaps half an hour,” Kirigiri said. “The announcement hasn’t sounded yet, but I don’t know how much more time the mastermind intends to give us.”

“Then… we should keep searching.” Naegi braced himself against the wall, looking around the room in determination. “We have to keep moving forward.”

“Agreed.” Kirigiri gave him an approving nod. “While I was looking through the bathroom for something to clean your wound, I noticed a few things that merit further investigation. I’ll examine those, and you can resume your search out here.”

Naegi frowned. “I’ve already looked out here.”

“Yes, but you were searching for a much larger murder weapon,” Kirigiri pointed out. “I don’t believe there are any other needles left in the bed, which means they must be elsewhere in the room. We need to find as many of them as possible.” With that, she turned and headed into the bathroom.

Naegi sighed. Searching a murder scene was hard enough normally, let alone when any move made his head spin and his stomach roil – but feeling sick wasn’t going to make the trial go away. He just had to ignore the discomfort and do it.

Well, if he was looking for needles, there was one obvious place. Naegi dragged himself over to Ogami’s desk and opened the bottom drawer where he’d seen her sewing kit. He hadn’t given it much thought when he’d looked at it earlier – but now that he did, he could see that it had been opened already. He opened the kit slowly, not sure if it was dread or drugs making his hands heavy as he examined the kit’s contents.

And it was exactly as he’d feared. All six needles in Ogami’s sewing kit were missing.
Chapter 65

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Kirigiri continue their investigation of Ogami’s room.

Naegi stared down at the sewing kit, trying to think what it might mean that the needles were missing. That looked bad for Ogami – but it didn’t mean anything conclusive, not necessarily. Everyone knew that all the girls had sewing kits in their rooms, so anyone could have taken the needles from hers.

So if all six needles from the sewing kit were missing, that meant five were still unaccounted for. Naegi grimaced at the thought of scouring the entire room for something as tiny as a needle. They could be hidden anywhere, and he was sure they couldn’t have that much longer before the trial would start.

But on the other hand, he wasn’t going to find anything by sitting around and worrying about it. Naegi sighed and began rechecking the other desk drawers. Unfortunately, he hadn’t missed anything the first time. They were as empty as before. So where else could the needles be?

The bookcase seemed like a possibility. The culprit might have stowed the needles along the back of the shelves. Naegi headed carefully towards it, trying to ignore the way the room seemed to wobble around him with every step. But when he made it there, the shelves didn’t contain anything, either.

Well, where would he put a bunch of suspicious needles if he needed to hide them? Naegi frowned, trying to think about it – but it was hard to envision needing to hide weapons at all. If he needed to get rid of something, all he had to do was toss it in the trash. He glanced automatically down at the trashcan beside the bookcase as he had the thought –

And saw something silver glinting in the bottom.

Slowly, Naegi eased himself to his knees in front of the trashcan, biting his lip. The thought of looking through a girl’s garbage made him feel slightly guilty – but if the killer really had tried to use this to dispose of the murder weapon, he didn’t see any other choice. He peered down inside. He could see a few sheets of crumpled paper, a dark brown bottle, and below them – several needles, edged with blood and bits of yellow residue.

Sticking his hand into a trashcan full of poisoned needles didn’t sound like a very good idea, so instead, Naegi gently tilted the can so that the contents slid out onto the floor. Tucking his hand into his sleeve, he used his fabric-covered knuckles to separate the needles out. He could see two – three – no, four of them had fallen onto the floor, and he nudged them into a small pile.

Was that all of them? He checked the trashcan to see if the fifth one might be in there, but no, he’d emptied everything out. Then did that mean there was still one missing?

Well, maybe not. Naegi frowned at the crumpled papers that had been tossed into the trashcan with the needles. It was just possible...
He began smoothing out the tangle of papers, checking to see if the last needle might have gotten caught inside. He couldn’t help noticing that at one point, they seemed to have been partially covered with writing, but at some later point it had been scratched over with heavy black ink. Only a few phrases remained readable.

_I hate to do it like this…_

_All of this is because of my own weakness…_

_This won’t end with me just accepting your hatred…_

Naegi frowned, a chill going down his spine at the sight. There was something about those words that he didn’t like at all, something ominous. But that didn’t make any sense, did it? The murder had already happened.

He wrenched his attention away from the unsettling words and smoothed out the last sheet of paper – and there, caught in a crumpled fold, was the final needle.

Naegi put it with the others, and after a moment of thought, he gingerly nudged all of them onto one of the papers so that he could move them. He didn’t know how much poison was left on the needles, but he didn’t want to take any chances by leaving them lying around on the floor. He set the paper with the needles safely on top of the bookcase, just as Kirigiri left the bathroom.

“Ah. I see you’ve had some success.” She headed over to peer down at the needles.

“Yes, five of them were in the trash,” Naegi said, nodding. “With the one from earlier, that makes all six.”

“Not quite.” Kirigiri held up a small jar. When Naegi looked inside, it held a lot of cotton swabs – and six more needles.

“What?” Naegi frowned, looking from the needles Kirigiri held to the ones piled in front of him. That didn’t seem right – where had the extras come from?

“But that wasn’t all I found.” Kirigiri jerked her head towards the bathroom. “Look for yourself.”

“Uh – is that okay?” Naegi asked, giving the door a hesitant look. “I mean – well, should I really be going through a girl’s bathroom?”

Kirigiri gave him a blank stare. “How else are you going to see what’s in there? Now hurry up before the announcement sounds.”

Naegi sighed, reluctantly heading for the bathroom. He supposed it was probably all right if Kirigiri was there, too – and he could always apologize to Ogami about it later. So with that in mind, he went ahead and stepped inside and began looking around.

The bathroom looked more or less like his own, with the front part containing a sink and mirror while the back area was split between a shower and a toilet. Nothing that he saw seemed immediately out of place, though. What was it that Kirigiri had wanted him to see? It couldn’t be anything too hidden, though. She’d said that she noticed something first when she’d been in the middle of treating his puncture wound, so it had to be at least somewhat unusual.

He checked the area with the sink first, since that was where Kirigiri must have been when she’d noticed something. The mirrored medicine cabinet didn’t seem out of the ordinary, though, even when Naegi opened it to give the contents an embarrassed glance. A lot of it seemed to be muscle
treatments of various sorts, and he wasn’t sure how to tell what was supposed to be there and what wasn’t.

But when he gave the sink a quick glance, he frowned. There was water pooling in the bottom, even though the drain didn’t seem to be plugged. Was there a clog or something? Gingerly, Naegi reached into the water and poked at the drain, stirring up a few tendrils of pulpy white gunk. He snatched his hand away before whatever that was could touch him, wiping his fingers hastily on his pants.

Could the clogged sink be what Kirigiri had wanted him to look at? Naegi wasn’t sure, but it did seem to be the only unusual thing he’d found so far. He bent down to check under the sink – and as he did, a small bit of something white caught his eye from the back of the faucet. He reached for it curiously, and it turned out to be a small scrap of paper. There wasn’t enough to read much of what had been written on it, but Naegi could tell from the few letters that it was definitely different from the writing on the papers he’d discovered in the trashcan.

That seemed like a much more likely thing for Kirigiri to have noticed than just the clogged sink – although Naegi supposed that with her, it could be hard to tell what she might consider important. With that in mind, he gave the bathroom one more quick glance, just to be on the safe side. The toilet looked ordinary, no different from his, and the shower seemed okay, with a few bottles of soap and a towel abandoned in a heap in one corner –

Wait. Naegi frowned at the towel. What was that doing there? Everyone in this room should have been unconscious when the water came back on at seven this morning, so no one would have had a reason to use a towel in the shower. And while Ogami might have used it last night, it just didn’t seem likely that a girl who neatly stacked rows upon rows of weights would leave a towel on the floor like that. Naegi walked over and picked it up.

And a small screwdriver fell out onto the floor with a clatter.
Naegi finishes his investigation of Ogami's bathroom, finding more questions than answers.

Naegi blinked down at the screwdriver as it rolled to a stop at his feet. Where had that come from? And why had it been in Ogami’s bathroom? Had she brought it in from the storage room?

No, he realized as he bent down to pick it up. This definitely wasn’t from the storage room. He recognized the small shape and the distinctive yellow handle. This screwdriver had come from one of the toolkits in a boy’s dorm.

And not just any boy’s toolkit, either. As he examined the screwdriver more closely, Naegi saw long scrapes along the sides – the marks from where he’d used it to try to open the dryer door yesterday. This was his screwdriver.

Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that it was Asahina’s screwdriver, since he’d given the toolkit to her yesterday. Had she been carrying it around with her since then? That seemed like it would be awfully inconvenient. The tools might be pretty small, but the toolkit itself was too big to fit in a pocket. Had she just been carrying the screwdriver, then? Why would she –

Naegi froze. Asahina had had a screwdriver. Ogami’s locked door had been opened without a key. That couldn’t possibly be a coincidence.

This must have been the real clue that Kirigiri had wanted him to find, not whatever was stuck on the sink. With the way that she examined rooms, of course she would have checked something as obvious as a towel on the floor. He headed back out to let her know what he’d discovered. He found her kneeling in front of the bookcase, examining the garbage he’d left there.

“Oh, I guess I should have cleaned that up,” he said, frowning at it.

“We don’t have time to waste on that.” Kirigiri picked up the brown bottle that had been in the trash. “Naegi, what do you think this is?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Naegi said. “Protein or something, maybe? Ogami drinks a lot of that, right?”

Silently, Kirigiri turned the bottle so that he could see the front label, with a heavy black skull and crossbones emblazoned on it.

“Oh. That’s… probably not protein.”

“Unlikely.” Kirigiri handed it over, and Naegi nearly dropped it at the unexpected weight. “Take a look for yourself.” She walked away as Naegi began examining the bottle.

Now that he looked at it more closely, Naegi thought that he might have seen this bottle before. It looked a little familiar. He glanced over the label. The poison wasn’t named, but it did say “Fatality guaranteed within five minutes upon consumption, injection, or inhalation.”
The words rang a bell in Naegi’s memory. This was the bottle of poison Togami had been looking at in the chemistry lab, or one just like it. Well, he supposed that made sense – whatever was on the needles had to be able to work by injection.

Although now that he was looking at the label, it seemed like that wasn’t all it said. There was a small asterisk at the end of the phrase, indicating further information elsewhere. Naegi frowned, wondering where it meant. The other side of the bottle was blank, but – he flipped it over – there did seem to be another label on the bottom.

“Fatal dosage information,” he read, frowning. He skimmed over it, trying to work out in his head what the different quantities meant. Injecting the poison definitely looked like it would take the smallest dose, requiring very little as long as it was injected directly into the blood stream. The dosage seemed to change a little according to the victim’s weight, but it didn’t look like the difference would be more than a few drops. It took much more to kill by consuming the poison, at least a third of the bottle for someone at the top of the weight range, and even more than that for a full dose by inhalation.

“If less than a full dose is administered, possible symptoms may include dizziness, memory loss, loss of consciousness, ongoing breath, continuing pulse, and a drive for vengeance against a failed killer,” the label declared. “Be sure to check your math, kids!”

Naegi shivered at the cheerful tone of the text, even on something as deadly as this poison. So this could kill in five minutes? He’d really had a close call with that needle, hadn’t he? He wondered if that could have been enough to kill him if Kirigiri hadn’t intervened. He hoped not, but he couldn’t be sure – not when this had been used to kill someone else already.

He set the poison bottle down with the needles and looked around the room for Kirigiri. He found her standing at the entrance to the room, running one hand along the doorframe.

“Did you find something?” he asked.

“Possibly.” She turned to look at him. “Naegi –”

Ding dong, bing bong.

The television in the room flickered to life, showing Monokuma yawning at them. “Oops, you caught me sleeping!” he said cheerfully. “Your investigation was just so boring I couldn’t stay awake!” The pseudo-tired expression morphed into a wide, eager grin. “Should I do it? Is it okay? Can I can I can I?” He laughed. “Okay! Then let’s begin the class trial!”

As the television turned off, Kirigiri turned and headed over to the bookcase to collect the various pieces of evidence they’d found. Normally she seemed to expect Naegi to carry it all to the trial room, but maybe she’d decided that he couldn’t be trusted not to stab himself on any of the needles again. The only things left for Naegi to carry were the screwdriver and the poison bottle, which he could easily tuck into his pockets. Meanwhile, Kirigiri had her hands full managing all the different containers of needles, keeping them separate and holding them without piercing herself. Still, she managed to do it all without looking like it was difficult in the slightest, striding out into the hall at her usual speed.

“Be sure to shut the door behind you,” she said over her shoulder as she headed for the trial ground.

Naegi sighed, bracing himself for the long walk over to the red door. He’d had a little time to recover from the effects of the poisoned needle – he hoped it would be enough. He didn’t think
Monokuma would be very happy about it if he held up the trial because it took him ages just to walk across the first floor of the school.

As Naegi left the room, he pulled the door shut, and to his surprise it wobbled a little under his hand. He frowned. Had it done that before? He tried to think back to when Kirigiri had first opened the door – but he couldn’t remember if the door had done anything unusual then. He’d been too focused on the horrifying scene inside the room.

He glanced back at the door – but as far as he could tell, it fit flush into the doorframe without any evidence of tampering. He opened and closed it one more time, and again, it shook as it moved, even more than it had the first time.

Well, he didn’t really have time to look into the issue of the door anymore. The investigation period had ended, and it was time to make his way over to the red door to the trial grounds. The class trial was about to begin.
Chapter 67

Chapter Summary

The students gather to begin the fourth class trial.

Naegi made his way to the trial ground, step by careful step. Moving too fast set his head spinning, and he knew that for the ordeal ahead, he would need to have his mind as clear as possible. He would just have to go at a pace he could manage, and that would have to be enough. After all, he was pretty sure the trial wouldn’t start without him.

The hallway was as eerily silent as ever as he approached the red door. He turned the handle and tried to push it open – but that door was heavy even on a good day. After a dose of poison on top of days of exhaustion, Naegi found that his arms shook a little under the weight.

And then the pressure eased a little. Naegi looked up to see that Ogami had reached over to hold the door open for him, looking down at him in concern. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Naegi did his best to sound normal, but judging from the looks the other students gave him as he entered, he didn’t succeed.

Togami stepped forward, lips going tight as his gaze pierced through Naegi. Naegi straightened and tucked his injured hand in his pocket, trying not to sway on his feet. He could feel Togami’s eyes scanning carefully over him, taking note of everything, and he wanted to give the other boy as little to worry about as possible. With the trial about to begin, Togami ought to be focusing on that, not on what might have happened to Naegi.

Togami didn’t seem to agree, though. He crossed his arms and glared at Naegi. “You,” he said distinctly, “are not fine. What the hell happened?”

Naegi shrugged. “It’s not important right now.”

Togami looked at him for another moment, then swung around to Kirigiri. “What did you do to him?”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “What makes you think I did anything?”

Togami glared at her. “You were the only one in there with him. And even if you didn’t do whatever happened personally, it would still be your fault.”

“I’m sure you’d like to think that,” Kirigiri said calmly.

Her lack of reaction only seemed to make Togami angrier. But before he could say another word, Monokuma came springing out among them to land in the middle of the room. He rubbed sleepily at his eyes, looking around.

“Oh, is everyone here already? We’re not missing anyone? It’s getting so hard to be sure these days.” He shook his head and heaved a too-heavy sigh. “I must be getting old – all worn out and used up. Soon, everyone will move on to some newer mascot, with a cuter design and a more charmingly violent flair. No one will want me around when they can have someone newer.”
“No one wants you around anyway,” Togami said coldly.

“So it’s starting already? Maybe soon I’ll be replaced with a cute piglet with perky ears and a jaunty curl to its tail.”

Naegi stared at Monokuma blankly. He was pretty sure that even without the poison and head injury, none of that would make much sense to him. “What are you talking about?”

“How? You don’t agree?” Monokuma tilted his head at Naegi. “You think there’s no way something could be cuter than little ol’ me?”

“I didn’t say that –”

“Well, you’re right!” A wide grin spread over Monokuma’s face. “Nothing out-cutes a bear, and I’m the cutest bear there is! Good thing I remembered that before I did something drastic!” He threw his head back and laughed wildly. “Now, everyone into the elevator. See you all down there!” As the elevator doors opened, he disappeared.

“That was weird,” Asahina said, frowning at the place where Monokuma had been.

Togami shrugged. “No more than usual.”

Naegi gulped, watching each of the others glance hesitantly at the elevator before looking away again. He understood how they felt, thinking about the situation. So the culprit… the person who had knocked everyone in Ogami’s room unconscious and then murdered Hagakure… that person was here, among them? It seemed unbelievable…

But they couldn’t think like that. They couldn’t bury their heads in the sand and pretend it wasn’t happening. If they did, they’d all end up just as dead as Hagakure was.

“Come on,” Naegi said, taking the first step towards the elevator. “It’s time to put an end to this.”

But even though he tried to sound strong and confident as he headed into the elevator, every step he took felt like one more move away from his goal. Stepping into the elevator was just as chilling this time as it had been every time before, somehow made even more terrifying by the familiarity it was starting to have for him. Nothing made it easier.

But as the steel doors to the prison closed, shutting all six remaining students inside, warm fingers settled gently around Naegi’s hand. When Naegi looked up, he saw Togami staring fixedly at the door rather than meeting his eyes – but that did make sense. After all, they were technically still supposed to be separated. Actually, if he was going to play fair, Naegi knew he ought to shake Togami’s hand off and step aside.

He couldn’t bring himself to do it. Not after the horror of today, with another murder and the fast-approaching trial. With so much darkness surrounding him at every turn, he needed to have this one small moment of light. Naegi let his fingers curl back around Togami’s, their hands fitting together like puzzle pieces.

Turning his attention back to the front of the elevator, Naegi noticed that Kirigiri was looking over at him, narrowed eyes fixed on his hand in Togami’s. Naegi had the brief impulse to snatch his hand away and pretend it hadn’t happened – but there wouldn’t be much point when she’d obviously seen already. He just hoped she wouldn’t take it the wrong way.

However she took it, Kirigiri didn’t say anything. She looked away from the boys’ entwined hands, face unreadable, and stood in silence until the doors opened on the trial ground.
This room wasn’t quite as elaborate as the gothic midnight room they’d been in last time, but not by much. The walls were bedecked in heavy red curtains, and between them huge golden pillars stretched to the ceiling, covered in elaborate ancient carvings. The circle of small wooden podiums looked almost out of place among the other furnishings.

Reluctantly, Naegi let go of Togami’s hand and headed over to his place in the circle, while the others did the same. It was strange to see them all so spaced out, when at first the circle had been crowded with faces and voices. Now, there were more pictures of the dead than there were living students among them. With Maizono and Yamada on either side of him, harsh red Xs painted across their portraits, Naegi couldn’t escape the memories of what had come before this.

“Just the six of you, huh?” Monokuma dropped his head in a mockery of a sad pose. “That’s so few. You must be lonely!”

Naegi glared up at him. “You say that like it’s not your fault we’re all that’s left!”

Monokuma laughed in response. “I wonder, how many classmates will you lose in this trial? Who will be found guilty, and who will go on to live another day? Or maybe your school life come to an end completely! Who knows!” He grinned. “Now, are we ready to begin?”

Naegi took a deep breath, bracing himself as he looked around at the faces of the other students. Another class trial – another life and death battle against a friend – and no matter how things ended today, another tragedy. But he knew that there was no other choice. He had to do this.

It was time to begin.
Chapter 68

Chapter Summary

The fourth class trial finally begins.

Naegi looked around the circle at his friends, taking in the other five faces of his friends. They all looked back with varying degrees of determination, fear, and resignation.

“Well, we might as well start with the obvious point,” Togami said, when no one else seemed inclined to say a word. “Out of all of us, there’s only one person who has recently gotten a motive to kill.” His gaze zeroed in on Ogami. “You’ve been the mastermind’s tool from the start, and now they’ve called you to action.”

Ogami dropped her gaze. “I… I understand why you would accuse me, but I did not do this.”

“It’s easy for you to say that now,” Togami said. “But do you expect us to believe you’d really be that strong if the mastermind waved their hostage at you again?”

“It’s true that I do value the hostage the mastermind has been holding over me.” Ogami looked up from the floor, eyes intense as she looked around the circle. “But I value all of you, as well. I can no longer sacrifice one to save the other. Even if I did decide to kill in a moment of weakness, I would admit to it rather than let all of you die accusing me.”

“Very noble,” Togami sneered. “But you’re forgetting one thing. Hagakure died in your room – a room that I locked. If you can’t explain how he got in there, then it can only be because the mastermind helped you. Either they turned a blind eye to your transgression of the rule against breaking down locked doors, or they opened the door for your themselves.”

“You seem awfully willing to speak for the mastermind,” Kirigiri broke in, crossing her arms. “But aren’t you forgetting something?”

Togami glared at her. “What?”

“A reason why the mastermind wouldn’t have been the one to open the door,” Kirigiri said. “After all, the question of locked doors has come up already.”

Naegi frowned. When else had they talked about locked doors? There had been the morning after the fourth floor had opened, when Monokuma had created the new locked door rule, but other than that he hadn’t been around much. The last time they’d seen him was when he’d called that assembly – wait.

“You’re talking about when Ogami didn’t show up for the emergency assembly, right?” Naegi said. “Monokuma told us that the only way he’d open a student’s door would be as part of an investigation. That means he wouldn’t open the door to help someone commit a murder.”

“That’s right!” Monokuma sang out, beaming at them. “Getting your headmaster to help with your graduation exam would be a big no-no!”

“And if that’s the case, I think this is the first question we need to discuss,” Kirigiri said. “How did
three people get through the door to Ogami’s room after it was locked?” She looked over at Asahina and Ogami. “You two were there. Do you have an explanation?”

But neither girl said a word. Naegi frowned. He couldn’t understand it – why were they both staying silent? Even if it really was one of them, shouldn’t the other still be willing to speak up?

He sighed. He’d hoped that one of them would admit what had really happened, since keeping quiet about it looked suspicious. He didn’t really want to have to force anyone’s hand – but Kirigiri was right. They had to answer this question before they could move forward.

“Asahina.” Naegi looked her in the eye, giving her one more chance. “Are you sure you don’t know what happened?”

Asahina squared her shoulders like she was preparing for a fight. “I told you already – the door was open when I tried it.”

“No, I don’t think that’s true,” Naegi said. “These doors don’t lock automatically – you have to use a key no matter what side you’re on. So if the door hadn’t been locked properly last night, it should still have been unlocked this morning. But when Kirigiri tried it, the door was locked.”

“She could have been confused,” Asahina insisted. “Or maybe Togami came back and locked it again.”

“I did nothing of the sort!” Togami snapped.

“Well, it’s true we can’t prove what anyone didn’t do,” Naegi said slowly. “But I think maybe we can prove what someone did.” He kept his eyes on Asahina as he spoke. “When I closed the door to Ogami’s room, I noticed that it was kind of wobbling. None of the other doors move like that.”

“Meaning that it was actually broken, as I said,” Togami said, nodding.

“Unlikely,” Kirigiri said. “Up to this point, the mastermind has taken great care in the rules we’re given. I don’t believe they would have created a new rule just to ignore it a few days later.”

“Then what exactly are you suggesting?” Togami asked.

Kirigiri smirked. “The new rule specifically forbids breaking down locked doors. It doesn’t mention any other interference.”

“You can’t be claiming someone picked the lock,” Togami said. “Or have you forgotten that these locks are unpickable?”

Naegi frowned. Something about that didn’t sound quite right. The locks couldn’t be picked, at least according to Monokuma, and the rules forbade breaking a door down. But remembering the way the door had moved, he was sure that something had been done to it – something that wasn’t either of those things.

The way the door had moved…

“No one would have needed to touch the lock,” Naegi said, drawing the circle’s attention back to him. “Someone could open a locked door without breaking it down – if they unscrewed the hinges.”

“Oh, could they get around my rule that way?” Monokuma asked pensively from his throne. “I wonder…”
Everyone looked at him for a moment, waiting to see if he’d continue, but he just grinned out at them.

“Whether it violates the rule or not, that isn’t the problem,” Togami pointed out, shaking his head. “Unscrewing the hinges would require a screwdriver.”

“Yes, it would. And that’s exactly what we found.” Naegi pulled out the screwdriver and held it up for display. “This was hidden in Ogami’s room.”

Togami’s eyes narrowed at it. “That’s one of the screwdrivers from the toolkits in the boys’ rooms.” He looked sharply at Naegi. “Then are you suggesting that *Hagakure* opened the door?”

“No. It isn’t *Hagakure’s* screwdriver,” Naegi said. “It’s mine.” He looked across the circle. “Isn’t that right, Asahina?”

She clenched her fists. “I – I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yesterday, when I was trying to do laundry, the dryer door got stuck,” Naegi explained to the group, though he kept his gaze locked on Asahina. “I tried to use my screwdriver to get it open, and it got scratched.” He pointed out the gouge marks on the side.

“And why would you expect Asahina to know about that?” Ogami said quickly, before Asahina could respond. “If you discarded it after it was damaged, anyone might have picked it up.”

“But that’s just it – I didn’t throw it out,” Naegi said. “Asahina saw that I was having trouble fixing the dryer, so she did it for me. In exchange, I sewed up a tear in her jacket for her. And since we were both better with each other’s kits, we traded her sewing kit for my toolkit – including the screwdriver.”

“So not only was she in possession of a screwdriver, she’s been attempting to conceal the fact,” Togami said, a dark smile crossing his face. “I see.”

Ogami glared furiously at Togami. “Asahina did not do anything wrong! She –”

“It was me.” Asahina’s sharp words cut through Ogami’s protest. Naegi looked over to see her glaring out across the circle. “You’re right,” she went on, speaking so hastily she almost sounded out of breath. “I was lying before. I didn’t just find the door open. I wanted to talk to Sakura, so I used Naegi’s screwdriver to take her door off the hinges. It was all me.”

Naegi frowned. Everything that Asahina had just said did actually sound like what he’d thought must have happened – but there was something strange about the way she was saying it. And why was she admitting it now, when a few minutes ago she’d been denying it so vehemently? There was something strange about her confession, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what.

“So you’re saying that you opened Ogami’s door?” Kirigiri asked, raising an eyebrow. “From the hallway?”

“That’s right,” Asahina said, nodding decisively. “That’s exactly what happened.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think so.” Kirigiri looked over at Naegi. “You can see it too, right? The reason that Asahina couldn’t have opened that door the way she’s claiming?”

“Huh?” Naegi frowned. Kirigiri was saying that Asahina… couldn’t have opened the door? But she’d been the one with the screwdriver, and he was positive that the door had been opened using the hinges. So why couldn’t it have been Asahina? He knew the hinges on the door were big
enough to unscrew easily, since anyone could easily see them all the way from across the room –

Oh. Naegi looked up at Kirigiri. “You’re right – Asahina can’t have done it. The hinges are on the inside of the door.”

Monokuma laughed. “Of course they are! If it was that easy to get into someone’s dorm room, your school life would be over before we reached our first trial!”

Naegi frowned. So… if the hinges were only on the inside of the door… then that meant….

He looked across the circle, and Ogami met his gaze head on with straightened shoulders and a raised chin.
Chapter 69

Chapter Summary

The students debate the issue of who opened Ogami’s door.

“It was you, wasn’t it, Ogami?” Naegi asked, leaning forward over his podium. “You were the one who unscrewed the hinges on your own door.”

“No, it wasn’t!” Asahina insisted, before Ogami could answer. “I did! She didn’t even have the screwdriver – so she couldn’t have done it!”

“No!”

“No!” Asahina turned to Naegi. “Sakura was avoiding me – that’s why I needed to get into her room to talk to her! If I’d talked to her for long enough to give her a screwdriver, then I wouldn’t have needed to get the door open at all!”

“Unless that isn’t really why you needed the door open,” Jill said, scissors materializing in her hand as she pointed at Asahina. “Admit it – you went in to try to lure her into some girl-on-girl action with those bouncing balloons on your chest!”

“H-huh?” Asahina blushed, drawing back a little. “No, that had nothing to do with it! I just needed to talk to her, that’s all.” She dropped her head, staring down at her hands. “I realized how unfair I’d been to her, and – and I couldn’t just leave things like that.” She looked up again, eyes blazing. “So that’s why I did it. I’m the one who opened the door!”

“Hina, this isn’t necessary,” Ogami said, closing her eyes. “I’m more than prepared to accept any possible consequences for my actions.”

“Oh, is that so?” Monokuma asked, tilting his head inquisitively.

“No!” Asahina all but shouted. “It wasn’t her – it was definitely me!”

“We’ve already proved it can’t have been,” Togami said impatiently. “You must have given her that screwdriver somehow.” He glared over at Ogami. “And then you had me lock you in your room again to mask your intent to break out.”

“I didn’t intend to deceive you,” Ogami said. “At the time, my request to be locked in my room was genuine.”

“See?” Asahina said. “Why would Sakura want to be locked up if she was just going to open the door again?”

“Because you convinced me otherwise,” Ogami said. She looked around the room. “Hina left a letter containing the screwdriver outside my room –”

“No!”

“– requesting that I use it to open the door and speak with her during the night.”
“No – no, I didn’t!” Asahina said frantically, her eyes darting from Ogami to Monokuma and back. “Nothing like that happened! I’m the one who opened the door, and the screwdriver was in the room because I carried it inside! There wasn’t any note, and you can’t prove there was!”

Naegi frowned as she continued speaking in a panicked outpouring of words. Was that really right? He and Kirigiri definitely hadn’t found any note – but if Ogami was telling the truth, it must have been there. The question was, where could it have been? It must have been very well hidden – unless it hadn’t been hidden at all.

“No! That’s wrong!” Naegi interrupted Asahina’s panicked objections. “I may not have the note you wrote, but I think we can prove it existed.” He looked over at Ogami. “The sink in your bathroom was clogged with something white and pulpy – something that looked a lot like paper would if you tore it up and put it down the drain. And on the side of the sink, I found a scrap of paper with writing on it – writing that I bet would look an awful lot like Asahina’s.”

“You can’t prove that!” Asahina said, eyes wide and horrified.

“He doesn’t need to,” Ogami said. “It’s true. I destroyed your note in order to hide your involvement – but if I’d realized you intended to take the blame on yourself, I would have kept it to demonstrate the truth.”

Asahina looked from Ogami to Naegi – and her shoulders slumped in defeat. “Okay. You’re right. It – it happened like you said. I wasn’t the one who opened the door – I just asked Sakura to do it for me.” Tears filled her eyes. “And I wish I hadn’t!”

“What do you mean?” Naegi asked.

“I forgot about that rule when I wrote the letter to Sakura,” Asahina explained. “And then, when I remembered – well, maybe it wouldn’t count to take the door off the hinges – but what if it did? As soon as I thought of that, I tried to go take the letter back. But it was too late, Sakura already had it. And she opened the door last night, just like I asked her.” A tear fell down her cheek. “So – that means it’s my fault. Sakura only opened the door because of me – so if anyone has to be punished because of it, I’m the one who deserves it!”

“That isn’t true!” Ogami said fiercely. “I was fully aware of what it might mean when I opened the door, and I chose to do it anyway. You are not to blame for anything that happens, Hina.”

“But she is to blame for wasting our time,” Togami snapped. “Didn’t it occur to you that once a murder had taken place, it was more important to explain how everyone entered the ‘locked’ room than to protect your so-called friend from a punishment that might not even occur?”

“It wasn’t just that,” Asahina said. She looked around the circle. “All of you are suspicious of Sakura already. Even if the rule really does have a loophole, I knew that I couldn’t let her tell you all the truth. You’d think it meant she did something awful!”

“That’s exactly what I think,” Togami said coldly. He looked at Ogami. “You had motive, and Asahina’s stupidity provided you with the opportunity. I’ve yet to see anything to suggest that you are not the most likely suspect.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Kirigiri said, crossing her arms and smirking at Togami. “You’re too caught up in the issue of the spy to see what happened. In fact, Sakura Ogami is the one person who could not have committed this murder.”

“Oh?” Togami’s eyebrows went up. “That’s an interesting claim.” He looked over at Naegi. “What
“Uh…” Naegi blinked. “Sorry, I’m not sure where she’s going with this.”

“If you think about how Hagakure was killed, then it should be obvious,” Kirigiri told him.

“I definitely remember!” Jill said, twirling her scissors in her hand. “Just seeing such an uninspired murder method as clobbering a guy over the head made my fingers twitch to do some slicing!”

But Naegi shook his head. “No – that wasn’t it.”

Togami frowned. “But the Monokuma File –” He stopped, a sudden frown crossing his face. “No, it didn’t say so, did it? It said that he’d been hit over the head, but it didn’t actually specify that the blow was the cause of death.”

“And it wasn’t,” Kirigiri said. “It looked impressive due to the quantity of blood, but the head injury was nowhere near severe enough to be a killing blow.”

“All right, then.” Togami crossed his arms, looking over at Naegi. “If the head injury wasn’t what killed him, what was?”

“This.” Naegi pulled the heavy bottle of poison out of his pocket and set it on the wooden column in front of him, positioning it so the skull and crossbones label faced the other students. “Hagakure was poisoned.”

“And that somehow precludes Ogami from being the culprit?” Togami asked skeptically. “I don’t see how. Admittedly it would be stupid to consume anything that came from a known traitor – but Hagakure was more than enough of an idiot to fall for such a ploy.”

Naegi grimaced. “Uh – should you really be talking about him like that now that he’s dead?”

“Why? Death hasn’t had an impact on his intelligence level,” Togami said flatly.

“Right.” Naegi sighed, figuring that wasn’t an argument to have at that moment. “Well, anyway, it doesn’t matter. Hagakure didn’t get poisoned by eating anything.”

“What do you mean?” Asahina asked, frowning. “How else would someone get poisoned?”

“It says here on the label that this poison can be administered by consumption, inhalation – or injection,” Naegi said. “There are three needle marks on Hagakure’s body.”

“So you’re saying the killer jabbed him with a syringe three times?” Ogami asked. “That seems excessive.”

“They can’t have,” Togami said. “I checked the nurse’s office myself, and none of the syringes were missing.”

“Because that wasn’t it,” Naegi said. “We found the needles the killer used, and they weren’t syringes. They were regular sewing needles that had been dipped in poison.”

“Needles like in the sewing kits in every girl’s room,” Togami said, nodding slowly. “I see.”

“So… you’re saying someone knocked us all unconscious and then stabbed Hagakure with a bunch of needles?” Asahina asked.

“Not quite,” Naegi said. “Hagakure wasn’t the only one in that room to get stabbed with a poisoned
needle – all of you were.”

“What?” Asahina drew back. “But – that can’t be right! If we’d been poisoned, we’d be dead!”

“Not if it wasn’t a full dose,” Naegi said. He flipped the bottle over to show the dosage instructions. “It says here that one of the possible symptoms of a partial dose is loss of consciousness.”

“Possible symptoms?” Togami raised an eyebrow. “As in, not guaranteed?”

“This killer has been remarkable in one respect,” Kirigiri said. “Their plan relied on a great deal of both careful forethought and impulsive action.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Togami demanded, but Kirigiri didn’t answer.

“I’m not certain your claim holds together,” Ogami said, ignoring this exchange as she looked at Naegi. “I believe I understand the theory… but I don’t recall being stabbed with a needle.”

“Me either,” Asahina said, shaking her head. “Needles hurt – I’m sure I’d remember something like that.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Naegi said. “Memory loss is another side effect, and this one happens for sure. After a partial dose of the poison, your memory gets fuzzy about what happened leading up to it. You can’t remember getting stabbed at all.”

Asahina and Ogami looked at each other and nodded slowly. “I guess that makes sense –”

“Wait.” Togami glared across the circle at Naegi, fists clenching and face going slowly pale. “How exactly do you know what happens after getting poisoned?”
Chapter 70

Chapter Summary

Naegi, Togami, and Kirigiri discuss just what happened with the poisoned needles.

Naegi smiled nervously as the whole circle turned to look at him after Togami’s question. He hadn’t actually meant to tell them all that he’d been careless enough to poison himself, at least not in the middle of the trial – but he should have realized Togami would be sharp enough to catch any reference to it.

“I just sort of figured it out during the investigation,” Naegi said, hoping that they could just breeze past it and get back to the main point of the trial. “When we found the needles.”

“Figured it out?” Togami stared at him. “You were stabbed with one of the needles.”

“Uh…” Naegi hesitated, not sure if he should confirm it or not.

“You found one of the poisoned needles by getting stabbed with it.” Togami’s voice was very calm and even, and it was starting to make Naegi worried. He would have felt better about it if the other boy had shouted or something. As it was, the only hints of emotion Naegi could see were Togami’s pale face and white-knuckled fists.

“That’s right,” Naegi said at last, figuring that he couldn’t really deny it at this point. “But look, that’s not the important part –”

“Did you fall unconscious?”

“Well – yes, for a little while,” Naegi admitted. “But –”

“How long?”

“Not that long,” Naegi said. “Kirisigiri said it was only half an hour or so.”

“Oh, she did?” Togami’s gaze swung around to her. “Only half an hour, is that all? What does it take for you to think something is serious, a coma?”

“Don’t be melodramatic,” Kirigiri said, crossing her arms. “The girls were stabbed as well, and they’re perfectly fine.”

“That’s right,” Naegi agreed hurriedly. “Honestly, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look it,” Togami snapped. “You look like you could collapse at any moment.” He glared at Kirigiri. “Strange how that seems to happen every time he’s alone with you.”

Naegi didn’t like the look in Togami’s eye at all. “It wasn’t her fault I got stabbed – it was an accident!”

“Oh, really?” Togami said, anger beginning to show in his voice. “Because just a moment ago, you said that you didn’t remember what happened!”
Kirigiri raised an eyebrow. “Are you suggesting that I deliberately caused Naegi to be poisoned?”

“Getting him injured seems to be your favorite plan!” Togami snarled

“Look, this isn’t important right now!” Naegi said, trying to derail the argument. “We need to focus on what happened to Hagakure, not on this.”

“Not important?” Togami’s hands clenched so tightly they trembled. “We could have ended up investigating a double murder!”

Staring across the circle at Togami, Naegi could see the emotions he was trying to hold back, and it sent an ache through his chest. If things really had gone badly – if that needle had actually been coated with a full dose of poison – how would that have affected Togami? He’d known that Togami wanted him to stay alive – but he hadn’t realized just how much the possibility of his death would shake the other boy.

“That wasn’t going to happen,” Naegi said, as firmly as if he were making any other argument in the trials. “Kirigiri made sure it wouldn’t. She got the needle out and cleaned off the poison, and now I’m okay.”

Togami’s lips tightened as he studied Naegi intently. “I want to see your hand,” he said at last. “Show me where it stabbed you.”

Naegi sighed and held up his hand. “It was in the middle of my palm – well, you probably can’t see from over there.”

“All right, then.” Togami started to leave his place in the circle to head around to where Naegi was standing.

“What’s that? You’re trying to leave your assigned seat without a hall pass?” Monokuma asked, sounding shocked. As he spoke, a mechanical whirring sound came from up above them, and when Naegi looked up, he went pale at the sight of a huge machine gun lowering itself from the ceiling.

“But if you do that, someone might mistake you for absent,” Monokuma went on, smiling out at them. “You wouldn’t want that to happen, would you?”

Jaw clenched, Togami stepped back to his podium. “Fine,” he said through gritted teeth.

“It’s okay now, really,” Naegi assured him. “But look, how I got stabbed isn’t the point. The important thing is that everyone we found in that room must have been stabbed with at least one needle.” He looked around the circle at Ogami, Asahina and Jill. “The rest of you only had a partial dose, but for Hagakure, it was enough to kill.”

But Ogami shook her head. “I don’t see how that could have happened. If someone had approached me with any weapon, even one as small as a needle, I would certainly have noticed their intent and blocked the attack.”

“But that’s just it – with these needles, they wouldn’t have to approach you,” Naegi said. “The first one we found wasn’t just lying around on the floor – it was stuck into the bed. We couldn’t even tell it was there until I pressed down on the mattress in the wrong spot.”

“So you think everyone who sat on that bed got impaled with something sharp that released a nasty liquid inside us?” Jill threw her head back and laughed. “I like the way you think, Big Mac! But gotta say, it sounds like you’re just fantasizing. If some killer really did use those needles to stick it to us, where were they when we woke up?”
“That’s a good point,” Asahina said, frowning. “Shouldn’t the needles still have been stuck inside us when you found us?”

“No, I don’t think the culprit could risk that,” Naegi said. “The dosage for injection is a pretty small amount, and if they left the needles in place for too long, everyone might have ended up dead. Every person is only allowed to kill two other people, so a mistake would’ve gotten them immediately disqualified.”

“Then what happened to the needles?” Ogami asked. “You did say you found them, didn’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Naegi said. “We found five needles in your trashcan – Kirigiri, you have them, right?”

“I do.” Carefully, Kirigiri pulled out the poisoned needles, setting them out on the wooden railing in front of her. “These five were in the trashcan, while the sixth one was still in the mattress.”

“That yellow stuff on them – is that the poison?” Asahina asked, drawing away as if it could stab her again.

“I think it has to be,” Naegi said. “It looks like the same stuff was on all of them, and the one from the mattress definitely knocked me unconscious.”

“But why would that needle still have been in the mattress?” Ogami asked, frowning. “Surely the culprit should have removed all the needles.”

“Who cares?” Jill said, twirling her scissors. “It didn’t kill anyone, did it? Who’d bother with something as boring as a murder weapon that didn’t even get used?”

“Maybe they got interrupted before they could find it?” Asahina wondered.

“Well, I still don’t see how you think any of this rules out Ogami,” Togami said, crossing his arms. He still had an icy darkness to his eyes when Naegi met his gaze, but at least for now, he’d moved on from harping about Naegi’s injury. “If this theory is right, then the culprit would have needed time to plant the needles in the bed. Who else would have had the chance?”

“The issue isn’t about the opportunity. There’s another problem with the needles,” Kirigiri glanced across the circle and gave Naegi a faint smile. “You’ve spotted it, haven’t you?”

If Kirigiri was talking about the needles, then there was only one thing she could mean. Naegi nodded slowly. “Yes. When we searched Ogami’s room, we didn’t find six needles – we found twelve.”

Togami stared at him blankly. “And?”

“Oh – I guess you wouldn’t know,” Naegi realized. “The sewing kits only come with six needles each.” He looked over at Ogami. “When we first figured out that the needles were involved, I checked your sewing kit right away.”

“It should have been in my desk drawer,” Ogami said. “I’ve never even opened it.”

“Maybe not,” Naegi said. “But someone did. All six needles were missing. And when Kirigiri and I searched the room, we both found needles in different places.”

“That’s right,” Kirigiri said, pulling out the jar of cotton swabs. “In addition to the five poisoned needles Naegi found in the trashcan, these six needles were hidden in the bathroom.” She tilted the
jar so that everyone could see them. “Unlike the ones Naegi found, these don’t appear to have any poison on them.”

“So you believe Ogami is innocent because there were too many needles for her to have supplied them all herself?” Togami asked, frowning.

“It’s like with the toolkits – the sewing kits are the only place to find sewing supplies in the school,” Naegi said. “And since we found twelve needles, the culprit must have had access to two sewing kits.”

Togami nodded slowly, mouth twisting in an ironic smile. “Well. Now that you’ve shared the rest of what you found, I see your point. So putting the poisoned needles somewhere as obvious as the trashcan was a feint – the culprit intended for those to be found. Emptying Ogami’s sewing kit of needles would put the suspicion on her.”

“Right,” Naegi agreed. “The culprit must have assumed no one would search for any other needles once we found the ones in the trash.”

“Hang on.” Asahina looked around the circle, frowning. “But – if you’re saying that the culprit had to have two sets of sewing needles –”

“That’s right. There’s just one person who could have done it.” Naegi looked across the circle to meet Genocide Jill’s blood-red eyes. “You’re the only one!”
Naegi and the others face off against Genocide Jill in the fourth class trial.

Naegi supposed that he should have expected that Genocide Jill’s reaction to a murder accusation would be laughter. She threw her head back and cackled like he’d told her a particularly hilarious joke.

“Good one, Makyutie,” she said, grinning at him. “You’re never boring, I’ll say that for ya!”

“I’m not kidding,” Naegi said, giving her a serious look. “Ogami only would have had access to her own sewing kit, Kirigiri wasn’t in the room, and Asahina gave her sewing kit to me. You’re the only one who could have done this.”

“Oh, I see what you’re getting at,” Jill said, shrugging. “But I think you’re forgetting just one little thing.” She leaned forward over her podium. “I wasn’t there, remember?”

“But Fukawa was,” Naegi said.

“Her?” Jill put one hand on her hip as she stared at him. “Are you for real? You think Gloomy scraped up the guts to off someone?” She shook her head. “No way. If she had the nerve for that, you wouldn’t have a fantastic murderer like me to show you how it’s done!”

“Can you be sure about that?” Naegi asked, frowning. “I mean, you’ve never actually met her, right? You’re never around at the same time, so how would you know for sure what she’d do?”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Jill shook her head. “Take a good long look past my charming demeanor and people-pleasing attitude and tell me – do Gloomy and I look like different people?”

“Huh?” Naegi blinked, puzzled. “Well – no, of course you don’t.”

“Exactly.” Jill idly twirled a pair of scissors in one hand. “Because we aren’t. I may not know the minute by minute details of what she does all day, but you’d better believe the important stuff comes through loud and clear.”

“She said something to that effect to me during the investigation,” Togami said, his eyes dark as he glared at Jill. “The two of you share emotions and feel the same way towards people.”

“Got it in one, White Knight,” Jill said, beaming at him. “Way to ride to the rescue of a damsel in distress!” She looked around the circle. “And before any of you ask another stupid question – I can tell you for sure that I never once wanted to kill that guy. The only boys I want to kill are so adorable you just want to make them scream – and there’s nothing adorable about Hagakure.”

“But – if Naegi’s right, then there’s no one else it could have been,” Asahina said. “Maybe – maybe being trapped here got to be too much for her, and she just picked a random target.”

“Random? Not on your life!” Jill snapped, jabbing her scissors in Asahina’s direction. “You think killing is just a game for me? Something I do because I’m bored or because it seemed like a good
idea at the time? Well, think again! Killing is my passion and my art, and I take it seriously.”

“And what exactly do you mean by that?” Kirigiri asked, studying Jill through narrowed eyes.

“I mean that I would never want the blood of some loser like Hagakure soiling my hands,” Jill said, tossing her braids. “The only blood I want to see belongs to my darling White Knight!”

“Which we already knew,” Asahina said, rolling her eyes.

But there was something about the way that Jill had said those last few words that had sent a chill of dread down Naegi’s spine. “Wait, hang on. If what you just said is true, then – then are you saying that you think Fukawa being the culprit would make sense if –” He took a deep breath, bracing himself to say the words. “If Togami was the victim?”

Jill grinned at him. “Now you got it, Big Mac! Only thing I’d object to there would be that I didn’t get to hear him scream myself.”

Naegi’s breath froze in his throat at the thought. He could almost see it laid out before his eyes – Togami’s face slack and lifeless, his own blood dripping down his sides, his hands pinned to the wall with the scissors Jill was even now spinning in her fingers. The world spun dizzily around him at the vision, and he felt himself weaving on his feet as a silent roar of protest filled his ears.

Before this, he would have said he didn’t want to see anyone here dead – but he knew now that this was different. Togami was different.

“Naegi? Are you all right?”

Only one voice could have cut through the spinning and screaming in his head. Naegi looked up across the circle, and his eyes locked with Togami’s. He clung to the shared gaze like a lifeline, taking in one shaky breath after another.

“I’m fine,” he said at last, using both hands to brace himself against the wooden railing. “I just – got dizzy for a second.”

“Aw, you didn’t have to get so shaken up by it, Makyutie,” Jill said. “It’s not like I’m really going to kill my darling White Knight. Sure, I’d enjoy it and all, but that’s a one-time deal! I’d rather follow him around and stay right up close at his side!”

“But what if you couldn’t?” Kirigiri’s calm question pierced across the circle. “What would you do if you felt that was no longer an option?”

Jill shrugged. “I guess that would be where plan B comes in!” She snipped her scissors through the air in demonstration. Naegi’s stomach lurched at the sight, knowing just what she meant by it.

“As fascinating as this debate is, can I remind you all that I’m not actually dead?” Togami said, sending Kirigiri an irritated look. “We’re talking about Hagakure’s murder, not mine.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” Kirigiri tapped one finger against her chin. “There’s one thing about this murder that is very unusual – something we haven’t seen before. And I think that it’s something that can answer this question.” She looked over at Naegi. “Do you know?”

Naegi gritted his teeth and tried to focus past the dizziness that still rocked his head. “Something we haven’t seen before?” What was it that was unique about this particular killing?

He tried to think. She couldn’t mean the locked door – they’d already answered that question. And Celeste’s plan had centered around people falling unconscious. He supposed that they hadn’t seen
poison in any of the other trials, but he wasn’t sure Kirigiri would consider poison to be very unusual – and anyway, that didn’t have anything to do with the question of who had been murdered. Not unless…

He looked up at her. “You mean that this is the first death we’ve seen where the culprit didn’t personally murder the victim, don’t you?”

“Exactly.” Kirigiri nodded. “The nature of the killer’s trap means that she would have had to put it in place before the victim was present – and that means that we can’t guarantee that the intended victim was the one who actually got killed.”

“So you’re saying that the culprit didn’t mean to kill Hagakure?” Ogami asked.

“She said it herself,” Kirigiri said, gesturing at Jill. “The only one she would try to kill is Togami. Any other victim must have been an accident.”

“Sounds like someone’s jumping to conclusions!” Jill retorted. “I can buy Gloomy screwing up a perfectly good murder plan – but even she would know better than to try to kill a guy who wasn’t actually in the room!”

“Unless she thought that he was going to be,” Naegi said. He looked over at Asahina. “You said that you brought the others to Ogami’s room, right?”

“Yes,” Asahina agreed. “Fukawa first, then Hagakure.”

“And what did you say when you asked them to come?” Naegi asked. “Did you say exactly who else would be there?”

“I – I don’t remember.” Asahina frowned. “I think that I just said that I wanted everyone who didn’t believe in Sakura to come listen to her.”

“Which could reasonably be assumed to include Togami,” Kirigiri pointed out. “On its own, that might not be enough to plan a murder – but there would have been one other reason for her to believe Togami would be involved.”

Naegi nodded. “You mean the door, don’t you?” He looked at Asahina. “The door must have been open already, right? Fukawa would have been able to see that from her room. And since she didn’t know about the screwdriver, she naturally would have assumed that the door had been opened with the key – the one that had been in Togami’s possession.”

“So you think she set up a murder while she was in a room full of people?” Jill rolled her eyes. “Not even I would try that – no way Gloomy could pull it off!”

“She wouldn’t need to,” Ogami said, face grim. “The room would have been empty when she arrived. Hina went to speak to Hagakure instead of returning immediately, and I was in the bathroom disposing of Asahina’s note. She would have had an opportunity, had she wished to use it.”

“And what, she just pulled a bunch of poisoned needles out of thin air?” Jill laughed. “Is she a witch now? Because let me tell you, I can think of much better uses for a magic wand!”

“It wouldn’t take magic,” Kirigiri said. “Just planning.” She looked over at Naegi. “You see it, don’t you?”

And as much as Naegi hated to do it, he had to nod. “Yes. The only way this makes sense is if
Fukawa already had the needles.” He took a deep breath. “This wasn’t a spur of the moment plan – she was planning to kill Togami already.”
Chapter 72

Chapter Summary

The fourth class trial continues with a discussion of what the culprit had truly intended to do.

After Naegi’s declaration, all eyes turned to Genocide Jill – but for once, she didn’t seem to have anything to say. She glared back out at them, dark and angry, and the faint snip of her scissors sounded through the room.

“So – if you’re right, and she had the plan already,” Asahina said slowly, “then you’re saying she brought the needles with her and stuck them in the bed right away? Without knowing for sure who would be there?” Her face went slowly pale. “But then – she couldn’t have known who would sit where. She – she could have killed any of us that way.”

But Kirigiri shook her head. “It’s not as much of a risk as you might think. Those beds aren’t very big, after all. If four people are going to sit on one, that would cover almost the entire surface. And as the first person in the room, she would have been able to choose her seat first, forcing the rest of you to seat yourselves around her.”

“That’s still a one in three chance,” Ogami pointed out, frowning.

“No, I don’t think it would have been,” Naegi said, considering it. “Not if she was trying to control where Togami sat.” He looked across the circle at the other boy. “If you had to sit on the same bed as Fukawa, where would you pick?”

“The place as far away from her as possible, obviously.” Togami scowled at Jill. “Which apparently wouldn’t be far enough.”

Jill crossed her arms, staring back at Togami. “So even you’re going to get in on this, darling? Joining forces with all the rest to try to kill off this big, bad murderer?” Her dark red tongue curled across her grin. “Well, if I’d known this was what it’d take to get your attention, I’d have tried it ages ago!”

Togami drew back, an expression of startled disgust crossing his face. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Oh, don’t try to hide it, darling,” Jill said with a laugh. “Jumping straight to trying to kill me is awfully forward – but I like a guy who knows what he wants.” She leaned sharply forward over her podium. “But you’ll have to try harder than that! You’re saying Gloomy did this? Well, I think your puzzle is missing one very important piece.”

Naegi frowned at her. “What do you mean? What’s missing?”

“Aw, come on, don’t tell me you aren’t going to fight me for him, Big Mac,” Jill said, sending a dark grin in Naegi’s direction. “Or did you just not bother to take a look at that bottle you’ve got in front of you?”

The bottle – did she mean the poison? Naegi picked the heavy container up with a frown. What
was she talking about? He didn’t see anything wrong with it, even when he tilted the bottle to examine it from all angles, liquid still heavy inside –

Oh.

Naegi checked the bottle’s cap more closely, then looked over at Jill. “I think I see what you mean. This bottle of poison is still sealed.”

“You always get there eventually, don’t you?” Jill said. “So go on then, tell me – how could anyone get poison on those needles without opening the bottle?”

Naegi frowned. That – that was a good question. It hadn’t even occurred to him that the bottle of poison he’d found in the trash might not be the murder weapon – but now that he was looking, he could see that the cap on top still had plastic on it, sealing it to the rest of the bottle. But that didn’t make sense, either – the way the poison had worked matched the label exactly. The murder had to have been done with this poison, even if he couldn’t see how.

“You’re assuming that was the bottle of poison the killer used,” Togami said. Naegi looked up to see the other boy smirking as he pulled out a small plastic bag full of broken brown glass. “Unfortunately for you, we have proof that it wasn’t. Asahina and Ogami found this in the kitchen – the pieces of a second bottle. And when I examined the chemistry lab, all the bottles of this particular poison were missing.”

“Ooh, so you’re coming at me with weapons and everything?” Jill’s ragged laugh tore through the air. “You’re just burning to see my corpse, aren’t you, baby? Gotta say I’m flattered, but what kind of girl would I be if I gave it all up before the first date?”

“You’re seriously still going to argue?” Asahina demanded, glaring at her. “We just proved there’s no one else it could be!”

“No one else? I don’t think so!” Jill’s hand shot forward, her scissors pointing straight at Togami. “Sorry, darling, but you had just as much opportunity as me.”

Naegi stared at her, startled. “What? No – Togami didn’t have any needles. He couldn’t have done it.”

“Oh, please.” Jill rolled her eyes. “If he asked right, he could get Gloomy to give up anything he wanted. A sewing kit would’ve been easy. And with the room key, he could’ve planted those needles any time he liked!”

“But Togami wouldn’t have known I was going to bring the others in there,” Asahina said impatiently. “He didn’t even know Hagakure would be there.”

“Maybe not, but he knew she would.” Jill’s scissors stabbed in Ogami’s direction. “We’ve all heard him going on about how she’s a dangerous traitor – looks to me like he finally decided to take her out for good!”

Togami glared at her. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve already told you all that I have no intention of murdering anyone.”

“Baby, I could listen to you talk all night long, but that won’t mean much when morning rolls around.” Jill smiled at him, dark and wild. “Prove it.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “I don’t need to. We’ve already proven it had to be you.”
“Are you sure? Is everyone sure?” Jill looked around the circle, her frightening red gaze burning into each of their eyes. “Are you all ready to bet your lives on it?”

And looking around, Naegi could see flickers of hesitation from Asahina and Ogami.

Were they really taking Jill’s claims seriously? Naegi knew Togami couldn’t have done this – but he would need more than his belief to convince anyone else. He frantically cast his thoughts back over the evidence they’d discussed – the needles, the poison, the mysteriously opened door – but none of it specifically ruled out the scenario Jill had suggested. Nothing they’d discussed so far could rule out her version of events.

“Yeah, I thought so,” Jill said, nodding in satisfaction. “You can all see it, too. There’s not one single thing about this murder that points to me instead of –”

“You’ve got that wrong!”

Jill stopped mid-sentence, staring at Naegi in surprise.

“There is one piece of evidence everyone saw that wouldn’t fit if Togami were the killer,” Naegi said. “You all remember the way Ogami’s room looked, right? You all weren’t just unconscious on the bed – you were covered with blood.”

“Oh, that’s right – the killer hit Hagakure with something,” Asahina said. “But – wasn’t that just to hide that he really got poisoned?”

“That’s what I thought at first, too,” Naegi said. “But now I’m not so sure. I mean, if the culprit seriously wanted to hide that Hagakure died from poison, they would have put the needles somewhere other than the trashcan. They could have hidden those needles anywhere, but they were in one of the first places I looked. I’m sure the culprit intended for them to be found, and for suspicion to fall on Ogami.” He looked around the circle. “Which means that there’s no reason for the culprit to have hit Hagakure.”

“That’s true, it’s very strange,” Ogami said slowly, “but I don’t see how that clears Togami of suspicion.”

“Yeah – actually, it makes him look even more guilty,” Asahina said, tilting her head as she thought it over. “I mean, Fukawa can’t even stand to look at blood, right? She faints every time she sees it.”

“Which is exactly why she would have had to do it,” Naegi said. “You two had been knocked out by the partial dose of poison, and she’d pulled the needles out to make sure that she didn’t accidentally overdo it. But she couldn’t risk doing the same thing to herself – there wouldn’t have been anyone around to pull the needle out. So if Fukawa was the killer, she would have needed a quick, reliable way to knock herself unconscious – and hitting Hagakure’s corpse would do it.”

“So – you think she used her own fear of blood to make herself faint?” Asahina looked disturbed. “She hit his body after he was dead, just to spill some blood? That’s – that’s awful.”

“Yeah – awfully unlikely!” Jill grinned at Naegi. “Nice try, Big Mac, but I don’t think so. I’ve seen plenty of blood splatters, and I can tell you this – that blood got spilled before he died.”

“Huh?” Naegi stared at her, frowning. He’d been sure that was right! Could she be lying?

“I’m afraid I have to agree,” Kirigiri spoke up. “With the quantity of blood, and the distance it spread – yes, Hagakure’s heart was definitely still beating when he was hit.”
“Still beating?” A thought occurred to Naegi. “But that doesn’t mean he was conscious.” He checked the poison bottle’s label. “It says here that death will occur within five minutes, not instantaneously – so she still could have hit him after he was poisoned, but before he died.”

“And you think five minutes is long enough?” Jill countered. “With everything she’d have to do? Waiting for the others to lose consciousness, getting the needles out of the bed, opening Ogami’s sewing kit – you really think she could have done all that in just five minutes?”

“It does sound like a lot to accomplish,” Ogami said, looking from Jill to Togami.

“Obviously she would have had to hit him first,” Togami snapped, glaring at the others. “And then she just kept her eyes closed until she was ready to faint.”

“Come on, White Knight, don’t tell me you think that would actually work,” Jill said, laughing. “Don’t you know that the number one guaranteed way to make yourself peek is to know that you shouldn’t?”

“I guess it would be pretty hard to keep your eyes closed all that time,” Asahina said, frowning. “I mean, it would just take one wrong second of opening her eyes, and then she’d faint.”

“She could have covered her eyes with one hand,” Naegi said dubiously. Something was nagging at his memory, like there was something he ought to remember about this – but he couldn’t quite recall what.

“That wouldn’t be very effective,” Ogami said. “And presumably she would have needed her hands to work with the crime scene.”

“Wasn’t there anything else she could have used?” Kirigiri asked, raising an eyebrow at Naegi. “Surely something comes to mind.”

Naegi frowned. Anything else…? What was Kirigiri talking about? Was there something else that he’d seen at the murder scene – something that he’d forgotten? It seemed like there was, but even as he strained, he couldn’t – quite –

Kirigiri rubbed at her wrist, idly wrapping her hand around it – and Naegi remembered.

“The hand wrap!” He looked over at Ogami. “I remember now! one of your boxing hand wraps was under the bed, on the other side from where the blood was – but I could see that it had blood splatters on it anyway.”

Kirigiri nodded, giving him a faint smile. “And a hand wrap would be exactly the right size to use as a makeshift blindfold.”

“She would have been able to hit Hagakure while he was still alive, and keep her eyes covered until she was ready to faint,” Naegi said.

“It would even explain why she was stupid enough to leave the last poisoned needle behind,” Togami added. “If she was operating on touch alone to retrieve the needles, she wouldn’t have been able to find the one that was still embedded in the mattress.”

“Which you definitely wouldn’t have left behind, if you were the killer,” Naegi said, nodding at Togami. He turned to Jill. “There’s only one reason someone would need to get blood all over this crime scene – and only one person who would have needed a blindfold.” He met her eyes, not flinching away from their bloody depths. “You did this.”
Slowly, Jill’s wild grin faltered, until at last it drained away. “Actually, I didn’t.” Her expression was oddly sad, looking out of place with her unsettling eyes and dangling tongue. “But – it seems like that doesn’t matter too much anymore.”
Naegi stared at Jill as she curled her fingers tight around her scissors. Was that really it? Was she actually going to take it so calmly? He’d half expected the serial killer to attack them in a fit of rage at finding herself cornered, or to explode in a scream of furious insults. He hadn’t thought that she might just – stop.

“So – you admit it, then?” he asked hesitantly.

Jill shrugged. “Well, I can’t say for sure or anything – but it sounds to me like you’ve probably got it right. I know when I’m beat.” She shook her head. “Man, I can’t believe I’m getting nailed for a loser with zero sex appeal! But hey, if I gotta go down to someone, can’t think of a better way than getting double-teamed by my White Knight and his boy toy. Hell of a lot better than what I’d find outside this place, that’s for sure.”

And with that, Jill spun towards Monokuma’s chair, her scissors flashing out to point at the bear. “You hear that, or do you have honey in your ears? Let’s get this thing started!”

“Huh? Is it time already?” Monokuma tilted his head, looking puzzled. “But that doesn’t seem very fair, does it?”

“Nothing about this is fair,” Naegi said, scowling up at the bear. “What are you talking about all of a sudden?”

“Oh? It doesn’t bother you?” Monokuma grinned out at them. “All right then – I guess it’s that time! Everyone, please use the lever in front of you to cast your votes! Will you make the right choice, or the dreadfully wrong one? What’s it gonna be?”

Naegi frowned up at Monokuma for a moment. What had the bear been trying to get at? Something wasn’t fair – something that should bother them all? He cast his mind back over all the evidence they’d discussed – but no, it still all made sense to him. Fukawa had to be the culprit. There was no one else who could have committed this murder. Monokuma was just trying to confuse them, like he always did.

He looked down at the levers, where all his classmates’ faces stared back up at him in silent judgement. He hated to do this – but he knew he had no other choice. Naegi reached out and pressed the lever showing Fukawa’s face, choosing her as the blackened.

He must have been the last one to vote, because as soon as he’d finished, the Monokuma Vote machine began its usual whirl of faces, flipping dizzily between the colored portraits of the living and the black and white pictures of the dead. And eventually, one by one, all three columns of images stopped to show Fukawa’s face, with the word “guilty” flashing below it.

“That’s right!” Monokuma sang out gleefully. “The killer this time was Toko Fukawa! You’re absolutely correct!” He shook his head. “Aw, but I can’t believe how cold you guys are. Accusing
a girl who isn’t even here to defend herself? How cruel!”

Naegi froze. He hadn’t even really considered it until this moment – but it was true, Fukawa wasn’t here. She’d been absent for the entire trial, and unlike all the other culprits, she’d never gotten the chance to speak for herself. Genocide Jill had done so, of course – but Jill wasn’t the one who had committed this murder, not really. They’d voted Fukawa to her death, without even giving her the chance to share her side of the story. Guilt curdled through his stomach, twisting together with the remaining effects of the poison in a violent nausea.

“Aw, but you don’t have to worry,” Monokuma went on, beaming out at them. “Your favorite headmaster will always play fair, even if you don’t – and I would never break one of my rules. We can’t just execute people who haven’t earned it, now, can we?”

Suddenly, the Monokuma Vote began spewing its usual bursts of confetti – but instead of letting it flutter harmlessly to the ground, this time it blasted the scraps of paper directly into Jill’s face. She coughed at the onslaught, gasped for a breath – and sneezed.

When she looked up again, her eyes had reverted to Fukawa’s light brown. She looked around the circle, confusion evident on her face – until her gaze settled on the Monokuma Vote, lit up with three of her own faces staring back at her. She stared up at the glowing images, all color draining from her own face until she seemed to be nothing more than a pale echo of the girl in the lights.

“So th-that’s it, then,” she said at last, her voice flat. “Did you even bother to have the trial, or did you all just v-vote for me as soon as you got the chance?”

“Of course we had a trial!” Naegi said. “We had to figure out what happened. We wouldn’t vote against anyone without being sure.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you spent a r-really long time talking about it,” Fukawa said. “It must have taken nearly five whole minutes to decide none of your friends would have done it.”

Naegi drew back a little at the venom in her voice at the word friends. She said it like she didn’t include herself in the group – but that wasn’t true. He’d always considered Fukawa one of his friends, just as much as any of the others. Hadn’t she known that?

“Picking based on that kind of criteria would be an open door to failure,” Togami snapped. Naegi looked over at the other boy, seeing his eyes cold with fury as he glared at the girl who’d tried to kill him. “We know exactly what you attempted.”

Addressed by her white knight, Fukawa finally looked away from the Monokuma Vote, turning towards Togami with the slow pull of a moon trapped in orbit around a dying planet. “What do you know?”

“Everything,” Togami said shortly.

“That’s what I th-thought you’d say.” Fukawa looked around the circle, eyes accusing. “You don’t know anything.”

“That’s not true,” Naegi protested. “We know that you didn’t really want to kill Hagakure at all.”

Fukawa’s head snapped around towards Naegi, and he fought not to take a step backwards at the intensity of her stare. He took a deep breath and forced himself to continue.

“You didn’t want to kill Hagakure, but you did want to murder someone,” Naegi said, Fukawa’s eyes burning into him as he spoke. “You were trying to kill Togami. You put poison from the
chemistry lab on the needles from your sewing kit, and then dumped the poison bottle in the kitchen trash. You hadn’t decided how to use the needles yet – but Asahina gave you an opportunity when she invited you to a meeting in Ogami’s room. When you saw the open door, you assumed Togami had to be involved.”

Fukawa’s gaze flickered towards Togami at that point, her eyes shadowed. Togami glared back at her, vicious and unforgiving.

“But what you didn’t know was that there was another way to get the door open,” Naegi went on. “Asahina had gotten a screwdriver from me earlier in the day, and she’d passed it on to Ogami. The door wasn’t actually unlocked – Ogami just unscrewed the hinges. Togami wasn’t there at all – but you couldn’t have known that. So while Ogami and Asahina were out of the room, you planted the poisoned needles in the only place anyone would be able to sit – the mattress. When Asahina came back with Hagakure, you must have realized your mistake – but by then, it was too late to stop.”

Fukawa flinched at the words “too late,” but she didn’t say anything to confirm or deny the accusations Naegi was throwing at her.

“Ogami, Asahina, and Hagakure all got stabbed by the poisoned needles as soon as they sat on the bed,” Naegi continued. “The girls only got enough to knock them out, but Hagakure got the fatal dose you’d meant for Togami. And then, before he actually died, you blindfolded yourself with one of Ogami’s hand wraps and hit him with a weight. That left blood all over the scene, so that you could make yourself faint at any moment. You got rid of as much evidence as you could, hiding the needles from Ogami’s sewing kit and putting the poisoned needles in the trash where anyone could find them. And then, after you’d finished altering the crime scene, you took the blindfold off so that you’d appear to be unconscious like the others when we found you.”

Naegi looked straight at Fukawa, meeting her eyes directly. “You were the only one who could have done it. We didn’t vote until we’d figured all of it out.”

“Good for you,” Fukawa said, clenching her fists. “I’m sure you’re all proud of yourselves. You have all the a-answers, don’t you?”

“No. Not all of them.” Naegi bit his lip, watching her. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to know this last answer – but she deserved the chance to tell them. He had to ask. “Why did you do it?”

Fukawa looked away instead of answering, her expression shuttered and unreadable.

“Well – it’s kind of obvious, isn’t it?” Asahina asked, tilting her head. “I mean – she wanted Togami, and he picked someone else. She found out he didn’t want her, and she was angry. Seems pretty simple to me.”

Fukawa’s laughter cut across the circle, sharp and bitter. “I-is that what you think? You think I was jealous, like some empty-headed manga heroine who c-cries into her pillow? I’m not stupid. I knew she didn’t want me.” She looked up, staring straight at Togami. “And I didn’t care. I wanted you, and that was enough.”

“So you expect me to believe you’ve been stalking me out of some kind of selfless devotion?” Togami sneered, rolling his eyes. “Or was your attempt at poisoning me a way of showing how much you care?”

“No. If that were all, she would have painted the walls with your blood days ago.” Fukawa clenched her fists. “I thought it was b-bad enough at home, waiting for the minute the police put all
her crimes together and came for me – but this is worse. Locked up with people who don’t want me around, waiting for someone to decide to get r-rid of me – I could only stand this nightmare until now because I could dream of something else instead. My white knight, handsome and perfect and untouchable.” She fell silent, mouth twisting into an ironic grimace.

“So – that was why?” Naegi asked. “Because you couldn’t see him as an untouchable prince anymore?”

“He wasn’t the knight I wanted him to be – but he never stopped being untouchable,” Fukawa said darkly. “That was the problem. For years, e-every boy I’ve ever wanted has turned up dead, murdered with a serial killer’s signature style. I’ve had to live in terror, knowing that o-one day I’ll be blamed for everything she’s done. And now, when it would actually help to have a serial killer on my side – she isn’t.” She clenched her fists, staring at Togami. “She w-wouldn’t kill you. Even though I wanted to leave, even though you weren’t the knight I dreamed about, even though it would have been easy for her – she wouldn’t kill you.”

“Well – she did point out that killing someone here when we all know her style would be a pretty stupid move,” Naegi said. “And she said she didn’t want to kill anyone another way.”

Fukawa spun towards him, and her glare was as poisonous as her needles. “She said? She said? D-did you talk about it while trading friendship bracelets and braiding each other’s hair?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever done either of those things,” Naegi said, taken aback.

“Y-you might as well have,” Fukawa said bitterly. “You said it before – you’d be her friend.” She looked at Togami. “And you’d rather have her around than me.” Her shoulders began to shake. “Outside this place, no matter how a-awful things got, no matter how much people hated me – at least I knew there was one person they’d hate more. Until you didn’t.”

“You mean… you were jealous of Genocide Jill?” Naegi asked slowly, the pieces slowly coming together in his head.

“She takes everything I want and destroys it,” Fukawa said. “And now – when I finally wanted her to do it – she wouldn’t. So I did it for her.” A vicious smile spread across her face. “I h-hope she enjoyed waking up at the scene of a murder with no idea what happened.”

“You tried to kill me to get revenge on your alter ego?” Togami demanded, looking outraged.

Fukawa’s head snapped towards him. “I tried to kill you because I want you dead.”

“That’s not what she said, though,” Naegi said, remembering Genocide Jill’s explanation of the two girls’ shared feelings. “She said she only wanted to kill Togami if she couldn’t be near him – and she said that you and she always feel the same way.”

Fukawa froze, her expression going brittle. At last, she shook her head. “But I couldn’t.” She closed her eyes. “Look, the trial’s a-already over. You don’t have any more arguments to win. There’s no point anymore. This is the l-last time you’ll have to fake caring what happens to me. After this, I’ll be out of your hair.”

Naegi would have protested, would have tried to convince her that he wouldn’t fake that – but he didn’t get the chance.

“Oh, then are you finished? Is everything all nice and fair?” Monokuma grinned out at them. “Then I think it’s time for the blackened who disturbed the peace to pay the price. I’ve prepared a very special punishment for the Ultimate Writing Prodigy. Let’s give it everything we’ve got – it’s
punishment time!"
Chapter 74

Chapter Summary

The remaining students watch the punishment for the fourth class trial.

Chains shot out of the walls, locking around Fukawa’s neck, and she let out a strangled scream as they dragged her away through the door. Naegi stared after her until the doors slammed shut, wishing he’d been able to say more to her. This wasn’t fair. Yes, Monokuma had given Fukawa a chance to explain herself after the trial had ended – but he’d begun the punishment before the rest of them could give her the answers she’d deserved.

She’d thought they all hated her. Naegi’s eyes burned at the thought of how she must have felt, believing that none of them wanted her around. He couldn’t even begin to imagine what it must have been like for Fukawa to live with a serial killer in her head, blacking out and finding the crucified bodies of boys she’d had feelings for. And she’d believed that they’d rather have that murderous alter ego than her.

Had they ever given her a reason to think otherwise? Naegi remembered his own words to her the day before. Fukawa had asked whether he wanted to spend time with Genocide Jill, whether he wanted to be her friend – and he’d said yes. He hadn’t meant to imply that he’d be Jill’s friend instead of Fukawa’s. He’d just assumed that Fukawa knew he already considered her one of his friends. He should have taken that chance to explain. If he had, then maybe she wouldn’t have felt like she had to go this far.

Would it have stopped her if she’d understood? Would knowing that she wasn’t as universally hated as she’d believed have calmed her enough to reconsider her decision? Well, now he would never find out. He hadn’t spoken up, and she’d acted out of fear, and loneliness, and betrayal.

And now she was going to die, still believing all those awful things were true. She thought they’d be glad she was gone.

Naegi looked up at the head of the circle, where Monokuma smiled out at them from his overwrought throne. The mastermind had done this on purpose. There was no other explanation. They’d never put a time limit on any of the trial proceedings, allowing the students to talk until they understood everything – but this time, Monokuma had ended things and dragged Fukawa away before Naegi had the chance to say something to make her upcoming execution a little easier to endure. She would die believing the worst of them, and they would all have to live knowing it.

After too many agonizing minutes, the curtains on the opposite side of the room finally swung open, signaling for the students to leave their places at the circle and watch the scene play out. Naegi turned towards the curtains – but as he stepped away from his podium, the world shuddered around him, and only the fact that he stumbled into the railing prevented him from collapsing to his knees. Black spots exploded before his eyes as he clutched at the wooden rail, fighting a desperate, losing battle to stay upright.

And then an arm wrapped around him, pressing him back against a warm body and taking enough of his weight that he could regain some of his bearings. Naegi looked up into Togami’s face, wincing at the depth of concern he saw there. He didn’t want the other boy to worry any more...
about him, not when Togami was angry enough already about what had happened.

Looking over at the window, Naegi saw that Kirigiri’s eyes were on him and Togami, rather the scene outside. He would have pulled away – but Togami’s arms tightened around him as soon as he tried.

“Not anymore,” Togami said, in a voice that would carry even to where Kirigiri stood. “We are done playing her games.”

Naegi might have protested in other circumstances – but he knew that he wouldn’t be able to make it over to the window without assistance. He didn’t want to find out just what Monokuma might do if he thought that Naegi was failing to watch the execution. And besides, if this had to happen, then Naegi knew he needed to see it, whether Monokuma would force the issue or not. Fukawa had been his friend, even if she hadn’t understood it. She deserved to have him witness her last moments.

Leaning heavily on Togami, Naegi made his way over to the window, step by nausea-inducing step. And when he finally got close enough to see past the curtains, what he saw only made him feel sicker.

The scene beyond the window could have come from an old horror movie, with dim, flickering lighting revealing a filthy hallway leading into darkness, heavy doors with barred windows lining the sides. At one end, a sign saying “Monokuma Asylum” swung in the air, its faint creaking the only sound.

And then a wild crash came from the shadows, and three figures came rocketing down the hall. Fukawa was the in center, a heavy white straitjacket locking her arms in place and covering her mouth. The tall white-coated figures on either side of her seemed to be doctors – until they turned towards the window and revealed their smiling Monokuma heads.

The door directly in front of the window burst open, revealing a blood-splattered surgery table and surgical implements. The Monokuma doctors pushed Fukawa into the dank room, and the straitjacket only barely muffled her screams as they strapped her onto the table.

Naegi had to fight not to close his eyes as the Monokuma doctors circled the table to examine the surgical implements. They lifted blood-encrusted scalpels, rusty knives, and finally – grinning at each other – long metal rods that sparked blue with electricity.

Fukawa’s eyes went wide with terror as the Monokuma doctors pressed the wide circular tips of the rods to either side of her temples. She struggled against the straps, tried to scream through the jacket – but blue lightning jumped between the rods and convulsed through her entire body. Once – twice – three times –

And she stopped moving.

Naegi turned away from the window, burying his face in Togami’s chest. He knew he shouldn’t, not with all the others right there – but he couldn’t help himself. He needed the strength and comfort too badly to resist. And as Togami’s arms moved to hold him close, Naegi could feel the other boy’s hands trembling against his back – and he realized that maybe he wasn’t the only one who needed reassurance.

From behind them, Monokuma heaved a sigh. “You know, it just isn’t as satisfying as I thought it would be.”

Naegi looked up, about to ask what he meant – but before he could, a crash came from beyond the
window. Naegi twisted in Togami’s arms to look back behind him – and he saw Fukawa standing up. She’d torn open the straitjacket and ripped away the restraints by throwing the table into a wall. Now she stood, looking around in mild confusion, a pair of scissors seeming to materialize in her hand.

That wasn’t Fukawa, Naegi realized as she twirled the scissors. That was Genocide Jill.

“I guess it can’t be helped, though,” Monokuma went on. “After all, the rules say that only the person who gets caught committing the murder gets executed – and I can’t break my own rules, can I?” He laughed wildly.

“You mean – Fukawa isn’t dead?” Naegi asked, staring up at Monokuma in shock. “You didn’t kill her because it would have killed Genocide Jill, too?”

“Oh, she’s dead all right,” Monokuma said brightly. “Or as close as I could get. That little electric display wasn’t just special effects, you know – it wiped her memory clean away. Everything that made Toko Fukawa is gone – and instead of a world-class novelist, you get stuck with the murderous fiend!” He sighed again. “But that’s the problem with rules – following them is just no fun at all.” He looked out at them, his eyes gleaming. “I guess that’s why you’re all trying to break them.”

And on the opposite side of the room, another set of curtains opened.
None of the students moved, looking from Monokuma to the newly revealed window with wary eyes. Icy dread slid through Naegi’s veins, chilling him even with Togami’s arms still warm around him. What was going on? The mastermind had already forced them to watch Fukawa’s execution – what else could be outside that window? He didn’t know – but he knew that whatever it was, it would be just as horrifying as what they’d already witnessed.

“What do you mean, we’re all trying to break the rules?” Asahina asked, drawing closer to Ogami as if the presence of her best friend could ward off the fear filling the room. “We had the trial, didn’t we?”

“You sure did,” Monokuma agreed. “My heart was pumping away the whole time, wondering what would happen. I just couldn’t decide!”

“What could you possibly need to decide?” Togami demanded. “You have your cameras watching us all the time – you knew who killed Hagakure from the start.”

“Oh, that?” Monokuma’s eyes widened in a mockery of surprise. “That’s old news! Who’d bother with yesterday’s headlines when there’s a brand new scandal sweeping the nation? People only care about the fresh new things, you know – once you lose that cutting edge, that’s it!”

“Then what exactly are you saying?” Kirigiri asked, stepping up beside Naegi and Togami so that she could stare directly at the enthroned bear. “What are you accusing us of doing?”

“Huh? Don’t you know?” Monokuma tilted his head. “But I thought you knew everything! Oh, well, guess you can’t trust everything you hear!” He looked around the room. “It breaks your poor headmaster’s heart to say it, but it seems that some of you don’t like the rules that have been set to give you a comfortable, peaceful life here in this school.” He raised a paw, and wickedly sharp talons snapped out to gleam in the light. “Some of you have been cheating.”

Naegi froze, a horrible thought occurring to him. Could the mastermind know about Alter Ego? Was this about the data that Alter Ego had uncovered for them – or worse yet, for the AI’s attempt to hack into the school network? He’d completely forgotten about Kirigiri’s plan to distract the mastermind when they’d discovered Hagakure’s body – but surely an actual murder would have been an even better distraction than whatever Kirigiri had been preparing to do.

“No one has broken any of your ridiculous rules,” Togami said, glaring up at the bear. “We’ve all been very careful to follow the exact wording of your rules. If we’ve exploited loopholes, then maybe you should have been more careful about what you said.”

“Is that what you think?” Monokuma asked, grinning at him. “Are you sure?”
Suddenly, five bright beams of light began circling through the room, sending spotlights whirling across the walls and floor. Naegi grimaced, the dizzy patterns making his head spin again, but he didn’t dare look away when Monokuma was clearly in the middle of something.

“You think no one has broken any rules?” Monokuma went on as the spotlights danced around him. “Well, maybe your headmaster needs to hold a little session of the academic honor court to clear up this little question. Just who are the cheaters among you? Let’s find out… now!”

And with that, the spotlights froze, coalescing into two solid beams of light. One shone down where Asahina and Ogami had pressed together, while the other blasted full on where Naegi, Togami, and Kirigiri stood.

“What exactly is that supposed to prove?” Togami snapped, narrowing his eyes against the glare of the spotlight.

“Aw, you didn’t get it?” Monokuma asked sadly. “Oh, well, I guess I can’t expect you to follow along – after all, you’re the only goody-goody left!”

Togami’s arms tightened around Naegi. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“He’s saying that the other four of us have all broken a rule,” Kirigiri said, crossing her arms.

“That’s right!” Monokuma beamed at her. “We’ve had more rules broken in the last day than the whole rest of your time here – almost twenty-four solid hours of rule-breaking, in fact.”

Twenty-four hours – the time period that Naegi and Kirigiri had set for Alter Ego’s hacking attempt. That couldn’t be a coincidence, could it? That had to be what Monokuma was talking about. After all, Naegi knew that nothing else he’d done had even come close to breaking a rule. Although now that he thought about it…

“Which rule are you talking about?” Naegi asked, frowning. “What are you saying we did?”

After all, he’d known all along that the mastermind wouldn’t like it if they found out about what he and Kirigiri had done with Alter Ego – but he wasn’t sure he’d actually call it rule-breaking.

Thinking back over the list of rules from the e-handbook, Naegi couldn’t think of a single one that they’d violated. And they definitely hadn’t involved Ogami or Asahina in it.

“You don’t even know?” Monokuma tilted his head inquisitively. “Hmmm. Maybe I should have made it more clear. After all, it makes things so confusing when you add a new rule after the game’s in motion!”

“You’re talking about the new rule? The one about breaking down locked doors?” Naegi blinked. “But we didn’t break down any doors.”

“Oh? Didn’t you?” Monokuma asked, leaning forward. “Are you calling your headmaster a liar?”

The spotlight burned down on Naegi, sending drops of sweat trickling down the back of his neck. “No – that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?” Monokuma pressed. “Are you saying I’m mistaken? That I don’t know a locked door when I see one? Or maybe it’s you who can’t recognize locked doors – what do you think?”

“We’re all well aware of what a locked door is,” Togami snapped, his fingers squeezing Naegi’s
arm until it was almost painful. “Get to the point.”

“Aw, but I wouldn’t want anyone to be confused about it!” Monokuma said. “You’re still in school, after all – learning new things should be a very important part of your daily life! I think it’s time for a very special lesson, by a guest speaker who knows all about it.” He raised his clawed paw, pointing out towards the students – but he wasn’t aiming at Naegi.

His claw pointed directly to Ogami.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo... that sounds like a good place for a break, doesn't it?

Well, I know it's not ideal, but unfortunately it's where I'm going to have to leave you for a little while. I have a few things to do in real life that will take up some time. Also, I need to spend a little time plotting out exactly what needs to happen in the rest of the story - I have the broad strokes, but the details need some refining. And honestly - well, the daily posting is a little exhausting. I need a break so I don't get too burned out!

So with all that in mind, I'm going to take about a week off from posting. If the stars align, it might be sooner, but I can't promise that will work out. You can expect the next chapter by next Sunday 2/7 at the latest. See you all then!
Chapter 76

Chapter Summary

Monokuma and the remaining students discuss the issue of rule-breaking.

Chapter Notes

And I'm back, as promised!

On the advice of some real life friends, I am going to try out a new update schedule for a while. Daily updates will continue from Sunday through Thursday, but I'm going to be taking Friday and Saturday off from posting. Hopefully this will let me do a few things - build up a chapter reserve, keep better track of my plot planning, and also (unfortunately) deal with the way reality keeps happening no matter how much I try to put it on pause. It seems like it should be a good balance of both finishing the story at a reasonable pace and also maintaining my sanity.

So just to repeat - new chapters will be out Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday only. We'll see how it goes!

Ogami didn’t flinch as all the other students followed Monokuma’s pointing claw to look in her direction. She held her head high as she looked back at the bear, her face settling into lines of grim resignation.

“I think it’s time for you to explain things to the rest of the class, Sakura Ogami,” Monokuma said. “Why don’t you tell everyone exactly what a locked door looks like – before and after you break it down?”

“We already discussed this during the trial,” Kirigiri said, before Ogami could answer. “We established that there is a loophole in the wording of the rule about breaking down doors.”

“That’s right!” Asahina said, her face pale. “Sakura didn’t do anything wrong! Taking the door off the hinges doesn’t count!”

“Oh? I don’t remember saying that.” Monokuma tilted his head.

“It’s clearly implied by the wording,” Kirigiri said, her gaze fixed unwaveringly on the bear.


Ogami stepped forward, putting herself between Asahina and Monokuma. “Leave her out of this. I’m the one who broke the rule.”

“No!” Asahina grabbed Ogami’s arm. “No, you can’t say that – you didn’t!” She spun towards Monokuma. “It was my idea! It was my fault, she only did it because I asked! I made her do it!”
“Oh, really? Did you hold a knife to her head to force her?” Monokuma asked. “Have you developed amazing magical girl mind control powers?” His eye gleamed. “Or do you mean that you think planning the act is more disobedient than doing the deed?”

“Hina didn’t make me do anything,” Ogami said. She sent a fierce glare up at Monokuma. “I know what this is really about, and it isn’t my dormitory door.”

“Is that so?” Monokuma sounded puzzled. “I don’t know what I’m talking about? Then maybe you should share with the rest of the class!”

“Share what?” Asahina looked up at her friend, terror written across her face.

“I knew that there was a high risk that the mastermind would consider opening my door to be a violation of the school rules, but I didn’t care.” Ogami closed her eyes. “Because I’d broken that rule already.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” Asahina’s voice trembled as she clutched Ogami’s arm in both hands. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I’ve kept my word in regards to the mastermind.” Ogami looked around at all of them. “I know that after everything I’ve done to work against you, none of you would ever be able to trust me again. My actions have caused rifts among you, and my continued presence only made it worse.” She sighed heavily. “I’d hoped to defeat the mastermind on my own and prove myself by freeing you all – but I see now that this is beyond my power. All I could do was try to remove the source of the breach among you, and give you a weapon to use against the mastermind yourselves.”

“What are you talking about?” Asahina demanded, her words high with panic. “Sakura – what did you do?”

“I broke down the door to the headmaster’s room.” Ogami smiled faintly up at Monokuma. “I think you’ll find that the lock and hinges are both beyond repair.”

“No.” Asahina looked like someone had punched her in the gut. “No, you – you’re lying. You can’t have done that. Someone would have noticed!”

“Of course I noticed!” Monokuma said brightly. “When a big hulking brute like the Ogre starts vandalizing school property, it’s not the sort of thing an attentive headmaster can miss!”

“If that’s the case, then why didn’t you punish her?” Togami asked.

“It’s rude to interrupt someone before they’re finished!” Monokuma said with a grin. “And I’ll have you know that I happen to be a model of ursine courtesy!”

Naegi frowned at Monokuma’s words. “What does he mean, before you were finished?” he asked Ogami. “Did you do something else?”

“I… intended to.” Ogami took a deep breath. “I knew I had marked myself for death when I broke one of the school regulations, but I had no intention of allowing the mastermind to execute me. Their threat against the hostages still stood, and although I no longer wished to act against any of you, I did fear for the hostages’ safety if I entirely ignored their orders. Therefore, I had planned to kill the only person among us who I could honorably act against in this situation.” She closed her eyes. “Myself.”

“What?” Asahina covered her mouth with both hands, tears filling the corners of her eyes. “You
“I saw no other choice,” Ogami said heavily. “Alive, I presented a threat to those I care for, both inside and outside this school. Dead, I could protect you all in the only way I had.”

Something clicked in Naegi’s head, and he realized what Ogami had intended. “The bottle of poison in the trash – that’s what you were going to use,” he said.

“That’s right,” Ogami said. She looked down at Asahina’s horrified face, and her expression wavered for the first time. “I’m sorry, Hina. I – I knew this would hurt you. That was why I didn’t want to say goodbye to you in person – I feared that if I did, I might lose my resolve. I didn’t even dare take my room key back before I acted.”

“So you planned to leave your corpse in a room where I had the only key?” Togami demanded, glaring at her. “I suppose you didn’t care that it would make me look guilty of your murder?”

“I wrote a note explaining my actions,” Ogami said calmly. “It would have absolved you of any involvement.” She looked over at Naegi. “If you found the poison, you should have seen the note, as well.”

Naegi remembered the ink-covered pages he’d found in the trash and nodded. “I think I did – but you’d crossed it all out. Did you change your mind?”

Ogami’s eyes went to Asahina, and she grimaced. “My own weakness got the better of me. I had found the envelope Hina left for me, but I had thrown it away unopened. But in that moment before I took the poison, I hesitated. We had argued, the last time we spoke, and I couldn’t bring myself to end it without knowing what her last words to me had been. And when I read the letter and found the screwdriver – I faltered.” Pain crossed her face for a moment before she locked it away. “Hina – in that note, you sounded as though you blamed yourself for all that had happened. I couldn’t let you go on believing that. And so I gave in to my own wish to see you one last time – and I opened the door.”

Tears were streaming down Asahina’s face now, her whole body trembling as she shook her head in silent horror.

“I knew that I had already doomed myself by breaking down another door,” Ogami went on. “I could no longer back away from my own death. But – I thought that I might be able to make your life easier if I spoke to you in person.” She looked straight into Asahina’s eyes. “You can’t let this stop you, Hina. You have to go on from it.”

“But I don’t want to go on,” Asahina said, her words barely loud enough to hear. “Not – not if this is what happens to you.”

“You must.” Ogami hesitated, then raised a hand to press against Asahina’s cheek, soft and fragile. “I – I never wanted to hurt you, Hina. Never you. I’m sorry.”

And with that, Ogami let her hand fall away and turned to face Monokuma. “All right. I’m ready to face the consequences for my actions.”

“Huh?” Monokuma looked up from where he’d been examining his talons. “Oh, are you done? With the daytime soap opera you had playing out here, I was waiting for a commercial break!” He threw his head back and laughed. “You say you’re ready? Well, sounds to me like you’re trying to jump the gun! Or did you forget?” He grinned out at them. “You aren’t the only rule-breaker under fire!”
As he spoke, the light blasting down on Ogami and Asahina blinked into darkness, leaving only Togami, Kirigiri, and Naegi in the spotlight.
Naegi and Kirigiri try to defend themselves against accusations of rule-breaking.

The spotlight burned on Naegi’s skin, the glare of the light making his head spin more than ever. If it hadn’t been for the anchor of Togami’s arms around him, he wasn’t sure he could have remained upright, even with Monokuma’s red eyes aimed at him. Naegi gritted his teeth and forced himself to focus, ignoring the way it made his head ache. He had to try to keep himself together – he didn’t dare face Monokuma at anything less than his best.

While he fought to focus, Kirigiri crossed her arms and eyed Monokuma with a slight frown. “Using special effects on us won’t change the facts.” She gave the spotlight a brief, dismissive glance. “Neither Naegi nor I have broken any of the rules, including the new one about locked doors.”

“Oh? Are you sure?” Monokuma asked, his voice taking on a sing-song cadence.

“Yes.” Kirigiri was unruffled by the mockery. “We’ve had nothing to do with any of the locked doors in the school.”

“She’s right,” Naegi agreed. “We were the only ones who had nothing to do with what happened in Ogami’s room, and we haven’t been near the other locked doors on the fourth floor.”

“And you think those are the only locked doors around?” Monokuma tilted his head. “Hmm. You know, I don’t think all of you are embracing your school life to the fullest extent.”

Naegi blinked at the sudden change of topic. “What?”

“You never take advantage of the opportunities available to a class of high school students!” Monokuma heaved a melodramatic sigh. “Maybe it’s because your headmaster hasn’t been giving you the full high school experience. Maybe I’ve been denying you the ability to succeed.”

“What the hell are you blathering about?” Togami demanded.

“I’ve given you the reading materials, but I’ve been remiss in checking up on whether you’ve done your homework.” Monokuma grinned out at them. “So in that case – I think it’s time for a pop quiz!”

A whirring came from the ceiling, and Naegi looked up to see the machine gun swing around to take aim at them.

“I hope you’ve been studying!” Monokuma said brightly.

Naegi couldn’t tear his eyes away from the stark, cold metal of the machine gun. Even after the horror of so many dramatic executions, the naked menace of a gun pointed at them was still chilling in its own right.

“So Naegi, why don’t you tell us,” Monokuma said, looking straight at him. “What exactly is a
locked door?"

“Um.” Naegi thought about possible answers, trying to figure out what Monokuma meant. Was it a trick question? If so, he couldn’t see the catch in it anywhere. He tried his best to ignore the machine gun and gave the only answer he could think of. “It’s a closed place that’s been sealed with a key?”

“Hmmm. That’s a veeeery interesting answer.” Monokuma rubbed at his chin. “Sorry, Naegi.”

A violent burst of staccato explosions shattered through the air, and Naegi stumbled backwards against Togami as the floor quaked beneath their feet.

“You’re absolutely right!” Monokuma threw back his head and laughed.

Naegi looked down at the ground in front of him, where three bullets had gouged their way deep into the floor mere inches from his feet. He knew he probably ought to be afraid of how close the shots had come, but it was getting harder and harder to focus on anything past the roaring at the edge of his consciousness. Fear felt like it was happening to someone else, just a little too far away to reach.

“Is there a point to these theatrics?” Kirigiri asked, tapping her fingers against her crossed arms as if she were bored by the entire situation.

“Of course!” Monokuma said. “I just want to make sure that everyone listening can follow along. I wouldn’t want anyone to think I’m unfair! I’m very serious about my rules – even if the rest of you aren’t.”

“Then you’re saying that there’s something about the definition of a door that we haven’t understood?” Kirigiri asked, frowning.

“What is there to understand?” Togami’s voice might have sounded icy and controlled, but Naegi could feel the other boy’s hands gripping his arms tight enough to bruise. “A locked door isn’t something that can be mistaken. All you have to do is look at it.”

“But what if you can’t look at it?” Monokuma asked, sounding like he was genuinely curious to hear the answer. “What if the door isn’t physical? What if it’s – oh, let’s say – electronic?”

And then, finally, Naegi caught up to what Monokuma was saying. He wasn’t talking about any of the locked doors they’d found around the school. He was accusing them of trying to break into the locked school network.

Kirigiri had clearly worked it out, too. She glared up at Monokuma. “There was never any indication that your rule referred to anything other than the physical doors in the school.”

“Oh? So I have to spell it out for you?” Monokuma shook his head. “That’s the trouble with high school students today – you’re all content to coast along and let your teachers spoon feed information to you instead of using your critical thinking skills!”

“If the rule applied to metaphorical doors, you should have specified.” Kirigiri said, refusing to waver from her point. “You can’t claim we broke a rule if we didn’t know we were doing it at the time.”

“You didn’t know?” Monokuma asked. He paused, tilting his head and giving Kirigiri his friendliest smile. “But if you didn’t think you were breaking a rule, why did you try to hide it with that fake murder plot of yours?”
Kirigiri went very still, her eyes going wide.

“Oh? Did you think I didn’t notice?” Monokuma laughed. “Sorry, but I saw through your little game right from the start!”

“What game are you talking about?” Togami demanded, eyes darting suspiciously from Kirigiri to Monokuma. “What murder plot?”

“Oh – was that a secret?” Monokuma covered his mouth, cheeks blushing bright pink. “I guess that’s what happens when you stay on the straight and narrow – you don’t get to find out all the juicy secrets!” He tilted his head and grinned at Togami. “But on the bright side, if I have to get rid of all the rule-breakers, you could win the game by default!”

Togami went deathly pale, and Naegi could feel the other boy’s chest go still for a moment as the breath stopped in his throat. He groped for Togami’s hand, and gave a shaky squeeze to the other boy’s frozen fingers.

“Oh, that’s right,” Monokuma said into the silence. “You don’t want to win anymore. You want to live happily ever after with your high school sweetheart.” He shook his head. “That’s a shame.”

Togami wouldn’t look down at Naegi, his jaw tight and his expression locked into a haughty mask, but now Naegi could see through the ice to the bone-deep terror he knew would be flooding through the other boy right now. It cut through the distant roaring and dizziness in his head to pierce right through to his heart, and Naegi had to look away.

“But then again,” Monokuma said thoughtfully, “I’ve always been a sucker for young love. And let’s face it, that wouldn’t be much of a heart-pounding conclusion to our little game if you all got yourselves punished on a technicality.”

Naegi looked up at Monokuma, not quite trusting the faint hope beginning to bloom in his chest at the words.

“Besides, we have a rule in place about this already, don’t we?” Monokuma went on. “About who’s really at fault when more than one person is involved in a scheme?”

“You – you mean the accomplice rule, don’t you?” Naegi asked, after a long moment of thinking back on the rules. “When two people work together, the real culprit is the one who came up with the plan.”

“And we can’t go around changing the rules this far in, now, can we?” Monokuma said with a bright smile. “Accomplices don’t get anything out of their crimes – only the mastermind behind your nefarious rule-breaking plot will be punished.”

Naegi frowned. The one who’d come up with the plan – which of them would that be? And how did Monokuma think he could tell the difference? He looked over at Kirigiri to see if she knew, but she hadn’t moved a muscle since Monokuma had revealed her fake murder plot. He felt a little bad for her. She must have been terribly shaken to find out that she’d been seen through so easily.

“So for this little bout of rule-breaking, I’ve prepared a very special guest!” Monokuma said, his voice taking on an all-too-familiar cadence as he gestured to the open window on the opposite side of the room. “Let’s give it everything we’ve got! It’s punishment time!”
Chapter 78

Chapter Summary

Monokuma doles out the punishment for rule-breaking.

The open window loomed from across the room, dark and foreboding, and Naegi wanted nothing more than to stay as far away from it as possible. Whatever Monokuma intended to show them through that window, he knew it would be terrible. He didn’t want to cross the room to see another set of horrors play out, not so soon after watching Fukawa die.

But he knew they didn’t have a choice. Hiding from the window wouldn’t stop the blow from falling. And so he began moving towards the other side of the room, one shaking step at a time.

Togami moved with him, still holding him steady and upright each time he swayed. Naegi spared a glance up at the other boy’s pale face, seeing the thin line of his mouth and the crease deep between his eyebrows, and a rush of guilt flooded him on top of everything else, for how many times Togami had been blindsided during this trial. He wished he could say something reassuring to show that he wasn’t as badly off as he seemed – but he knew this wasn’t the time or the place. With Monokuma watching, any attempt at comfort would just get turned on itself to make everyone feel even worse.

Finally, they crossed to the other side of the circle, where they could see through the second open window – or at least, where they would have been able to see through it if the space beyond hadn’t been pitch black. Naegi squinted into the darkness, but he couldn’t make out much more than a few vague shapes.

But before he could ask just what it was that Monokuma wanted them to see, light began trickling through the blackness as an aggressively yellow paper sun peeked up from the ground. The dismal, grayish light resembled the first stirrings of a cloudy dawn, unfolding to reveal a dirt-packed courtyard backed by a pockmark-riddled stone wall. Above it, a flag bearing Monokuma’s grinning face rippled in a faint breeze.

In front of the wall, a straw-stuffed figure stood, dressed in a black and white parody of a military uniform, with a red lightning logo on the chest where its insignia ought to have been. Its arms extended out in front of it, and balanced on them, propped against the mannequin’s chest, was an all too familiar laptop.

Naegi had been half-expecting it, but it still hit him like a blow to see Alter Ego’s innocently puzzled face looking out at them from the execution chamber.

“So that’s what this is about?” Togami asked, looking up at Monokuma with narrowed eyes. “You finally noticed Alter Ego’s data decryption and analysis?”

“Finally? Data decryption?” Monokuma yawned. “No no no, I knew about all that from the very beginning. I knew Fujisaki did something with that laptop, and that you were all using it to analyze data. I knew exactly how that was going to play out from the start!”

“You knew?” Togami asked, glaring up at him. “And you still waited until now to call it breaking
“Of course not,” Monokuma said. “It wasn’t breaking any rules to decrypt the data in the laptop. That was just – oh, let’s call it a gift, from me to all of you, for being able to unlock something so difficult. So of course it wouldn’t break any rules for you to find the key to that.” He laughed. “But trying to break into the school network is a different story!”

“The network? What are you talking about?” Togami demanded.

“Still behind the curve, I see,” Monokuma said, shaking his head. “You’d better try to get some remedial tutoring if you want to keep up with the rest of us. I bet Naegi would be happy to give you some private instruction.” He gave the two boys a wicked grin. “But you’ll have to save that for after class. Both our lecturers are in place, and today’s real lesson is about to begin.”

Naegi frowned. What did Monokuma mean – both?

And then a horrified gasp came from behind them. Naegi twisted to look over his shoulder, only to see Asahina looking frantically around the rest of the room.

“Where’s Sakura?” Asahina demanded, spinning to get a look at the entire room. “She – she was right behind me, but now –”

Naegi glanced around, but even from the most cursory look, it was obvious that Ogami was no longer in the trial room. She wouldn’t have run, even if there had been any way to escape – which meant –

From the dingy courtyard beyond the window, a low, mournful bugle began to play. Naegi turned back to the window, just in time to see Ogami walk out to stand beside the figure holding Alter Ego, head held high as she put her back to the wall. Her expression of grim resignation and acceptance never faltered as she stared forward, hands clasped behind her back.

And in front of them, a long row of old-fashioned muskets rose up from the ground, aiming directly at the two figures.

“No!” Asahina screamed, grief tearing her voice raw. “No, you – you can’t do this! Please, please, it wasn’t her – it was my fault, it was my idea – please –”

Ogami’s mouth quivered as Asahina’s pleas collapsed into broken sobs, but otherwise she showed no reaction to what she saw through the window. Beside her, Alter Ego’s face had begun to shift from confusion to slow, painful realization.

Naegi remembered the way Alter Ego had spoken to him and Kirigiri in the bathhouse, so brave and determined to help them even at the risk of his own life, and he wanted to scream and cry himself. It wasn’t fair, not when Alter Ego had fought so hard for them. Not when Ogami had turned on the mastermind to give them a chance. It wasn’t –

The guns fired in an explosion of light, filling the courtyard with smoke as bullets thundered across it. The sounds echoed through Naegi’s pounding head, sending his perception spinning until he couldn’t tell the windowed execution chamber from the trial ground. Were the sounds ringing through his ears coming from there, or here, or somewhere inside his head? He couldn’t tell anymore, not with the barrage of noise assaulting him from all sides.

As suddenly as they’d begun, the guns ceased firing, leaving a silence as loud as the noise had been. Slowly, like the curtain rising on a stage, the smoke cleared away to reveal the ravaged courtyard, with chunks of stone crumbling away from the broken wall. The figure that had been
holding Alter Ego had disintegrated into shreds of wood and straw, topped with mangled bits of plastic and circuitry. And beside the remains of the laptop –

Sakura Ogami stood, looking as whole and untouched as she had before the gunfire began, except for a single scratch along her cheek where a piece of the laptop had scored her face. Blood dripped down her pale face from it, but she hardly seemed to notice, staring out at them through the window with wide, horrified eyes.

“She’s – okay?” Naegi stared through the window, hardly able to comprehend what he was seeing. Ogami had begun to tremble from head to toe, but that was no surprise after being faced with a firing squad. Other than that, she looked fine.

“So the mastermind chose to spare their spy after all,” Togami said grimly. “I knew all that talk about switching sides was rubbish.”

In the courtyard, Ogami collapsed to her knees, paying no heed to the sharp stones and plastic that had to be gouging into her bare skin. Her shoulders shook as she bowed her head, soundless sobs rocking through her entire body. It was exactly like the way that Asahina had cried, in the moments before the execution began.

And then, in the silent trial chamber, Naegi realized just what sound was missing – and who hadn’t had anything to say about the missed execution.

Slowly he turned to face the rest of the trial chamber, dread cold in his veins as he realized just what he was about to see.

Asahina lay unmoving in a spreading pool of blood, the machine gun in the ceiling still aimed directly at her.
Chapter 79

Chapter Summary

The students react to Monokuma's punishment.

Naegi stared at Asahina in blank horror, hardly able to comprehend what he was seeing. She hadn’t been named in a trial or dragged off to an elaborate execution chamber – she’d been standing among them all when she was cut down. It was just like the mastermind’s brutal murder of Junko Enoshima, when she’d broken the rule about attacking Monokuma – only somehow even more painful. They’d hardly had a chance to get to know Enoshima when she’d died, but Asahina had been their friend.

Maybe – Naegi bit his lip – maybe it was a trick? Monokuma had stopped short of two executions today already. It was just barely possible that this third one might be false as well. He tried to take a step in Asahina’s direction.

Togami held him back, hardly needing to exert any strength to prevent Naegi from moving. “Don’t,” he said shortly, giving the machine gun a pointed glance.

“But – she might still be alive,” Naegi protested.

Togami looked down at him for a moment, expression tightly controlled, then looked over Naegi’s shoulder towards Kirigiri. “You’re fond of examining bodies. Be useful for once.”

Kirigiri looked over at them, her face showing so little reaction that Naegi almost thought she must not have heard. But after a long moment, she stepped over to Asahina and knelt just beyond the pool of blood. Naegi couldn’t see exactly what Kirigiri did in the moments that she examined the other girl, but maybe that was for the best. If he couldn’t see for certain what had happened, then at least he could still believe it might be okay a little longer.

But Kirigiri only took a few seconds at Asahina’s side before she stood, shaking her head. “With that many bullets, it would have been instant,” she said, her voice low and tense.

Monokuma’s loud laughter shattered the moment, obscene in its wild glee. “Of course it was! It wouldn’t be much of a punishment if they missed!” He sighed and shook his head. “But you know, that’s the trouble with our world’s fixation on instant gratification. We want everything right away, but it’s never quite as satisfying – like instant coffee never has the same kick as the real stuff!”

“What – what are you saying?” Naegi couldn’t believe the bear’s flippant words in the face of so much destruction. It wasn’t really different from Monokuma’s usual inappropriate chatter – except that this time, it was.

He remembered Asahina sitting with him in the laundry room, the first one of his friends to relent in her suspicion of him. He’d seen the tears in her eyes when she’d told him she wished she knew how to be brave. And it wasn’t just her – Alter Ego’s smiling face flashed before his eyes, so determined to help even at the risk of his own life. They’d both been stronger than they’d known themselves to be – and they’d deserved better than what Monokuma had just done to them.
All at once, the shock and pain that had been hammering at Naegi ever since Fukawa had been dragged away all boiled into a single explosion of rage. “How dare you? They were my friends! How dare you kill them!”

“How dare they?” Monokuma tilted his head, puzzled. “Do you mean you thought about that computer the same way as a person? That’s pretty pathetic. Are you going to replace them with a pair of basketballs?”

“Shut the hell up!” Naegi’s sheer fury, beyond anything he’d ever felt before, had temporarily burned away his dizziness, and he barely noticed that he was still swaying on his feet. “Alter Ego was just as much of a person as the rest of us, and he and Asahina were both our friends. And you killed them!”

“Call them whatever you want,” Monokuma said, shrugging. “It doesn’t change the fact that in the end, they were both nothing more than a pair of rule-breakers. I couldn’t let them hang around setting a bad example for the rest of you, could I?”

“But that isn’t right.” Kirigiri still stood at Asahina’s side, heedless of the blood spreading to lap at the heels of her boots. Her gaze was fixed so unwaveringly on Monokuma that she didn’t look like she would have noticed an explosion elsewhere in the room. “You keep calling her a rule-breaker, but Asahina didn’t break a rule.”

“Have you been sleeping in class or something?” Monokuma asked. “We already covered this! The culprit who planned to break down a locked door was the one at fault for breaking the rule.”

“And opening Ogami’s locked door with that screwdriver was originally Asahina’s plan,” Togami said, calculations plain behind his eyes as he frowned. “So you’re saying that unscrewing the hinges really does count as breaking the door? That’s a very arbitrary ruling on your part.”

“Oh, really? It’s arbitrary?” Monokuma said, sounding puzzled. “So you think the door wasn’t broken, is that it? You think it was exactly the same as it was before Sakura Ogami decided to play handyman with it?”

And as Monokuma said that, Naegi remembered how Ogami’s door had wobbled when he’d tried to close it. All the other doors moved smoothly and easily, but Ogami’s hadn’t – the strange clue that had made him think of the hinges in the first place.

Kirigiri clearly realized it at the same time he did, her lips going tight in an emotionless mask. “So the door was broken after all.”

“Of course it was,” Monokuma said brightly. “Your favorite headmaster had to put in plenty of safety precautions to make sure you could all feel snug and secure in your own rooms! It’s not so easy to unscrew those hinges – one tiny mistake, and the door will never open right again. Or in other words,” he grinned out at them, “it’s broken.”

“Which you failed to explain to us beforehand.” Kirigiri retorted. “You punished Asahina for breaking a rule without knowing she was doing it.”

“Did I? I don’t think so!” Monokuma raised his paws in anger. “I’ll have you know that I take my rules beary seriously! Asahina knew she was breaking a rule when she left that screwdriver for Ogami. If she’d really thought the better of it, she could have let Ogami know the plan was off – but she decided to let it proceed. She used Sakura Ogami to break down a locked door – and your loving headmaster can’t let that kind of behavior stand.”
“And yet in Ogami’s case, you did,” Togami pointed out, glaring over to where Ogami still knelt in the ruined execution chamber, tears staining her face. “She broke a rule even more blatantly than Asahina, but you seem content to let her escape punishment.”

“Oh, that? Well, I guess I did,” Monokuma said. “My heart was so moved by her touching little goodbye speech that I just couldn’t bear to finish her off. And after all, it’s not a very good punishment to give someone what they want anyway!” He laughed. “And this way, she even got to live long enough to see a pair of meaningless deaths!”

Naegi looked around at the aftermath of the executions – Ogami’s broken sobs, Asahina’s bloody corpse, and Alter Ego’s shattered circuitry – and said, “No. You’re wrong. These deaths weren’t meaningless.”

They all turned to look at him at those words. Even Ogami lifted her head a fraction to stare from red, streaming eyes.

“Everybody who’s died so far,” Naegi went on, the words pouring out directly from his heart before he had a chance to think them through, “the deaths of each and every one of our friends – they all make us stronger! And I swear to God, someday you will pay for this!”

“Holy moly!” Monokuma drew back in a mockery of fear. “You’re super mad – like unreasonably upset!” He shrugged. “Well, if that’s the case, I guess it’s time for me to bring things to a close. I’m outta here! You guys should get some rest – and think long and hard about the lessons I’ve given you today. I think we’ve all learned something important!”

And with that, he disappeared.
Chapter 80

Chapter Summary

The mastermind watches the aftermath of the fourth trial.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Junko spun slowly in her chair, views from different cameras flashing in and out of her vision. Her classmates seemed to move in stop motion as she caught glimpses of them, slumping and shuddering in her absence. It was almost cute, the way all the bravado drained right out of them without a Monokuma present – like they forgot she could still watch them through the cameras.

Well, in Naegi’s case, it was probably the poison finally dragging him down. Junko brought her spinning to an abrupt halt in front of the screen with the best view of her classmates, giving her a good look at Naegi’s pale face. Whatever had been in that poison, it wasn’t mixing well at all with his other injuries – or maybe it was reacting to the lingering effects of the head injury and the tranquilizer she’d had to use to keep him unconscious down in that hidden room. She’d thought for sure he would have shaken that off by now! That poor kid just couldn’t catch a break.

Which brought up a puzzler for her. If Naegi died of chemical overdose, did she want to make them hold a trial? She did like the idea of giving Togami a constructive way to express his feelings about it! But then again, it wasn’t like there’d be a culprit to execute – and a trial without an execution at the end just sounded unsatisfying for everyone.

Well, maybe Naegi’s luck would finally kick in and he’d recover – though from the look of him, Junko thought that would take some time. It looked to her like his little burst of defiance after the punishments had cost him pretty badly. He sagged back against Togami so hard it looked like the heir was having some trouble keeping them both from crashing to the ground. Junko smirked. She’d never thought Togami would be much for catching swooning damsels. It was a real shame Fukawa wasn’t around to see him play into her fantasies for once!

Although that said, Togami wasn’t doing too badly as a white knight these days. He’d gotten awfully willing to draw his sword in Naegi’s defense – for all the good it was doing. Junko giggled to herself at the way he tried to look intimidating, sending Kirigiri a poisonous glare and positioning himself between her and Naegi as they headed for the elevator. He could posture about protecting his cute little boyfriend all he liked, but that wasn’t worth much when Naegi was oh-so-willing to let Kirigiri toss him into danger.

And it looked like Togami knew it, too. Junko turned to the elevator camera, giving herself a nice close up shot of the anxiety lines around Togami’s eyes and the grayish tinge to his face. Every time he looked down at Naegi, who’d closed his eyes and seemed to be drifting towards unconsciousness now, a muscle visibly twitched down the side of his neck.

Now, if that wasn’t the face of a boy primed to do something stupid, Junko didn’t know what was. Naegi might like preaching tiresome sermons about trust and friendship and working together, but for Togami, the head wounds and poison would speak louder. Junko sighed in sympathy for the poor boy. Togami always did have a difficult time sorting through new emotions – and now, with
this onslaught of shiny new affections and vulnerabilities, with the feelings from his erased memories echoing back on top of everything else, he’d be at a loss for the best way to cope.

And what kind of girl wouldn’t help a classmate in need?

Junko spared a perfunctory glance at the monitors showing the execution chambers, checking to see whether she needed to spur Jill and Ogami to get a move on for the elevators yet. Ah, good, it looked like they’d both spotted the exits and had at least started moving. Jill made a beeline for the elevator, not looking much worse for wear despite her alter ego’s execution.

Ogami, on the other hand, looked ready to cause trouble. Junko frowned as she headed not towards the elevator, but back in the direction of the trial room. Oh, no, that wouldn’t do at all!

Junko vaulted up from her chair into the control room, and only just made it to the buttons in time. Even in the other room, she could hear the crash from the monitor as the heavy iron security gate slammed into place, locking the trial chamber – and Asahina’s body – safely out of reach. After all, what kind of classmate would she be if she let poor, grieving Ogami stare at her precious friend’s bloody corpse? No, no, much better to hurry her on her way.

Heading back out to the room with the monitors, Junko was just in time to see Ogami turn away from the iron gate and make her way to the elevator at last. So that made all of them – her only five remaining classmates out of the original fifteen. Junko had to give them a small, proud smile as she activated the elevator. They were doing so well! She’d known that entrusting this role to her beloved classmates was a good idea.

In fact, they were doing so very well that soon, she might need to start thinking about the endgame. After all, she’d given them so many clues that even the dimmest and most distracted of them had to be piecing a few things together by now. Junko flopped back into her chair, letting it twirl her around the floor one last time as she grinned. She just couldn’t wait!

The chair slowed to a halt in front of the elevator camera, and Junko beamed up at her classmates’ exhausted, broken expressions. They were so very close! She looked from face to face, drinking them in and committing the moment of despair to memory.

But as her eyes fell on Kirigiri’s face, Junko’s smile fell away and she leaned forward, concentrating intently. The pale girl stood in the corner of the elevator, not facing the door as usual, but staring directly at Naegi and Togami. Another person might have called her expressionless – but Junko hadn’t spent two years around her classmates for nothing. With that expression, combined with what Kirigiri thought she already knew – Junko knew exactly what Kyoko Kirigiri was thinking right now.

A slow smile spread over Junko’s face, darker and more terrible than before. Maybe Togami wasn’t the only weak point among the students after all.

Chapter End Notes

Just a reminder that according to the new schedule, the next chapter will be posted Sunday. See you then!
The students return to their dorms after the trial.

The elevator ride up from the last trial ground was the longest one they’d endured yet – or Togami supposed that might just be his own perception. After all, any amount of time spent trying to keep Naegi from collapsing was too long – and that didn’t even take the girls into account. A traitor, a serial killer, and a closed-mouthed manipulator were the last three people he wanted to be trapped in an enclosed space with.

Not that any of them seemed overly interested in approaching him and Naegi, at least. Jill was keeping her mouth shut for once, in what had to be some kind of minor miracle. She seemed content enough to lurk in the back corner, tapping a pair of scissors against her palm and staring at the doors like she was plotting the best way to stab them.

Ogami, on the other hand, barely seemed to notice her surroundings at all. When she’d finally trudged up to join them in the elevator, she hadn’t acknowledged anyone, staring down at the ground with an expression slack and broken. She’d taken things so far that Togami was starting to wonder if maybe it wasn’t entirely an act – maybe she had ended up caring about Asahina a little after all. Or maybe she just wanted them all to let their guards down. It was hard to say.

But as for Kirigiri – every time Togami glanced in her direction, he found her eyes just turning away from him and Naegi. She was watching them, and she didn’t care if he knew it. Togami narrowed his eyes in her direction, and though she didn’t visibly react, he was sure she noticed. Well, let her. If she intended to make a fuss about trying to enforce her stupid separation rule now, when Naegi couldn’t even stand on his own, he would make her regret it.

At least Naegi seemed mostly oblivious to anything else going on in the elevator, including the staring tug of war between Togami and Kirigiri. Togami suspected that only sheer determination to make it through the trial had kept Naegi on his feet this long. He stared unseeingly at the wall, and Togami couldn’t tell if it was dark thoughts or sheer exhaustion occupying his mind. He wanted to ask, to hear Naegi’s thoughts and understand his reactions – but he wouldn’t do that here, in front of those girls. None of them deserved to share that.

When the doors finally opened to release them back on the first floor, Togami did his best to hurry them out, but apparently Naegi could only move so fast. He gritted his teeth at the obvious effort Naegi had to put into every faltering step, locking it firmly into his memory. At some point, he would find a way to get an accounting from someone for every flicker of pain that he had to watch cross Naegi’s face.

The three girls quickly outstripped them without even bothering to offer to help – not that he would have accepted anyway, not from any of them. Jill still had her scissors out, Ogami looked liable to forget what she was doing and drop Naegi in her current state, and Kirigiri – well, the further she stayed away from Naegi, the better, as far as Togami was concerned. If she wanted to disappear into the dorms on her own, then good riddance.

“You can go on ahead if you want.”
Togami looked sharply down at Naegi’s quiet words. “What are you doing wasting your energy on spouting that kind of idiocy?”

“I’m not as badly off as I look,” Naegi insisted. “I could make it back on my own.”

Togami narrowed his eyes. He didn’t believe Naegi would lie to him – but he had no confidence in the boy’s ability to assess his own condition, either. Naegi might well genuinely think he would be okay on his own, but all Togami had to do was look at the other boy’s glassy, unfocused eyes and pale cheeks to know it wasn’t true.

“You can’t possibly think that I would actually abandon you in the middle of the hallway,” he said acidly. “You were just poisoned.”

“So were Ogami and –” Naegi’s voice faltered for a moment, “and Asahina, and they could still walk.”

“They didn’t get a dose of poison on top of a head injury,” Togami snapped. “And Ogami is twice your size – any idiot could tell that the same dose of poison would hit you harder.”

Naegi frowned. “I – I just don’t want you to worry.”

Togami’s eyebrows shot up. Naegi got badly injured again, and that was his primary concern – whether Togami was worried?

“Then be more careful,” Togami said. “And stop making stupid suggestions about trying to make your way back without me. If you have enough energy for that, then use it for walking instead.”

Naegi gave him a half-smile at that, as if Togami had said something much softer and more affectionate than he actually had. It was still sad, still a little shaky, but so genuine that Togami’s heart clenched up at the sight. God, he’d missed seeing Naegi smile – he hadn’t even realized how much until right now.

A sudden, desperate desire bloomed in him to lean down and cover Naegi’s mouth with his own, to kiss him until the last traces of sadness disappeared from his smile. He nearly did, right there in the middle of the hall – but the feeling of Naegi swaying against him brought him to his senses. He was obviously the only rational one here, if Naegi’s unreasonable insistence that he could walk on his own was any indication – he couldn’t let himself get distracted until they were safely locked inside one of their rooms.

“Come on,” he said shortly, dragging his eyes away from Naegi and forcing himself to focus on the hall around them. “We’re nearly there.”

They’d made it nearly to the dormitory hall by that point, to Togami’s relief. With every step, Naegi leaned on him a little more heavily, and Togami was starting to fear that if they’d had to go too much further, Naegi might collapse entirely. If that happened, would he be able to carry the boy to one of their rooms on his own? Naegi might be short, but he wasn’t that tiny.

Fortunately, it didn’t come to that. Togami breathed a sigh of relief when they finally got to Naegi’s door and Naegi began rummaging through his pockets for his room key. Naegi had left the various pieces of evidence he’d gathered behind in the trial chamber, but even without that, the boy still seemed to be carrying around an absurd amount of junk. Where had he even found all of that rubbish?

Naegi’s hand shook as he tried to get the key in the lock, clinking it against the edge of the knob instead. His vision had to be blurring, Togami realized, lips tightening as he tried to maintain a
mask of iron control – but it was a challenge not to betray his concern when Naegi was having
difficulty with something as simple as a lock. He reached out and took the key from Naegi,
opening the door and hauling the boy inside.

They made it just in time. As soon as they’d crossed the threshold, Naegi’s strength gave out.
Togami only just managed to brace himself to take Naegi’s weight as the boy sagged against him,
and even so his shoulder still slammed into the wall hard enough that he knew it would bruise.

“Naegi?” Togami clutched at the boy’s wrist, not daring to breathe until he finally felt a pulse
beneath his fingers. “Naegi, can you hear me?”

An unintelligible mumble was all the reply he got. Better than nothing, but that didn’t mean he had
to like it. Most of his attention on the boy in his arms, Togami kicked the door closed before
mostly dragging Naegi across the room and onto the bed. Hopefully this was all just exhaustion,
and Naegi would be back to his usual self in the morning. Togami refused to let himself consider
any other possibility.

Normally, he didn’t think much of sleeping in the same clothes from the day, but getting Naegi to
change out of his clothes was clearly a lost cause. He tugged the boy’s shoes off as the bare
minimum required before rearranging the blankets so that Naegi was snugly tucked in. Togami was
relieved to note that at least some of the lines of tension eased from Naegi’s face as his head settled
into the pillow.

With Naegi settled, Togami started to take a step away – only to find that Naegi’s hand had
somehow ended up locked around a handful of his jacket. He looked down at Naegi, but as far as
he could tell, the boy had finally surrendered to exhaustion. This seemed to be an unconscious
reaction.

Slowly, trying not to wake the sleeping boy, Togami pried Naegi’s fingers loose from his jacket. It
wasn’t good for the fabric to be crumpled like that, after all, and stressing the seams too much
would tear it. He took the jacket off and laid it along the shelf at the head of the bed.

But before he could move again, fingers curled around his wrist. Togami glanced down again,
seeing Naegi’s eyes fluttering blearily open. Well, that couldn’t be good for him.

“Go back to sleep,” he instructed, since that had to be better for Naegi than trying to force himself
to stay awake just because Togami was still up.

Naegi shook his head dizzily, and Togami was fairly certain he wasn’t fully aware of what was
going on at this point. “Stay?”

Something warm melted through Togami’s chest at the question. Naegi wanted him here – wanted
him here enough that he needed reassurance about it before he could let himself rest. “I’m not
leaving.”

This didn’t seem to be satisfactory, at least in Naegi’s barely-conscious state. His fingers tightened
around Togami’s wrist, colder than they should be. “Stay,” he mumbled again.

Togami hadn’t actually felt tired enough to go to sleep yet himself – but he couldn’t bring himself
to tell Naegi no when he was like this.

“All right,” he conceded, settling himself on the bed beside Naegi. He would just lie down here for
a few minutes, just long enough for Naegi to fall into a deep, true sleep. Then he’d get up and think
about the trial, and try to figure out just what he would need to do from this point on.
As soon as he lay down on the bed, Naegi pressed into his side, like a kitten curling up into a patch of warm sunlight. Togami sighed and wrapped an arm around Naegi, holding him closer. If this helped him rest, he supposed it was fine. And after the past few nights in an empty bed, not knowing where Naegi was or whether he was safe, there was something comforting about having the boy in his arms at last. Togami closed his eyes, just for a moment, and let himself enjoy the peaceful sensation…

Only to have it shattered a few hours later by the creak of moment from the other side of the room.

Togami sat up like he’d been electrified, staring across the room. “What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded, glaring at Kirigiri.
Kirigiri and Togami have a nighttime confrontation.

Kirigiri stood in the middle of the room like she had every right to be there, leaning casually against the bookcase with her arms crossed.

“It certainly took you long enough to notice,” she said, unruffled. “I was starting to wonder if I’d need to shake you.”

“I hardly expected an intruder in my bedroom in the middle of the night,” Togami snapped. He sat up, carefully sliding Naegi off of him, and pushed himself out of bed. If he had to deal with Kirigiri, he wanted the freedom to move. “And you didn’t answer my question – what are you doing in here?”

“I came to check on Naegi,” she said. “He didn’t look like he was doing at all well during the trial.”

“No thanks to you,” Togami spat at her. “How does that justify breaking in –” He stopped mid-sentence, his own words catching up to him. Kirigiri might be manipulative and obnoxious, but she wasn’t stupid. She wouldn’t break into a dorm room mere hours after seeing Asahina brutally executed for the same crime. “How did you get in here?”

“Didn’t you realize?” she asked. “The door was unlocked.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous, it was –”

And then he froze, the events of that evening running through his mind again. Naegi had collapsed just after the door had opened, and it had taken both of Togami’s hands to hold him up. He’d kicked the door shut, that was all – and the doors didn’t lock automatically.

Kirigiri was right. The door hadn’t been locked. He’d been distracted enough by his concern for Naegi’s wellbeing to allow them both to fall asleep in a room that hadn’t been properly secured.

She raised an insufferably smug eyebrow at him. “Like I said.”

Togami glared at her, refusing to admit it out loud. “So you consider an unlocked door to be an invitation?”

“In these circumstances, it might as well be,” Kirigiri said, shrugging. “I’m surprised that you of all people would be so careless, after all the fuss you made over Ogami.”

“All of which was fully justified,” Togami said. “She’s an admitted traitor with orders to kill!”

“Exactly,” Kirigiri said calmly. “And Monokuma never told us whether the orders still stand, now that the last trial is over. I’d expected you to demand answers about that at the first opportunity.”

Togami scowled. So it wasn’t enough for her to point out that he’d made a serious mistake – she
had to rub salt into the wound as much as she could. She grated on his nerves more than any girl he’d ever met, and he couldn’t for the life of him understand why Naegi cared about her opinion at all.

“If you’re only here to mock me, then you can get out,” he said, crossing his arms. “Actually, you can get out regardless of why you’re here. You are not welcome in my bedroom under any circumstances.”

“Your bedroom?” Kirigiri glanced pointedly around Naegi’s dorm room.

“My point stands,” Togami said through gritted teeth.

“Naegi might feel differently.”

“If he were awake to hear it, I’m sure he would,” Togami snapped, stepping to block her view of the sleeping boy. “Unfortunately for you, he isn’t. He collapsed without even making it through the door, because of the injuries he got while alone with you. And if you think that I’m going to entertain even one more word about that self-serving separation you inflicted on us, then –”

“I’m not remotely interested in enforcing that any longer,” Kirigiri said, waving a dismissive hand. “I told Naegi as much earlier.”

Togami drew back, staring at her suspiciously. He didn’t believe for a second that she would retreat on the issue just because of a couple more deaths. “What do you mean?”

“It hardly matters anymore,” she said. “I learned what I needed to know. And if Naegi is as badly off as you seem to believe, then it’s good that he has someone looking after him. Try not to be so careless about it in the future, though – the next person to sneak through your door might not be so innocent.”

“You’re about as innocent as a snake.” He glared at her. “Now get out.”

She gave him a slow smirk before strolling for the door, as if to drive home the point that she was only leaving because she felt like it, not because of his order. He clenched his fists, wishing desperately that he could slap that look off her face – but he knew that the first thing she’d do would be tattle to Naegi about it. Naegi wouldn’t understand at all, no matter how obnoxious she was being.

The second Kirigiri was over the threshold, Togami shut the door behind her and locked it with a decisive click. He would have liked to slam it, but that much noise might wake Naegi up. It was a miracle he’d slept through the argument, really – that or a mark of just how badly drained his injuries had left him.

Togami looked over at Naegi, curled up on the side of the bed he hadn’t been able to touch while they’d been apart, and an unexpected burst of nausea hit him as the full impact of what had just happened sank in. Kirigiri had been here, in this room, while they were asleep and vulnerable – and she’d been able to do it because he’d left the door open. Careless, she’d called him – well, she’d been right, though he’d bite through his own tongue before telling her so. Forgetting to lock the door had been unforgivably careless, and it was only merest chance that nothing had happened. Kirigiri was bad enough, and he’d have to sort through what she might have meddled with later, but if it had been Genocide Jill or Ogami…

Well, Jill had made no secret of the fact that she’d like to murder him from the day she’d revealed herself. And as for Ogami – who knew what she was thinking now? With Monokuma’s order to
kill still on the table, she could have seized the opportunity to provide the ransom for whatever hostages the mastermind had threatened.

Although now that he considered the idea – was the order to kill actually still valid? Kirigiri had said it as though it might not be. After all, Monokuma had revealed the order as part of his last incentive assembly – and as far as Togami could work out, the incentives only seemed valid until a murder occurred. They certainly hadn’t heard anything further about threats to the outside world, revealing secrets, or promises of money after those motives had caused someone to act. Kirigiri seemed to have concluded that the order for Ogami to kill would be abandoned in the same way – but would it actually be? She couldn’t possibly know.

No, there was only one person who could answer the question about whether Ogami’s order to kill was still active or not.

Togami looked up into the camera and said, “Monokuma! I want to talk to you.”
Chapter 83

Chapter Summary

Togami demands answers from Monokuma.

Togami kept his eyes fixed directly on the camera as he waited for Monokuma to answer him, arms crossed with his fingers drumming against his elbow. He locked his face into the slightly bored, impatient expression he’d always worn back at the Togami Corporation, when he’d waited in the executive suite for a subordinate he’d summoned. It was hardly the same situation, but the memory let him draw on the type of attitude he wanted to present, especially after so many moments of the bear catching him unawares.

“Oh, my, what’s this? An unexpected middle of the night call to visit you in the wrong dorm room?” Monokuma finally appeared in the middle of the room, looking around as if he were surprised at where he found himself.

“I want to ask you something,” Togami said.

“Ohh? It must be a real emergency!” Monokuma’s paws flew to cover his mouth. “Do you want to ask me about the school’s stockpile of special lotions?”

“What?” Despite his efforts to appear cool and collected, Togami couldn’t stop a hint of pink from flushing his cheeks. “No!”

“Huh? That’s not it?” Monokuma asked, sounding shocked. “But why else would you want to talk in the middle of the night? Is it something… private? Something you can’t bear to talk about in front of anyone else?” He tilted his head, giving Togami a bright grin. “If you have any health questions about rashes or burning, Doctor Monokuma is open for business!”

Togami did his best to pretend that he hadn’t gone red at that blasted bear’s insinuations. “It’s nothing so childish. I want to know whether your order for Ogami to murder someone is still in effect.”

“Order?” Monokuma paused for a long time, staring up at the ceiling. “Oh, that’s right. She was supposed to kill one of you, wasn’t she?” He shook his head. “It’s so hard to keep ancient history straight, isn’t it? I’m a forward-facing bear myself – the future is where it’s at!”

“That isn’t an answer,” Togami said, scowling.

“Oh, my, so demanding!” Monokuma said, leaning away and sweating as if he were frightened. “You really do like to have everything laid out for you in black and white, huh?” He laughed loudly at that. “I like your taste! All right, then, if you want a plain answer – no! Sakura Ogami’s order to kill is no longer in effect – because she already fulfilled it!”

“She did what?” Togami frowned, his mind racing through the possibilities of what Monokuma could mean by that. When had Ogami had the opportunity to kill someone? Had she caught Kirigiri in the moments after she’d left Naegi’s room? Or – he remembered her claim about what she’d intended to do with that second bottle of poison. Had she gone through with her suicide
threats after all?

“She sure did!” Monokuma said. “Breaking down her own door to carry out Asahina’s little rule-breaking plot sounds like causing a death to me! Be sure to congratulate her on a job well done!” He threw back his head and laughed again, the sound echoing around the room as he disappeared.

Togami scowled at the empty place where the bear had been, thinking over what he’d said. So Ogami could count her order as filled by Asahina’s execution? That didn’t sound like it ought to qualify to him, but he was hardly going to press the issue. At least now he could go to sleep with one less thing to worry about – that was one silver lining to Kirigiri’s intrusion, anyway.

He switched off the light and headed back over to the bed, deciding that he ought to try to salvage some rest from the remainder of the night. They’d presumably have a new area of the school to explore tomorrow, and he needed to be alert enough to search for potential clues or new threats.

But as he lay down in the darkness, he couldn’t clear his mind of the thoughts still swirling around about everything that had just happened. The thought of Kirigiri wandering around the room while he and Naegi slept sent cold shudders coursing through him, in spite of the warm blankets on the bed. She could have done anything in here – rummaged around in the room, planted something among Naegi’s possessions, or worse.

He couldn’t avoid the truth, not when it was this plain – she could have killed them both in their sleep, without even trying. Or worse, she could have just killed one of them, and left the other to take the fall. If he’d woken up beside Naegi’s dead body, with no idea what had happened – the thought was too horrifying to let himself finish.

It would have been so easy for something like that to happen that he couldn’t find any comfort in the fact that it hadn’t – not when he wasn’t sure why not. Had he thwarted her murder attempt by waking up unexpectedly, forcing her to pretend she’d wanted to have a conversation instead – or had she had some other plan that he couldn’t see? And if it had been something other than murder, then had she actually accomplished her goal before he’d sent her packing?

He didn’t know. He couldn’t know, not without understanding whatever goal she’d been aiming for by sneaking into this room. All he knew was that it had to be something underhanded. After all, even if the door had been unlocked, she couldn’t have known that from the outside. For her to have learned that the door was open, she would have had to try the handle in the first place – something that a person acting honestly wouldn’t have had any reason to do at this hour of the night.

The only bright spot that he could see in this whole mess was that at least Naegi didn’t seem to have been overly disturbed by everything that had happened in the room while he slept. The encounter with Kirigiri would have been so much worse if Naegi had been awake for it, what with his unreasonable insistence on continuing to treat her as a friend. At least she hadn’t had the opportunity to try to manipulate him again – after poison and a head injury, Togami shuddered to think about what other terrible things she could arrange.

Unable to escape from the unsettling thoughts of everything that might have happened, Togami moved closer to Naegi, wrapping an arm around the sleeping boy so that he could feel his reassuring warmth. Naegi nestled back against him with a small sound of contentment, his head settling against Togami’s shoulder as though even in sleep he knew that was where he belonged.

In an impulsive gesture that he doubted he would have gone through with if Naegi had been awake, Togami pressed his lips to Naegi’s temple in a soft kiss. “Stay alive,” he whispered, the words no more than a breath as his lips brushed Naegi’s skin. “Stay with me.”
With Naegi in his arms, warm and alive, some part of the anxiety plaguing Togami’s mind eased, just a little. For all the dangers they faced, there was something safe in a moment like this – a fragile bubble of peace surrounding them. He wasn’t ridiculous enough to think that it was anything more than an illusion, not when the mastermind had made certain no one could find peace in this nightmarish place – but at least for now, it could soothe away enough of his worries to let him rest. Tomorrow, it would all return, the murders and the betrayals and the questions – but at least when it did, he would have had this first.
Chapter 84

Chapter Summary

Naegi wakes up after some strange dreams to discuss the previous day's events with Togami.

Consciousness returned gradually to Naegi, like the slow creep of the rising tide. Voices murmured to him as he woke, half-remembered words that he didn’t consciously recall hearing.

“Try not to be so careless…”

Kirigiri frowned at him, arms crossed and expression chilly. She was as distant and self-possessed as ever as she spoke the reprimand, sounding almost bored by the need to scold.

But echoing behind that, he could hear the same words said differently. Wry humor colored the words to soften an often-repeated lecture, with a smile more open than any expression he’d ever seen her wear. Ghostly fingers ruffled his hair with a casual touch that had never been part of their interactions.

“It’s so hard to keep ancient history straight…”

Monokuma’s words cut through the memory, sharp with false kindness meant to wound. His laugh set Naegi’s teeth on edge, with its gleeful pleasure in its own cruelty. He hated that laugh more every time he heard it.

And somewhere beyond that, faint and far away, he could almost hear another laugh, nothing like Monokuma’s except in the chills it sent down his spine. He knew that laugh, knew that he should recognize it, but reaching for the memory only made it drift further away.

“Stay with me…”

Another voice pulled him away from the horrors lurking in those thoughts, a voice that he would always recognize. Togami pressed close to him, whispering the words with a sincerity that made Naegi’s heart ache.

And the same words rang through his head again and again and again, spoken with every emotion from affection to grief, a plea so familiar he knew it in his soul. He’d heard those words before, so many times, and he could almost –

“Good morning, everyone! It is now 7 A.M. and nighttime is officially over!”

Naegi slammed fully into wakefulness as Monokuma’s announcement sounded, morning hitting him like a punch to the gut. His entire body ached with a bone-deep heaviness that went further than simple exhaustion, and the thought of needing to drag himself out of bed made him want to groan.

And then something shifted under him, and Naegi realized that he hadn’t been sleeping on the bed – or at least, not entirely. Prying his eyes open, he found that his head was resting on Togami’s shoulder, and the other boy’s face was blinking sleepily only a few inches away.
Naegi shifted a little, figuring he should probably give Togami the freedom to move around while he was still trying to find the energy to get up – but Togami’s eyes focused sharply on him the instant he tried.

“You’re awake?” Togami reached over with his free hand to brush Naegi’s hair away from his forehead. “How are you feeling this morning?”

“Better,” Naegi said, as confidently as he could. He remembered their conversation on the way back to the dorms, though his memory got pretty fuzzy after that, and he knew that Togami had been seriously concerned for him. After everything that had happened, the last thing he wanted was to make Togami worry more.

“Hmm.” Togami eyed him dubiously. “It looks to me like you could use more rest.”

“Well – maybe I’m still a little tired,” Naegi admitted. “But I can’t go back to sleep. We need to go meet the others in the cafeteria.”

Togami grimaced. “I suppose we should at least keep tabs on what those girls are all doing.” But even though he said so, he didn’t seem inclined to move.

Naegi couldn’t blame him. He’d missed Togami so much when they were separated – and the mornings had been the worst. There had been a brief moment of disorientation each time he’d woken up, as his subconscious sought the other boy’s presence in the empty space beside him. Now that they were reunited, he just wanted to curl up around Togami and enjoy the time that they could finally have together.

But this wasn’t the right time for that. The others would worry if he and Togami didn’t make it to the breakfast meeting on time, especially after how shaky Naegi knew he’d looked the night before. And even apart from that, he wanted a chance to check on Ogami and Jill. The trial had hit those two the hardest of all, and he wanted to be sure they were okay.

So Naegi forced himself to pull away from the warmth of Togami’s arms and tried to push himself into a sitting position. The sudden shift made his head spin for a moment, his vision blurring briefly out of focus – but he managed to keep himself upright without collapsing again. Once his gaze steadied again, he gave Togami a smile.

“See? I’m fine.”

“Yes, I see you’re capable of sitting up for several seconds together.” Togami propped himself up on his elbow in a pointed demonstration of all the ease and grace that Naegi’s attempt had lacked. “The real question is whether you’re rested enough to maintain this elsewhere.”

“Definitely,” Naegi said firmly. “I slept all night, that has to be enough.”

“Did you?” Togami’s mouth twisted strangely as he looked at Naegi. “You’re sure that nothing disturbed you?”

“Actually, I think I might have gotten more rest last night than any of the last few,” Naegi said. He frowned, thinking back. “I had some weird dreams, though.”

“Oh?” Togami raised an eyebrow.

“Not – not that kind of dream,” Naegi protested, turning a little red. “I just dreamed that I heard Kirigiri and Monokuma and you talking, that’s all.”
“Ah.” Togami let out a long breath. “Well, I thought that might be it.”

“Huh? You did?” Naegi asked, puzzled. “Was I talking in my sleep?”

“No.” Togami sat up entirely rather than lounging, his expression growing more serious. “That wasn’t a dream. Both Kirigiri and Monokuma were here last night.”

“While I was sleeping?” Naegi asked, horrified. Kirigiri being in the room wasn’t too worrying – but the thought of Monokuma appearing in the room while he slept was just creepy. “Why?”

Togami studied Naegi for a moment, then shook his head. “If I don’t tell you, I’m sure she will.”

“Tell me what?” Naegi asked, starting to get worried at the look on Togami’s face. “Did something happen?”

“It might have,” Togami said grimly. “I doubt you remember, but you didn’t make it to bed under your own power last night. You collapsed just inside the door, and I had to carry you the rest of the way.”

“Oh.” Naegi blinked, a sudden image popping into his head of Togami lifting him over the threshold bridal style. “That was nice of you.”

“It was stupid,” Togami corrected him flatly. “Because in the confusion, I – well, the door ended up remaining unlocked.”

Naegi waited for Togami to continue on to whatever had him so upset, but he didn’t say anything else. “So… that’s how Kirigiri got in? I guess it was nice of her to check up on us.”

Togami stared at him. “Maybe I didn’t make myself clear. She entered this room while we were both still asleep. I only found out because I woke up and caught her at it.”

“Oh.” Naegi frowned. “Okay, I guess that’s a little strange. Did she say why she came in?”

“Did she offer an adequate explanation for sneaking into your bedroom without an invitation and hanging around doing who knows what while we were sleeping?” Togami said acidly. “No, she didn’t.”

“Then I’ll ask her about it later,” Naegi decided. “I’m sure she must have had a reason.”

“Yes, I’m sure she did,” Togami agreed darkly. “That’s what worries me.”

“Wait – you don’t think she was trying to – to do something to us, do you?” Naegi asked, startled. “Kirisgiri wouldn’t hurt us!”

“She’s done so twice already,” Togami countered. “Every time you’ve been alone with her, you’ve been left so badly injured that you were unable to stand on your own.”

“Not every time,” Naegi protested. “And I mean – it’s not like she wants me to get hurt. It’s just a risk of investigating, that’s all.”

“A risk that she repeatedly asks you to take on her behalf,” Togami said. “I notice that she never seems to end up poisoned or beaten over the head. Whenever she wants to try something dangerous, she makes you do it for her – and it is going to stop.”

“She doesn’t make me do anything,” Naegi said. “I want to help investigate. And she didn’t even have anything to do with that needle – that was just an accident.”
“One that you don’t remember.” Togami shook his head. “Whether or not she’s deliberately causing you harm is beside the point – the point is that it keeps happening. Do you honestly believe you would survive another such accident, in your current state?”

Naegi opened his mouth to protest again – but then the look in Togami’s eyes finally sank in. Yes, Togami was furious with Kirigiri, blaming her even though it was really the mastermind’s fault that all this had happened – but there was more to it than anger. Of course there was, if Naegi really had collapsed last night. That must have been terrifying, knowing that it was poison that had caused it. Could Naegi really get upset at Togami when he’d been so afraid for Naegi?

“I see what you mean,” he said instead. “And – well, I’ll try harder to be careful.”

“Good. And if Kirigiri tries to talk you into any other stupid risk, tell me before jumping in head first,” Togami said, relaxing minutely.

But as he said that, the words triggered a memory in Naegi. *Tell me first* – the promise Togami had asked him to make about not returning to the hidden room again.

The promise that he’d broken.

He had to tell Togami about it, he knew it. He shouldn’t have even put it off as long as he had – only the separation forced on them could excuse the delay. This wasn’t a good time, not when Togami was already so angry at Kirigiri – but Naegi couldn’t see another option. Not telling would be as good as lying, in this situation.

“Uh – Togami? There’s something else I think I need to tell you about what happened while we were apart.”
Naegi finally tells Togami about his broken promise.

As soon as Naegi said the words, Togami’s expression changed, gaze sharpening and mouth thinning into an icy frown. “Does what you’re about to say have to do with Kirigiri?”

Naegi didn’t like the dangerous glint in Togami’s eye as he said her name. “You can’t get mad about it.”

“Meaning that it does have to do with her,” Togami concluded grimly. “Well, let’s hear it.”

“And you won’t get mad at her?” Naegi pressed.

“I doubt I could get any angrier at her than I already am,” Togami said, rolling his eyes. “Not unless you’re about to tell me that she endangered your life again.”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Naegi said. “It’s not even something she did, exactly. It’s something I did while she was there.” He took a deep breath and met Togami’s eyes. “I’m really sorry, but I broke my promise to you.”

“You went back to the hidden room?”

“Yes.”

“The room where she sent you so that she could check if the mastermind knew about it?” Togami demanded. “The one where you got knocked unconscious the second you stepped inside?”

“Right.” Fresh guilt began to gnaw at Naegi at the horror on Togami’s face. He’d known the other boy would be upset, but actually seeing it was worse than his imagination had been. “And – well, I know I promised to tell you first, but – well, it was during the separation, and we had to act fast. There wasn’t anything I could do.”

“You could have not gone!” Togami snapped. “I knew it, I knew she was going to try something when she got you alone –”

“It wasn’t Kirigiri’s idea,” Naegi interrupted, glaring at Togami.

“Oh, really? You just felt like wandering back to visit one of the places you nearly died?” Togami snarled.

“It wasn’t my idea, either,” Naegi said, trying his best to stay calm. “It was Alter Ego’s.”

That silenced the other boy for a moment, and he seemed to calm down a little as he considered the statement. “During the trial, Monokuma did say that you and Kirigiri were doing something with that computer,” he said eventually. “Something to do with electronic doors.”
“Right,” Naegi said. He glanced over at the camera, wondering if it was okay to say this where the mastermind could hear – but on the other hand, the trial had proven pretty thoroughly that the mastermind had known about their plan all along. “Alter Ego thought that he might be able to break into the school network, and he asked Kirigiri and I to help him do it.”

Togami frowned. “So there was an Ethernet port in the hidden room?”

“Yeah, and a cable,” Naegi said, nodding. “We thought that maybe if we could keep the mastermind from noticing, it might be all right. I carried the laptop under my jacket, and we pretended to have an argument about the room so that I’d have to go in again.”

“And yet again, somehow you ended up being the one to take the risk,” Togami said.

“No, I wasn’t,” Naegi said, biting his lip as Alter Ego’s cheerful face flashed before his eyes again. “It was Alter Ego who took the real risk – and Monokuma killed him for it.”

“And he thought about doing the same to you, in case you forgot,” Togami said, leaning forward. “Monokuma was more than willing to kill over that rule – and it sounds to me like you were the one participating, not Kirigiri.” He scowled. “This is exactly why I wanted you to talk to me before trying to go back to that room.”

“But we weren’t supposed to talk to each other then,” Naegi reminded him. “And – well, I did think about breaking the separation just for a minute, but if I’d suddenly left to go talk to you, the mastermind might have gotten suspicious. It was already so risky for Alter Ego – I couldn’t make it worse for him.” He sighed, dropping his gaze to his hands. “Not that it helped in the end.”

That was the worst of it – that everything Alter Ego had tried to do to help had been for nothing. Alter Ego had worked so hard to decrypt that data for them, and it had just been a part of whatever game the mastermind was playing with them. And then, when he’d gone a step further and tried to break into the network – well, if Monokuma was telling the truth, then all their precautions for Alter Ego’s safety had been worthless. When Naegi had carried the laptop to the hidden room and plugged it into the network, he’d been taking his friend to his doom.

“So you’re saying that you didn’t tell me before you acted because you wanted to protect Alter Ego?” Togami asked, his gaze so intent that Naegi could almost feel the pressure of eyes on his skin. “A computer program?”

Naegi’s head snapped up so he could glare at Togami, ignoring the way the sudden movement brought on another wave of dizziness. “He was my friend!”

“So that’s what it comes down to, isn’t it?” Togami clenched one of his hands into a fist, so tightly that his knuckles went white. “You’ll risk your life for any of your friends – even the ones who aren’t human. Even the ones who have sent you into danger time and again. All they have to do is ask, and you’re willing to throw your life away.”

“It’s not like that,” Naegi said, stung. “Look, I know you think that Kirigiri is trying to hurt me or something, but that isn’t it. She just wants the same thing all of us want – to get out of this place. It’s the same thing that Alter Ego was fighting for – and it’s what I want, too.”

Memories of his fallen friends blazed through him as he said those words. Fukawa’s terrified screams echoed in his head, full of her miserable conviction that no one would care when she was erased from existence. Asahina’s body crumpled before his eyes, riddled with bullets as “punishment” for the simple wish to speak with her best friend.
And beyond them, the others stretched out in a line of ghosts, each one bright with their own unique heartaches. Celeste’s dreams twisted into desperation – Ishimaru’s bond with Owada shattered, leaving him broken by grief – Fujisaki’s innocent expression of admiration brought on his own death – and of course, before any of the others, Maizono’s fears spurred her to use his affection for her and begin the killing.

They’d experienced nightmare after nightmare in this place, caught in the mastermind’s trap. And the longer they remained, the worse things would get. He didn’t just want to leave because he wanted to get away from this madness and return to his normal life – he wanted to get out because they all owed it to their friends who hadn’t been able to make it this far.

Naegi reached out and caught Togami’s hand in both of his, wrapping his fingers around the clenched fist. “I don’t want to stay here and let the mastermind keep pitting us all against each other. I refuse to watch my friends lose hope and die. Even if I have to take some risks to fight against it, that’s okay. This world that the mastermind forced on us – I don’t want to be part of it!”

“You’re dismissing those risks like they’re nothing,” Togami snapped. “This game has life or death stakes, even apart from the murders – both Asahina and Enoshima got killed for nothing more than rule-breaking! You can’t just take risks without considering the consequences. You’ve nearly been killed twice – three times, if we count Monokuma’s threat during yesterday’s trial. If it went wrong – if you died – for god’s sake, that isn’t worth it!”

“But if it could help us find a way to get out –”

“It doesn’t matter!” Togami’s hand twisted to wrap around Naegi’s in turn, gripping his fingers until they ached. “There’s nothing you could gain that could possibly be worth your life!”

“But –”

“I’d rather stay trapped in this hellhole for the rest of my life than lose you!”

Naegi stared at Togami as those words rang out between them. The other boy had gone pale, a look of horror crossing his face. He hadn’t meant to say that, Naegi realized. Togami hadn’t wanted Naegi to know the depth of his feelings – and maybe he hadn’t even known it himself until he’d heard his own words.

What was he supposed to say to that? Naegi didn’t have the faintest idea. Nothing in his very limited previous romantic experience had even come close to that kind of declaration. Togami was willing to stay here in this twisted killing game, locked away from everything he’d spent his life working for – just so Naegi wouldn’t have to risk his life? Naegi could hardly get his mind around the thought. It was staggering. It was world-altering.

It was wrong.

As amazing as it was to hear how much Togami cared for him, Naegi didn’t want that kind of affection – not something so rooted in terror and pain. Their connection could be so much more than that, he knew it – more than it could ever be while they were stuck in the mastermind’s game. They could build something beautiful between them if they had the chance, something that would give them strength instead of fear. Something like that was worth fighting for – it was worth risking everything for.

“Togami,” Naegi said slowly, “I – I get what you mean, but – you can’t say that. It isn’t what I want.”
Togami jerked back like the words had been a physical blow. “You – what?”

“I don’t want to be the reason you give up,” Naegi said. “That isn’t how you make me feel at all – and it isn’t what I want to be for you.”

Togami stared at him, looking inexplicably stricken by Naegi’s words. “I see.”

“Huh?” Naegi blinked, startled as Togami broke their joined hands apart. “Wait – what are you talking about?”

“You’ve been more than clear enough.” Togami stood, a cold mask settling over his face. “I told you my feelings, and you informed me that you don’t feel the same way.”

“No!” Naegi sat up straight, vision blurring in and out and preventing him from catching Togami’s gaze. “That’s not what I meant!”

“Isn’t it?” Togami said, and the ice in his voice hit Naegi like a punch to the gut. “It sounds to me like that’s exactly what you’ve been trying to tell me all morning. I don’t matter to you. Not as much as – as you do to me.”

“You do!” Naegi insisted, panic making his breath catch in his throat. “Of course you do! I’ve never felt like this about anyone before!”

“Really? Because you haven’t shown it!” Togami sneered, with a viciousness Naegi hadn’t felt directed at him since the start of their relationship. “You’ve jumped into danger on command for everyone else, all of your precious friends – but you couldn’t be bothered with the one simple promise I asked for. All they had to do was threaten to ignore you for a couple days, and you completely threw me over. You’ve shown more concern for a computer’s feelings than mine. You don’t – you aren’t –” He covered his face with one hand, taking a deep, shuddering breath.

“I’m sorry!” Naegi protested, his voice shaking from the terrible fear growing inside him. “I – I didn’t mean to hurt you, I’d never want that! I’ve just – I’ve had to make decisions, and –”

“And you haven’t chosen me,” Togami cut him off. He turned away, but not before a glimpse of his expression stole Naegi’s breath away. “Fine. I think I’ve made myself enough of a fool over you.”

“Don’t!” Naegi tried to scramble to his feet, to run after Togami – but his head swam so violently that he collapsed back onto the bed before he could.

And lying alone on the bed, he heard the click of the door closing as his vision slowly cleared on the empty room.
Chapter 86

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to process his feelings in the aftermath of his fight with Naegi.

The overwhelming tide of emotions flooding through Togami carried him across the hall, but by the time he’d entered his own dorm, he already regretted his hasty decision to leave Naegi’s room. He could still hear the pain shaking through Naegi’s voice – pain that he’d caused. The knowledge that Naegi would be miserable and alone now, maybe even crying, too dizzy and injured to leave the bed – it burned inside him, an almost physical compulsion to turn and run back to Naegi’s side. He wanted to go back, to gather Naegi into his arms, to hold him close and keep him safe –

But Naegi didn’t want that from him.

Togami slumped back against his door, pressing one hand hard against his mouth. He could hear his breath hissing through his fingers, harsh and too loud in the silent room. The bitter truth held him paralyzed, unable to turn away from everything he’d understood.

For days now, he’d turned his entire world upside down for Naegi’s sake. He’d abandoned his plans to win the game and joined the others as an ally. He’d gone chasing after Naegi time and again to rescue him from his injuries and keep him safe. For the first time in his life, he’d fought on behalf of a person other than himself.

And those actions hadn’t been the worst of it. He’d slept in Naegi’s arms, even in the middle of the killing game, trusting the boy not to hurt him. He’d been unguarded enough that all the other students had known of his vulnerability, allowing that obnoxious Kirigiri to manipulate him. He’d let his feelings for Naegi become his weakness, a weapon that could be wielded against him.

He’d never thought Naegi himself would be the one to use it to hurt him.

For all the confusing new emotions and shifting uncertainties that had hammered away at him since he’d first felt anything for Naegi, there had been one thing that had given him some measure of comfort – the thought that he wasn’t alone in it. Yes, he’d made himself vulnerable in a way he’d never been before, but it had been all right as long as he wasn’t the only one. He’d believed that Naegi had shared his feelings, matching him weakness for weakness – believed it unquestioningly enough that he hadn’t even hesitated to offer Naegi his heart.

He’d admitted out loud that he would do anything in his power to keep Naegi safe, something that he hadn’t fully understood until he’d heard himself saying the words. It wasn’t just a refusal to try to win the killing game, or the need to care for Naegi’s injuries, or the fury for the people who’d hurt Naegi – it went beyond that. Naegi mattered to him more than anything else in his life, to the point where leaving this place didn’t matter if Naegi couldn’t escape with him. He’d come to care too much for Naegi to be able to envision returning to a world without him.

No. Togami couldn’t lie to himself, not anymore. Not after what he’d realized.

He’d come to love Naegi, so deeply that that his heart ached with it. Now that he recognized the emotion for what it was, it pulsed through him with every heartbeat, so intense that it terrified him.
with its inescapability.

And Naegi didn’t feel the same way.

In the moment that Naegi had said so, everything Togami had believed about their relationship had come crashing down around him. He’d known that Naegi didn’t feel quite as strongly about protecting him as he did for Naegi, but he’d just assumed that was because he obviously needed much less protection than Naegi did. He’d thought that at the core of it, Naegi felt everything as strongly as he did. It had never even occurred to him that his feelings might not be returned.

An ugly, broken sound tore through the air, and Togami realized that he was laughing, shoulders shaking with the force of it. He tilted his head back against the hard wood of the door, closing his eyes as the bitter irony convulsed through him. How many times had some infatuated idiot thrown themselves at him, seeing reciprocated feelings where there was nothing more than contempt? Too many to count, with Fukawa only the latest and most disturbing in a long string of easily-manipulated fools. And now here he was, on the other side of it, caught in the trap of unrequited love.

It would be easier if he could blame Naegi for it, if he could twist the pain into resentment, let it burn away until there was nothing left but ashes and regret – but how could he? It wasn’t as though Naegi had been using him – as transparent as Naegi was, that would have been obvious, and Togami could have avoided it easily. No, Naegi was open, honest, and kind, and it wasn’t his fault that Togami had misunderstood just what that meant.

Naegi did care about him, Togami didn’t doubt that – but Naegi cared about every one of the students he’d met here at Hope’s Peak, even the murderers. Hell, he even cared about Fujisaki’s goddamn computer program. And Togami didn’t want to be on the same level as a laptop.

Thinking back on it now, he realized that Naegi had never actually said how he felt about Togami at any point in their ill-fated relationship. He’d obviously felt physical attraction fairly strongly, but that was hardly a shock. And he’d trusted Togami, even from the start – but who the hell didn’t Naegi trust?

No, Togami could see now that he’d always been the one to initiate, to push for more, to spell out his feelings. He’d sought Naegi out, over and over – even at the start, he’d been the one to drag Naegi into the archive. And now he’d handed Naegi his heart, just as thoughtlessly as he’d done the rest of it. How could he have expected anything more than rejection?

Slowly, throat raw and heart aching, Togami forced his eyes open and pushed himself away from the door. Part of him wanted to collapse onto the bed and bury his face in a pillow – but he refused to let this break him any worse than it already had. He might not be able to control the emotions clawing their way through his soul, but at least he would be master of his own actions.

Instead of collapsing, he went to prepare himself to face the day, stripping away the wrinkled clothing he’d worn in Naegi’s bed. He forced himself to step into the blisteringly hot shower without any hesitation about washing away any lingering traces of the other boy’s scent on his skin. And if the face that he tilted up into the shower spray was already streaked with salty tear tracks, he would never admit it.
Chapter 87

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to decide what he needs to do in the wake of his argument with Naegi.

After going through his usual morning rituals, Togami told himself that he felt better able to deal with the new day. He’d scrutinized himself in the mirror to determine whether there were any outer indications of his feelings, and he was sure that the pallor of his skin and traces of red around his eyes would fade soon enough.

The only thing that gave him pause before he left the room was the small pile of room keys sitting on his bookcase. He really had to decide what to do with those. His own key was easy enough – he tucked it into his inner jacket pocket where he usually kept it safe. But that didn’t address the question of the other two keys – the ones belonging to Ogami and Naegi.

He hadn’t realized he’d taken Naegi’s room key with him when he’d left the other boy’s room. He’d had it in his pocket already, and he’d hardly been thinking clearly enough to decide whether to return it before he’d stormed out. He’d locked the door behind him, he was fairly certain of that – which meant that at the moment, Naegi was locked in his room with no way to leave.

Part of Togami rather appreciated that idea. At least this way he knew where Naegi was and that he wasn’t doing anything stupid. But keeping Naegi safe wasn’t his responsibility. Naegi had made that perfectly clear.

Togami sighed, picking up the key and frowning at it. He’d have to return this to Naegi, wouldn’t he? The thought of facing the other boy again, so soon after his resounding rejection, made Togami’s stomach twist. Naegi would want to talk to him, he knew it – and he wasn’t sure he could trust himself if faced with Naegi’s unhappiness. It would be so easy to let himself be convinced to return, to spend his time chasing after a boy who didn’t love him back.

No. No, he couldn’t let himself do that. This was all bad enough without heaping that additional humiliation onto the list of the other mistakes he’d made. He would just have to return that key to Naegi without seeing him, somehow.

Which still left the question of Ogami’s key. Togami scowled down at that one. He’d tried to return it to her the night before Hagakure’s murder, figuring that there wasn’t much point in continuing the inconvenient charade of locking her in her room when he’d been convinced she could leave any time she chose – but she’d refused to take it.

Well, he’d intended to speak with her anyway, to inform her of what Monokuma had said regarding her order to kill. That certainly lessened any concerns he’d had about her ability to wander the school at will. Maybe she’d feel differently about taking her key back now. Or if she didn’t, she could throw it away herself and leave her door open to the world, for all he cared. If that whole mess with the locked door had taught him anything, it was that confiscating keys was more trouble than it was worth.

Togami pocketed both other keys and left his room, making sure to lock the door behind him. With the hallway empty, he couldn’t quite resist the impulse to look across the way at Naegi’s door for a
moment, the key’s weight unavoidable in his pocket.

It would be so easy to return. All he had to do was open the door, and it could be like the last hour had never happened. Naegi would smile, kiss him, curl into his arms –

But it wouldn’t be enough. Even the thought of holding Naegi felt hollow, now that he understood the disparity in their feelings for one another. No matter how soft and sweet his moments alone with Naegi might be, he knew that wouldn’t matter when it came down to making real decisions. Naegi had never chosen him over any of the others, not once.

Togami had let go of so much of his pride already, for Naegi’s sake – but he couldn’t do this. He wouldn’t. If Naegi didn’t want the love he’d offered, then he refused to beg for it, or to crawl back as if it didn’t matter. It did matter. If he had to be vulnerable, then he needed to know that the other boy had been defeated just as thoroughly by this relationship. He wanted Naegi to love him in return.

Togami tore his eyes away from the door, scowling at his stupid, useless thoughts. Indulging in that kind of melancholy in his own room was bad enough, but doing so in the hall was utterly unacceptable. He had to get away from this area before things got any worse.

But first, he did have to deal with the question of Naegi’s key.

After a moment’s thought, Togami braced himself and crossed the hall to press Naegi’s doorbell. When he’d left, Naegi had been barely able to sit up on the bed, despite his insistence that he felt much better. It was possible that he hadn’t even been able to make it to the door yet this morning, and was still unaware he was locked in the room. But hearing the doorbell would bring him over, if he wasn’t...

But after several agonizingly long moments, the doorknob rattled, as if someone on the other side was trying to open it. Togami pressed his lips together, trying not to react to the knowledge that Naegi stood less than a foot away from him, close enough to touch if the door weren’t in the way. That didn’t matter. He’d forfeited his right to touch Naegi, separating them more thoroughly than a closed door ever could.

Before he could do anything foolish, Togami slid Naegi’s key into the lock and turned it, leaving the knob to turn suddenly under the other boy’s hand. As soon as the lock clicked open, Togami turned and sped down the hall, leaving the key dangling from the knob as he walked away as quickly as he could without breaking into a full run. He only just made it out of the line of vision when he heard the door open behind him.

“Togami?” Naegi’s voice, trembling with a painful hope, caught at Togami’s heart, trying to pull him back like a moon captured in a planet’s orbit. If he’d called again, Togami didn’t know what he might have done in response, despite all his decisions to the contrary.

So before he could hear Naegi say his name again, Togami headed for the door that would take him into the rest of the first floor. Better to put some distance between the two of them until he could face Naegi with a greater degree of composure.
Chapter 88

Chapter Summary

Togami decides to go off and investigate on his own.

Leaving the dorms so quickly left Togami with the question of where exactly he wanted to go instead. Anywhere that had the risk of Naegi’s presence had to be off the table, at least for now. The stupid breakfast meeting wasn’t even worth considering.

He might as well try to do something useful while the others frittered away their time in petty arguments and false friendships. Destination in mind, Togami made his way for the stairs, climbing until he reached the fourth floor. He could see that the next set of stairs continued upwards from here, but he could search that area later. He had a more important goal in mind.

During the trial yesterday, Ogami had claimed she’d broken down the door to the headmaster’s room, and Monokuma had confirmed it. Togami didn’t believe the rest of the rubbish she’d spouted about suicide plans and wanting to help them, but the state of the door did sound worth investigating. After all, with Alter Ego’s data analysis results, the headmaster had to be the primary suspect for being the mastermind – regardless of the pack of lies Kirigiri had tried to feed him on the subject a few days ago.

As soon as Togami turned down the hallway towards the headmaster’s room, he could see that something had indeed been done to the doorknob and hinges. Deep gouges marred the door in all those areas, and it no longer fit neatly into the doorframe. It looked like Ogami actually had been telling the truth on this topic.

But when Togami put out a hand to try to open the door, it wouldn’t budge. The knob turned easily under his hand, and the door slid from side to side without the hinges holding it in the frame – but no matter how much force he used, he couldn’t get it to open so much as an inch.

“What’s this? Seeing your headmaster in the middle of the night wasn’t enough?"

Togami turned around to see Monokuma standing mere feet behind him.

“It looks like you just can’t stay away from my lusciously fluff-filled figure, huh?” Monokuma went on, that awful grin spreading over his face.

“Shut up,” Togami ordered, raising his chin imperiously. The expression had never worked on that stupid bear yet, but at least it let him set the tone he wanted. “What happened to this door? Ogami said she broke it down.”

“Oh? And that got you interested?” Monokuma asked. “Were you planning to sneak in to find some naughty discipline of your own?” He laughed. “Sorry, but I’ll have you know I’m a very rule-abiding bear – teacher-student relationships are strictly off-limits! You’ll have to daydream during class just like everyone else.”

“You did something to this door, didn’t you?” Togami demanded, deciding it would be best to ignore the bear’s ranting. “You sealed it.”
“And just in time, too!” Monokuma said brightly. “If you’d been just a little bit faster, you might have managed to sneak in. And who knows what exciting mysteries you could have uncovered if only you’d had the chance.” His red eye gleamed as he grinned at Togami. “I guess it’s a good thing for me that you were too slow!”

Togami glared at the bear, cursing himself for not thinking of this sooner. Ogami had announced that she’d broken open the door in the middle of the trial, right to Monokuma’s face. Of course the mastermind would have taken the first opportunity to reseal the door. If he’d wanted to get inside the office, he should have gone immediately after the trial had ended.

But that would have meant abandoning Naegi. The boy had barely gotten to his room with all the help Togami had given – he never would have made it on his own. If he’d left Naegi’s room after putting the boy to bed, it might have been just fast enough – but there was no point in dwelling on what-ifs. For all Togami knew, the mastermind had resealed the door immediately after Ogami had broken it, and this was all a ploy to make them suffer.

Well, he wasn’t going to give the mastermind the satisfaction of seeing that he’d been disconcerted. “Fine,” he said, stalking past Monokuma and heading back down the hall. “Then I won’t waste any more of my time here.”

“Oh? You have somewhere else to be? Or do you have a strict schedule of moping to get back to?”

The innocent-sounding questions stopped Togami in his tracks, and he spun around to pin the bear with the most vicious look he could muster. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Monokuma gasped, covering his mouth with both paws. “Oops, was it supposed to be a secret? Well, don’t worry! I’ll be extra careful to save all the camera footage from this morning in a beary safe place!” He threw his head back and laughed.

Togami’s stomach heaved, and he had to swallow hard against the bile rising in his throat at the thought of the mastermind watching the moment when Naegi had broken his heart. Experiencing it had been bad enough when he’d thought they’d been alone – but knowing that an enemy had been observing him at that moment of painful weakness made him want to scream.

“I guess it’s just another case of a whirlwind high school romance ending in tears,” Monokuma went on, shaking his head in a mockery of sympathy. “Well, if you need a shoulder to cry on, all you have to do is ask!”

“Shut up!” Togami snarled, cheeks flushing a burning scarlet at the realization that the mastermind had also seen his tears. He’d rarely cried in his life, not since he was a child, and never in front of anyone else – but leaving Naegi had brought him to it. And now the mastermind had another weapon to use against him.

“Oh, my, such violence!” Monokuma drew back as if Togami had frightened him. “I’m starting to worry for the sanctity of my lovely fur!” He gasped. “Is the pain of losing your high school sweetheart too much to bear? Are you going to turn to delinquency and rule-breaking?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Togami scowled at the bear, preparing to leave again. “I don’t know why I bothered. Nothing you say is ever worth listening to.”

“Is that so? Then I guess you don’t want to hear any secrets I came to tell you, do you?”

Togami froze at those tantalizing words. It was a trap – he knew it had to be a trap, the mastermind would never just share information to be helpful – but he had to ask. “What secrets?”
Monokuma grinned. “You came here to sneak into the headmaster’s office, right? So you must be curious about what’s inside!”

“Are you going to let me in?” Togami asked.

“After all the trouble I took to lock it up? No way!” Monokuma said. “But since you’ve had such a bad day already, I just couldn’t resist giving you a little something to turn your frown upside down!”

Togami stared at the bear’s beaming face, dread beginning to curdle through him at the possibilities of what he might be about to say. It hadn’t taken him long to realize that the more Monokuma smiled, the worse something was going to be – and right now, Monokuma was wearing one of his widest grins.

But as horrible as whatever was coming might be, it would be better to know. Whatever Monokuma was planning, Togami at least wanted to be able to see it coming.

“All right,” Togami said at last, crossing his arms. “What is it?”

“I know it was very upsetting for all of you to find out that your beloved headmaster’s office was locked,” Monokuma said, sighing heavily. “But it couldn’t be helped! After all, even the most approachable and friendly headmaster needs to keep a few things away from a school full of curious students – things that aren’t conducive to a healthy and fulfilling school life!”

“What kind of things?” Togami asked, frowning as he considered the possibilities.

“Oh, the usual things – barrels of honey, picnic baskets, maps for the best hibernation spots,” Monokuma said.

Togami shook his head. “Right. I should have expected that kind of nonsense.”

“You’re not interested in the delicious varieties of honey your headmaster keeps behind lock and key?” Monokuma asked. “Oh, well, can’t be helped – some people just don’t have very refined palates. I guess there’s really only one thing from that office that would interest a one-track mind like yours.”

Now they were getting somewhere. “And that is?” Togami prompted.

Monokuma grinned, eyes gleaming. “A weapon.”

Togami stared at the bear, waiting a long moment to see if he was going to elaborate. “And?”

“Huh? That’s not enough?” Monokuma asked, shocked.

“There have been weapons all over this school since we arrived,” Togami said, rolling his eyes. “What do I care if there’s one more?”

“Huh. I thought you’d be more interested.” Monokuma shook his head glumly. “I guess even the most dangerous weapon in the entire school isn’t enough to distract you from your broken heart – not even if it gives the wielder the ability to secretly kill everyone!”

“That does sound dangerous,” Togami said, making his disinterest in the subject clear. “It’s a good thing you went to so much effort to seal it away.”

“Oh – did I forget to mention that part?” Monokuma tilted his head with an innocent smile. “It
wasn’t in the office when I sealed the door. It’s gone *missing.*” And with a last wild burst of laughter, the bear disappeared, leaving Togami to stare at the sealed office in growing horror.
Chapter 89

Chapter Summary

Naegi tries to pull himself together after being left behind by Togami.

If Naegi hadn’t known that skipping the breakfast meeting would worry the other students, he might have let himself collapse back into bed and the temporary relief of sleep. His limbs still felt leaden from exhaustion, even after a full night of rest – it would be easy to sleep through the day and give himself the illusion this had been nothing more than an awful dream.

But he knew that wasn’t true, and pretending otherwise would only make it worse when reality set in. The room key clutched in his hand was more than proof of that.

When he’d heard the doorbell ring, he’d had a brief, awful moment when he’d believed that Togami had come back – that he’d regretted leaving so quickly and was willing to listen to Naegi’s explanations after all. In the long moments since Togami had left, the things he’d wanted to say had run unstoppably through Naegi’s head, things that explained that he’d never meant to hurt the other boy so badly. Hurting Togami was the last thing Naegi had ever wanted to do, and he’d thought that maybe, maybe he’d been given the chance to tell him so.

And then, after a confused moment of rattling a locked knob, the door had suddenly opened – and Naegi had understood. Togami hadn’t wanted to see Naegi after all. He’d just wanted to return the only thing of Naegi’s in his possession – Naegi’s room key. Naegi hadn’t even realized Togami had still had it – that he’d kept it after helping Naegi last night. And now he’d returned it, as if to say that he was washing his hands of Naegi. He couldn’t even be bothered to return it to Naegi’s face – he’d left the key dangling from the lock and run off before Naegi could even catch a glimpse of him.

Just looking at the key now made Naegi feel sick from how badly he’d handled everything. And the worst part was that he still wasn’t sure what else he could have done. He didn’t want Togami to give up on attempting to escape just because of Naegi. How could either of them ever live with themselves if they really did end up stuck here because of each other? That would poison everything between them, even more surely than the drug on Fukawa’s needles. They would have come to hate each other in the end, if they’d let that happen.

But Togami hated him now, anyway.

Naegi turned away from the key, trying to put that thought out of his mind. He didn’t know if it was really that bad, not for sure. Togami might have avoided Naegi when he’d returned the key, but that didn’t mean he’d keep doing it forever. Naegi was sure that given the chance, he could explain to Togami just what he’d really meant. He refused to let himself believe that everything they’d shared had been broken beyond repair.

Instead of dwelling on those depressing thoughts, Naegi made his way over towards the bathroom, using the wall to support his slow, trembling steps. He didn’t have much longer to get ready if he wanted to make it to the breakfast meeting.

With his head spinning already from his trip across the room to the door, Naegi moved as carefully
as he could while preparing for the day. He made it through his shower by clutching hard at the
door every time the steam overwhelmed his perspective and made the room tilt alarmingly, and he
felt rather proud of the fact as he stumbled out of the bathroom. He was fine, just like he’d insisted
to Togami, and he wished the other boy were here so he could show him.

When Naegi finally managed to drag himself out of his room, it was approaching the time that
the breakfast meeting usually ended, but he was pretty sure it wouldn’t be over just yet. He should still
be able to catch the others before they scattered. And – a burst of optimism struck him – and
maybe Togami would even be there! He’d been attending the breakfast meetings lately, so it
wouldn’t be impossible. And if he were, then maybe – just maybe – he’d let Naegi talk to him.

But when Naegi finally walked through the cafeteria doors, the only person he saw inside was
Kirigiri, sipping a cup of tea and watching the clock. A wave of disappointment washed through
him at the mostly empty room – but he supposed he shouldn’t have let himself expect anything
else. Togami obviously wanted to avoid him, after all. Why would he show up somewhere that he
knew Naegi would be?

But that didn’t explain where the others were. Naegi looked around the room again, carefully,
making sure he hadn’t missed Jill lurking in a corner or Ogami hidden back in the kitchen – but no.
Other than Kirigiri, the room was empty.

She looked up as he made his way slowly across the room to drop into the seat across the table
from her. The exertion left him a little winded, and he could see her watching as he tried to catch
his breath.

“I’d thought you might be feeling better this morning,” Kirigiri said at last, setting her teacup down
with a faint click.

“I am,” Naegi assured her, the words coming out more breathlessly than he’d intended. “I’m much
better today.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Appearances are deceiving, then.”

“So – where are the others?” Naegi asked, frowning around the room. “How come you’re the only
one here?”

“I was about to ask you the same question,” Kirigiri said, leaning back in her seat. “Your knight in
shining armor seems to be falling down on the job.”

Naegi couldn’t stop himself from paling at the reference to Togami. He should have been prepared
for the question – but it hadn’t even occurred to him that he might need to explain what had
happened. After Kirigiri had finally relented on the separation issue, of course she’d have expected
them to be together again. Naturally she’d have questions at the sight of Naegi all by himself. But
the thought of answering, of explaining why Togami wasn’t at his side, made Naegi’s stomach
twist.

Kirigiri watched him as he groped uselessly for an explanation, a slight frown on her lips. “I see.”
She shook her head. “Well, I haven’t seen him since last night. You’re the first one to arrive here
this morning.”

“What? The first?” His own worries flew out of Naegi’s mind as he realized what Kirigiri was
saying. “You mean Jill and Ogami haven’t shown up yet, either?”

“That’s right,” Kirigiri said. “I was going to wait a few more minutes before checking doors.” She
gave him a faint smile. “I suppose if you’re here, that’s one less room I need to check.”

Naegi was starting to get a bad feeling about this. He didn’t remember much of that elevator ride back up from the fourth trial ground, but he knew that both Ogami and Jill had been in bad shape after the executions. And at the end, when Ogami had been explaining why she’d been willing to break rules, she’d said… she’d admitted…

“We shouldn’t wait any longer,” Naegi said, forcing himself back to his feet despite the way it made his vision blur. “We should check on them now!”

“Are you sure?” Kirigiri asked, eyeing him dubiously as she got to her feet. “I could go, and you could stay here and try to rest. Eating something might make you feel better – at least some tea.”

The thought of food made Naegi’s stomach roil. “I can’t think about that now,” he said. “Not until we’ve seen that they’re okay.”

Kirigiri shrugged. “All right, then. Try to keep up.” She headed out the cafeteria doors at her usual brisk pace, leaving Naegi to follow as best he could.
Chapter 90

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Kirigiri check on Jill and Ogami.

As Naegi left the cafeteria, he could see Kirigiri in the dormitory hallway, already ringing the bell outside Jill’s room. But by the time Naegi made it to her side, there was still no answer.

Kirigiri looked at him and shrugged. “She may have left already.”

Naegi nodded. He might be worried about Jill, after how unusually quiet he remembered her being last night, but she wasn’t his main concern. Not after everything Ogami had said.

As Naegi moved past Jill’s door to continue down the hall, a sense of déjà vu struck him. He, Kirigiri, and Togami had followed this exact path yesterday morning, when they’d rushed out to check on the students who hadn’t shown up for the breakfast meeting. Even Kirigiri had seemed unsettled as she’d tried door after door with no response – or no, even before that, when something had driven her into the cafeteria to begin her hasty search. Naegi just prayed that this hunt for missing students didn’t end as horribly as yesterday’s had.

Again, Kirigiri reached the door long before Naegi could, and he held his breath as she pressed the bell, hurrying towards her as quickly as he could. But the sound of his footsteps in the empty hall only reinforced the silence around them as the door remained stubbornly closed.

“Maybe she didn’t hear,” Naegi said, reaching out to push the bell again, longer and harder than Kirigiri had.

Kirigiri raised an eyebrow at him. “You seem very concerned.”

“Aren’t you?” Naegi said, Ogami’s words echoing in his mind. Dead, I could protect you all. “We shouldn’t have left her alone, not after what happened to Asahina.”

He reached out, intending to rattle the doorknob – but to his surprise, it turned easily under his hand. Had it not been locked? Or – Naegi remembered closing the door behind him after the investigation had ended. He hadn’t locked it, and Togami had still had Ogami’s key. He must not have returned hers – and Naegi wasn’t quite sure how to feel about that, when Togami had made such a point of giving his back.

He pushed the door, letting it swing open on the dark room. The lights were off – did that mean Ogami wasn’t here after all? His legs ached already at the thought of needing to scour the entire school for her – but before he could do more than contemplate it, a shape moved in the darkness.

“What… are you doing here?” Ogami’s voice croaked, thick and raw from too many shed tears.

“We came to check on you,” Naegi said, squinting into the room to try to get a look at her. He couldn’t see much more than a silhouette standing against the far wall. “You didn’t come to the breakfast meeting. Are you okay?”

And then, with a small sigh of annoyance, Kirigiri reached past him to flick on the light switch,
and the dark shape resolved itself into Ogami. The girl sat slumped against the far wall, looking like she might collapse if she didn’t have the wall holding her marginally upright. Even from across the room, Naegi could see the redness to her eyes, the smudged streaks of tear tracks cutting down her face. She hadn’t even tried to clean up after the trial, her skin and clothes still grimy with blood and dirt from the firing squad.

As much as Ogami’s broken appearance hurt to see, Naegi couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. She was still alive. She might be unhappy and grieving for her best friend, but she hadn’t done anything drastic about it, not yet.

“Am I okay?” Ogami echoed Naegi’s question. “That’s what you’re worried about?”

“Well, yes,” Naegi said. “Yesterday – it was awful for everyone. You shouldn’t be alone after something like that.”

“No. You’re wrong,” Ogami said, her eyes like dark holes in her face as she stared at Naegi. “I should be alone. None of you should come near me.”

“That’s not –”

“Four people are dead because of me,” Ogami cut him off sharply, her voice rasping like she’d had to force the words from a closed throat.

“None of that was your fault!” Naegi said, eyes widening at the idea.

“Wasn’t it?” Ogami said. “You were all starting to work together – until I sparked the division among you that led to all of this. None of this would have happened if you’d all been able to work as a united front.”

“You can’t know that,” Naegi said, taking a few steps into the room. She hadn’t invited him, but he thought that this kind of conversation might be easier if they weren’t straining to speak from opposite sides of the room. “The mastermind would probably just have tried to use something else against us, and it could have been just as awful.”

“But we’ll never know,” Ogami said. “Because they used me.” Her shoulders heaved in a long, shuddering sob. “I should have killed myself the moment I chose to go against the mastermind.”

“What?” Naegi stared at her, horror hitting him like ice. She couldn’t really think that, could she? “Don’t say things like that! Killing yourself wouldn’t have made anything better – it would have just let the mastermind win!”

“And what do you think they’ve done now?” Ogami said, her face twisting with a gruesome laugh that chilled Naegi to the bone. “I thought that I could help you all – that I could give my life to protect you from the evil I’d been aiding. I thought I could fight. But I was wrong. This isn’t a battle, and we aren’t up against an enemy that we can beat. The mastermind will take everything from us, and there’s nothing we can do to stop them.”

“That isn’t true,” Naegi insisted. “If you just give up like that now, then it’s like saying that all the friends we’ve lost died for nothing!”

“They did die for nothing!” Ogami shouted, surging to her feet. “Don’t you understand? Every bond we make, every friendship we form, every time we choose to trust – those are what the mastermind is using to destroy us!”

Naegi rocked back at the words, unable to deny their painful truth. Ogami was right – every
And not just the murders. Looking at Ogami’s face, Naegi knew what she had to be thinking about. Asahina had been desperate to talk to her best friend – desperate enough to defy Monokuma’s rules. And that act of friendship had been the mastermind’s excuse for murdering her.

“What happened to Asahina was the mastermind’s fault,” Naegi said fiercely, looking up into Ogami’s eyes. “They’re the one who killed her. Not you.”

But Ogami just shook her head. “It doesn’t make a difference anymore.” She bowed her head, the sudden burst of fury draining out of her. “All she wanted was a few minutes to talk to me – and now I’ll never talk to her again.”

“Ogami…” Naegi reached out a hesitant hand to touch her shoulder in reassurance.

“Don’t.” She shook him off immediately. “Just – don’t say anything to me. Not right now. Just get out.”

Naegi bit his lip. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“What?” Ogami looked up at him sharply, the look dark enough to make Naegi’s insides quail.

But he didn’t dare give in – not if what he was afraid of might be true.

“I don’t think you should be alone right now,” Naegi said. “Not when you’re so upset.”

Ogami stared at him for a long moment. “You think I’m going to kill myself.” She shook her head. “You’ll be better off if I do.”

“Don’t say things like that!” Naegi said. “Asahina wouldn’t have wanted you to!”

“You can’t possibly know what she would have wanted!” Ogami snarled. “She’s dead. She’s dead, and it should have been me!”

“It shouldn’t have been anybody!”

But even as he said the words, Naegi could see that he was talking to closed ears. Ogami’s grief was too powerful for him to break through right now. Maybe if he’d said this to her after giving her time to recover, she might have been more receptive – but if he waited to convince her, he might never get the chance at all.

If his words weren’t helping, maybe someone else’s would. Naegi turned to look back to the door, where Kirigiri still stood watching the exchange. He didn’t know what to say to her that wouldn’t make Ogami more upset to hear, so he just had to hope that she could understand his plea for help from his face. After all, she’d never had trouble seeing through him before.

Kirigiri tilted her head, looking at him for a long moment – and then she shrugged and looked past him to Ogami. “Killing yourself would be very troublesome for the rest of us.”

Naegi’s jaw dropped at Kirigiri’s blunt statement. How could she say something so coldhearted to a grieving girl who’d been threatening suicide?
But as he looked back at Ogami, some of the heartache clouding her eyes seemed to have faded a bit in the shock of Kirigiri’s words. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” Kirigiri crossed her arms. “The mastermind would certainly require us to investigate and hold another trial. We would have to prove that you genuinely had been the one to kill yourself – and then deal with the repercussions.”

Ogami frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“The true culprit is the person who planned the crime,” Kirigiri said. “That’s the rule. So tell me – what happens if the culprit herself is already dead?”

“There wouldn’t be anyone to execute,” Ogami said.

“Maybe.” Kirigiri shrugged. “Or maybe the mastermind would choose the next best thing – the person who seems to be driving you to it.” Her gaze slid over to Naegi.

“That –” Ogami went even paler than before. “That wouldn’t –”

“Are you really going to pretend that you understand what the mastermind will do?”

Ogami flinched at the cruel reminder of her belief that she, not Asahina, would be the one executed for the rule-breaking.

Kirigiri nodded sharply. “All right, then. I think that’s enough.” She turned on her heel and left the room.

Naegi looked from Kirigiri’s retreating back to Ogami’s slumped shoulders. “I –”


“Ogami – I’m sorry,” Naegi said desperately. “I didn’t think she’d say something like –”


Naegi hesitated – but Ogami did seem to have been convinced by Kirigiri’s argument. And with the way that Kirigiri had used him to manipulate the other girl, he could understand why she might not want him in the room any longer. He nodded and turned for the door.

Just before leaving, he looked back over his shoulder. Ogami stood at the corner of her bed, staring down at the clean, unblemished sheets, so different from the blood-stained mess that had been there yesterday. One of her hands rested on the crisp white pillow where Asahina had lain.

“I’m sorry,” Naegi said, one last time. “And – I’m glad you aren’t dead.”

He closed the door behind him as he left, leaving Ogami alone with her grief.
Naegi confronts Kirigiri about the way she spoke to Ogami.

When Naegi left Ogami’s room, he expected to see an empty corridor – but to his surprise, Kirigiri stood leaning against the wall just around the corner. As soon as the door had closed, she fell into step beside him, not saying a word as she slowed her pace to his tired steps down the hall.

Naegi frowned to himself as he considered the girl beside him. It had definitely been a huge relief when she’d decided not to be angry with him any longer. Arguing with his friends had always given him a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, one that had only gotten more intense now that they were trapped in this killing game. And now, with Togami angry at him, it was nice to have at least one person still on his side.

But as much as he hated the idea of starting another fight with Kirigiri right on the heels of their last one, he didn’t think he could just stay quiet. He stopped his slow progress, just before they passed through the gate to the other half of the first floor, and looked up at Kirigiri’s impassive face.

“Why did you say all those awful things to Ogami?”

Kirigiri stopped as well, a faint frown crossing her face as she looked down at him. She stared at him silently for so long that he started to think that she wasn’t going to answer. Maybe he really had made her angry again, and she was about to storm off without a word like she’d done in the music room when he’d refused to tell her about seeing Ogami and Monokuma fighting.

But before he could think of a way to soften the words he’d already spoken, she said, “Because one of us had to say something, and you wouldn’t.”

Naegi hadn’t expected the implied accusation in her reply. “Of course I wouldn’t have said anything like that! She was grieving, and you made her feel worse!”

“Maybe,” Kirigiri said. “But I was concerned with her actions, not her feelings. If a few words are all it takes to stop her from doing something stupid, would you want me to hesitate?”

“You didn’t see how she looked after you left,” Naegi said, the defeat on Ogami’s face flashing before his eyes. “She just gave up!”

“She’d done that already,” Kirigiri countered. “Even when Ogami claimed she wanted to fight, she intended to do so by letting herself be killed. When she struck against the mastermind, she meant for it to end with suicide. And even if she had the best of intentions, I don’t think that the mastermind would let her die a martyr. They’d twist her death and turn it against us somehow – and we can’t afford to give the mastermind that kind of weapon at this point.”

“So – you really think that what you said to Ogami is true?” Naegi asked. “You think that the mastermind would try to say that – that I was the culprit? That I drove her to it?”

An involuntary shudder rocked through him at the thought, like something cold and slimy had
dropped unexpectedly against the back of his neck. If Ogami had killed herself after talking to him – well, it would be all too easy to blame himself for something like that.

But Kirigiri shook her head. “Not that specifically. Your words certainly weren’t having a very positive effect, considering her mental state – but that alone wouldn’t make you a culprit. You would have had to intend to drive her to suicide, and that would be extremely difficult for even the mastermind to prove. I just used it as an example that might get through to her.”

“So you don’t think it’s true.” Naegi frowned. “You used me as your example because you thought it would upset Ogami the most, even though it was a lie. I – I don’t think I like that you did that.”

Kirigiri gave him another long look at that, and Naegi wished forlornly that he could read at least a little of her expressions. Her intense scrutiny left him pinned like a bug on a microscope, all his thoughts and emotions plain for her to pick apart – but he couldn’t tell anything about her in turn, not unless she let him. Had his words made her angry, or was she softening towards his arguments? Nothing in her expression gave him a hint either way.

“Some lies aren’t meant to deceive,” Kirigiri said at last. “Sometimes a smaller lie can reveal a bigger truth.”

Naegi frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I didn’t want Ogami to kill herself,” Kirigiri said. “Not even if she herself believes she wants to do it. And so I said what I had to at the time. If my methods were unduly cruel, I can apologize later.”

Naegi nodded slowly. “I think you should – and I will, too, if you think that what I was saying was only making things worse. We can’t let her feel like she’s alone, not after Asahina.”

“All right,” Kirigiri agreed with an indifferent shrug. “But not until she’s managed to get ahold of herself again.” She turned back to the hall. “And there’s something else we need to address before we worry about that.”

Naegi wasn’t entirely sure that the issue was resolved – but it sounded like Kirigiri had said everything she intended to say on the subject. “You mean – exploring the rest of the school?”

“That’s right.” Kirigiri started walking again, and Naegi had to strain to keep up even though she slowed her pace to little more than a stroll. “The fourth floor had a blocked set of stairs, so I think we can assume there’s a new area available to us again.”

“Right.” Naegi tried not to sigh at the thought of climbing all the way up the many flights of stairs to the newly-opened fifth floor.

When they reached the first floor’s stairway entrance, Kirigiri paused. “If you aren’t up to it, perhaps you should wait down here.”

It was a tempting thought. Even that first staircase seemed to loom like an unscalable mountain. And really, was there even anything that he could find up there that would be worth the exhaustion he knew he’d be inflicting on himself for trying to climb it? It would only be new murder methods and questions without answers, if the last four floors were anything to go by.

But – no. Naegi shook himself. He couldn’t let himself think that way. If he just decided that there wouldn’t be anything worthwhile and gave up without looking, then he’d definitely never find anything. He couldn’t stop trying – especially not when Ogami was so close to breaking from despair.
And besides, if there really was a new area of the school open, then he was sure that Togami would already be up there, investigating it for any useful information. When Togami had wanted to avoid him in the past, Naegi hadn’t been able to find the heir at all – but now, at least, he had a pretty good idea of where Togami might be. Maybe if he did manage to make it up to the fifth floor, he’d be able to find an opportunity to talk to the other boy, just for a minute or two.

Naegi looked back at Kirigiri, setting his shoulders with determination. “I don’t want to wait,” he told her, trying to sound as confident as he could.

She shrugged. “All right, then.”

Without another word, she began climbing the stairs, leaving Naegi to trail behind.
Naegi and Kirigiri begin to explore the fifth floor of the school.

Naegi hadn’t realized that climbing the masses of stairs with Kirigiri would be so different from doing the same thing when Togami was the one at his side. It wasn’t that Kirigiri was being unkind about the fact that he couldn’t move fast at the moment – she even slowed her usual brisk pace enough that he could keep up, if he worked at it.

But that was just it – he was the one straining to keep up with her, while her occasional glances at the upper floors betrayed an impatience she wasn’t speaking aloud. He would have liked to move faster so that he didn’t waste so much of Kirigiri’s time, especially when she was being nice enough to walk with him – but after several flights of stairs, every step was beginning to make his head whirl as dizzily as it had the night before. He really could have used a break to catch his breath and let the dizziness subside a little, but Kirigiri’s steps never so much as paused.

Her lack of reaction to his weakened physical state only highlighted just how gentle Togami had been with him. When the other boy had matched his pace to Naegi’s, it had felt like they were walking together, just at an unusually slow pace, not like Naegi was holding him back from somewhere else he wanted to be. Togami had never once given Naegi the impression that he’d wanted to be anywhere other than by Naegi’s side. He’d paid more attention to Naegi’s health than Naegi himself had, slowing when Naegi’s footsteps faltered and pausing before Naegi even had to ask for breaks. He’d checked Naegi’s head injury, made him tea, even held him upright and all but carried him to his room.

And Naegi hadn’t appreciated any of it. He felt his steps slow even more than they had been as harsh guilt weighed down on him. Togami must have offered up a hundred tiny gestures of kindness, each one so small as to be nearly invisible, but together comprising a softness that Naegi never would have expected the harsh-tongued heir to possess. Togami had certainly never shown that side of himself to anyone else. Naegi hadn’t even understood how much Togami had given him, freely and without hesitation. Was it any wonder the other boy had gotten fed up and left?

Well, he knew now, and the understanding was an almost physical pressure at his throat, as all the words of gratitude and returned affection begged to be spoken. That was just one more reason to add to the long list of why he had to try to talk to Togami and fix things as soon as he could. He couldn’t let Togami go another minute longer than necessary believing that Naegi hadn’t appreciated everything he’d done. Naegi should never have let these things go so long unspoken in the first place.

But before he could do anything like that, Naegi had to find the other boy – and that meant searching the newly-unlocked fifth floor. And as much as Naegi wanted to see Togami again, to throw his arms around the other boy and babble out all his explanations and apologies and affections in a mad rush that the heir couldn’t avoid or ignore – he knew he couldn’t focus on that alone. Exploring the new area was important, too, especially now that there were so few students left to search. If there were any secrets hidden on the new floor, he had to be alert enough to spot them.
So as Naegi finally struggled up to the top of the final staircase, he did his best to put the aching mess of his feelings for Togami out of his mind. It didn’t entirely work, not when the awareness that Togami wasn’t beside him gnawed constantly at the edge of his thoughts – but maybe if he pretended long enough, he’d be able to convince himself.

Stepping out of the stairway and onto the fifth floor, Naegi shivered at the chill in the air. It wasn’t just the exhaustion or the unsettling perspective shifts from the sudden bursts of dizziness – there was something different about this floor. Not that any of the new areas they’d found had been especially pleasant, but something about this particular floor sent unease prickling across the back of Naegi’s neck.

“I – I don’t think I like this floor,” Naegi said, pulling his hoodie and jacket tighter around him. It didn’t help much, though – the icy shivers snaking through him came from somewhere deeper than the air temperature. “This isn’t going to be a good place.”

“Probably not,” Kirigiri said, shrugging. “None of what we’ve found so far has been good.”

She didn’t seem to be taking his concerns very seriously, heading towards a pair of classroom doors without much hesitation. But Naegi supposed there wasn’t much she could do, even if she felt the same sense of fear permeating the area. The only options they had were turning back or pressing on – and turning back wouldn’t get rid of whatever dark secrets this floor held.

The first door turned out to be nothing more than an empty classroom, with blotchy black and white walls and more absurd chalk art on the board. Kirigiri gave it a cursory glance before letting the door swing shut again, not even bothering to go inside.

“You don’t want to look at it?” Naegi asked, following her to the adjacent classroom door.

“I’ll come back to do that once I’ve gotten an overview of the entire area.” Kirigiri smiled faintly. “I doubt you’d be up to inspecting the different rooms in the detail I generally use.”

Naegi had to admit she was probably right on that score, so he didn’t object as she opened the second classroom. This one didn’t look much different from the first. The only differences were the red and white zebra-print wallpaper and the chalk pictures scribbled on the board.

“Are those supposed to be us?” Naegi asked, squinting at the blackboard before Kirigiri could close the door on the room. The blackboard had a huge picture of a laughing Monokuma in the center, surrounded by three figures running in different directions – a long-haired girl, a boy with messy brown hair, and a boy with rectangular glasses. The words “I’m going to punish you!” were scrawled across the top of the board.

“Presumably.” Kirigiri rolled her eyes. “More childish taunts. I plan to ignore them.”

“Yeah.” Naegi gave the board one last glance before Kirigiri closed the door on it, his eyes lingering on the expressions of cartoonish terror on the figures’ faces. Childish or not, that picture gave him a bad feeling. Every minute they spent on this floor only made him more nervous about what else they might find here.

After leaving the classrooms, Kirigiri turned left down the hall, passing a few central displays of greenery. None of the other floors had had any kind of decoration, let alone something that would take as much attention as actual plants. Naegi gave those areas a wide berth as he trailed after Kirigiri.

When the hall split again, she took another left, towards a set of large sliding doors. Naegi glanced
up at the sign above them, labeling the room a dojo, just before Kirigiri opened the doors and headed inside.

Naegi stopped short when he entered, staring around in shock at the graceful trees, the pink cherry blossom petals drifting in the wind, and the facsimile of a night sky arcing above them. With the lingering sense of dread he’d gotten as he’d walked through the halls, he certainly hadn’t expected to come across a room like this. The peaceful loveliness of the space felt wrong when held up against the atmosphere outside the doors, like seeing a rainbow arc across the sky above a fatal car wreck.

He wouldn’t have minded closing the door and leaving this unsettling room behind the way they’d moved swiftly past the others – but apparently Kirigiri felt that the dojo merited a more thorough investigation than the classrooms had. She walked inside and leaned over the display of armor on the left, inspecting it closely.

Naegi left her to it, heading out to give the trees a closer look. Were they actually real? He didn’t see how they could be, indoors with no access to the sun – but as he stood under the blooming branches, the delicate scent of cherry blossoms surrounded him. He reached out and ran a hand along a tree trunk, the bark realistically rough under his fingers. The trees didn’t seem artificial – but on the other hand, real cherry blossom trees wouldn’t be blooming at this time of year, would they?

The clunk of a closing door drew Naegi’s attention back to where Kirigiri was investigating. She’d moved across to the other side of the room and was now moving along the line of wooden lockers, opening each of them to glance quickly inside.

“Is there anything interesting in there?” Naegi asked, moving back towards her.

She closed the final locker in the row and shrugged. “Not much.” She turned away, looking around the room. “This room is quite elegant, isn’t it?”

Naegi blinked, looking from the weird cherry trees to the wall of archery targets to the row of lockers. “This is what you consider elegant…?”

Kirigiri looked away, appearing to be a little embarrassed. “I lived overseas for a long time, so this kind of Japanese-style scenery is refreshing.”

Naegi would have called it out of place, himself – but if Kirigiri found it pleasant, he didn’t see a point to arguing with her about it. “Do you want to stay here a while?”

She shook her head. “No. There are still other places to examine.”

This time, Kirigiri headed to the doors on the other side of the hall. As she pulled them open, a blast of wet heat hit Naegi in the face, entirely different from the chill of the rest of the floor. And as soon as he caught a glimpse of the room, he understood why. It wasn’t a room at all – it was a garden, full of lush green plants and bright tropical flowers.

And standing right in the middle of the room, staring up at a huge orange flower that towered in the middle of the garden, stood Genocide Jill, clutching a pair of bloody scissors in each hand.
Naegi and Kirigiri encounter Genocide Jill in the fifth floor garden.

Naegi stared at Jill in shock, unable to process the contrast between the brightly-colored garden and the dark pressure emanating from the girl in the middle of it. Jill’s dark uniform had been shredded, sleeves sliced past the elbows and skirt torn into fluttering strips reaching so high up her thighs that Naegi would have turned pink – if it hadn’t been for the blood oozing down her limbs. The same blood glinted wetly from the tips of her scissors, and the sight of one fat drop of it falling to splatter on the ground broke Naegi out of his daze.

“Jill – what happened?” he called, taking a stumbling step forward. “Are you okay?”

At the sound of his voice, she whipped around, scissors whirling to point blade-first in his direction. Naegi stopped short, not quite daring to go any closer to the armed genocider.

“Am I okay?” Jill repeated, her voice far too bright and cheerful for a girl covered in blood. “You want to know if I’m okay? Man, you ask the most ridiculous questions, Makyutie – don’t I look like I’m okay?”

“Well – no, not really,” Naegi said slowly. “You’re – kind of bloody?”

“Oh, this stuff?” Jill raised an arm to inspect it, like she hadn’t even realized the blood was there. She ran a finger from the opposite hand across her arm with an almost puzzled air, before looking back up at him with a wide grin. “Don’t worry about that – it’s nothing to do with you!”

That wasn’t reassuring at all – not when a sudden, awful thought crossed Naegi’s mind. The blood on Jill’s arms and legs – the tears in her clothing, far too extensive to have been done by accident – the scissors in her hands, with blood on the blades proclaiming that they’d been used –

Jill had even said it herself yesterday, during the trial – there was only one person she wanted to kill.

Nausea surged through Naegi’s body, sending the world spinning around him. His knees shook, going weak and watery, and if he hadn’t caught himself on the edge of the doorframe, he would have lost the ability to stand upright. He could hardly see the garden any longer as the colors bled sickeningly into one another. The only thing burned still and unmoving into his vision was the dark red of fresh blood on Jill’s hands, and the sight of it froze his breath in his throat.

And through the spinning world, he heard Kirigiri ask a question, her voice sounding like it came from very far away even though he knew she stood directly beside him. “That’s your own blood, isn’t it?”

Jill’s wild laughter rang through the air as Naegi’s vision began to clear again. “Mine? Is it mine? Well, it came gushing right out of this body, so it looks like it’s gotta be, right? There’s not anyone else’s it can be – not anymore!”

So it was Jill’s blood after all, and not – not anyone else’s. An intense relief rushed through Naegi
at the confirmation, so powerful that his hand shook where he clutched the doorframe. The blood on the scissors didn’t belong to Togami – wherever he was, however angry he might still be at Naegi, he was alive. That awful fight wouldn’t be the last time that Naegi ever saw him.

And hard on the heels of that thought, guilt twisted through him. How could that have been his first thoughts, when Jill had just said that she’d been injured? How could he have found anything good about the knowledge that one of his friends had been bleeding? That her blood was still wet on her scissors –

On her own scissors. Naegi forced his vision to snap back into focus at the thought, clenching his fists until his nails bit painfully into his palms, and he gave Jill a much closer look.

Now that he was paying attention, he could see that the blood trickling down her arms and legs hadn’t been splattered on her. Dozens of thin lines had been sliced into her skin, growing messier and deeper as they crawled down her thighs and up her arms. And the angles – Naegi might not have Kirigiri’s talent for examining bodies and understanding wounds, but even he could tell that Jill’s cuts were at the exact angle that would happen if she’d been the one to perform them.

“Jill…” Naegi said, slow horror creeping through him as he put the pieces together. “Jill… did you do that to yourself?”

Her answering grin twisted across her face, unsteady and off-kilter. “Didn’t hear anyone else offering.”

“But – why would you do something like that?” Naegi demanded. “You weren’t trying to – to –”

“None of those cuts could possibly be fatal,” Kirigiri cut him off, crossing her arms. “However, even the shallowest is deep enough to scar.”

“Always on the ball, aren’t you?” The look Jill shot in Kirigiri’s direction wasn’t entirely a positive one, despite her complimentary words.

“What are you talking about?” Naegi asked, looking from one girl to the other.

“They aren’t just cuts,” Kirigiri explained, not taking her eyes off Jill even as she addressed him. “They’re tally marks.”

“What?” Naegi’s gaze ran over all the marks on Jill’s arms and legs, dozens of them stretching out in row after row.

“It’s a common trick for serial killers,” Kirigiri said. “They like to keep track of their victims. Scarring her own body was risky, but no more so than the ones who keep a collection of mementos from the ones they’ve murdered.”


“Sure – not since yesterday!” Jill said. “That’s ages, right? What’s one night, when you really get down to it, huh? I mean, sometimes I’d fall asleep one night and wake up to find that days and days had just slipped away without me!”

Naegi frowned. “Are you talking about Hagakure?”

“That loser? Please! I’d have to take marks away from my tally if I wanted to include him,” Jill sneered.
“But who else –” And then another option occurred to Naegi. “Wait. Are you talking about Fukawa?”

“Give the boy a prize!” Jill twirled a pair of her scissors in his direction.

“But – that was the mastermind,” Naegi said. “You didn’t do anything to her. You weren’t even there!”

“Oh, no?” And suddenly, Jill bounded across the room to loom over Naegi, glaring right down into his eyes. “Tell me, then, if you’re so smart – where was I? You think I wasn’t there? You think I didn’t get tossed into a mental hospital and electrocuted? Well, who the fuck was it then?”

Naegi leaned back against the wall, glad he had the support against his back. The genocider’s eyes flashed red mere inches from his face, and he was alarmingly aware of the scissors spinning in each of her hands.

“It was Fukawa, wasn’t it?” he said, figuring that his best option was to answer her question as honestly as he could.

A pair of scissors smashed into the doorframe, less than an inch from his ear. “And what,” Jill went on, her voice low and dangerous, “have I told you about Gloomy?”

Naegi cast his mind frantically back through everything that Jill and Fukawa had ever said about their relationship to one another. They switched places – they were opposite personalities – they only shared emotions, not memories –

_They shared emotions._

Naegi stared into Jill’s wild red eyes, understanding finally clicking into place for him. “You feel what she feels,” he said, voice trembling as the full horror of it sank in. “Which means – you felt her dying. The fear, the pain, the loneliness – whatever was going through her head, you would have felt all of it.”

“Oh, I like a guy who’s _sharp_,” Jill said, tongue curling out in front of Naegi’s face. “Lucky for you you’re not quite sharp enough for my tastes. Yeah, you bet I felt the whole death and dying sob fest Gloomy had going on – but more than that, you know what else I felt? You know what was going through her head?”

Jill leaned in close, hissing the words into Naegi’s ear. “How much she hated me.”
Chapter 94

Chapter Summary

Jill explains to Naegi and Kirigiri that she is definitely not affected by Fukawa's death. Not even a little.

Naegi stared up at Jill, looming over him with wild eyes and a smile bright enough to cut. Fukawa had hated her – was that true? He couldn’t say for sure, but Fukawa had certainly never expressed much affection for the murderous half of herself. And if that was how she felt, Jill would have known it.

What would it be like to have to cope with an existence like that? Naegi didn’t know exactly how Jill had come into being, but from everything she and Fukawa had said about it, Fukawa had been the original personality. Jill had been born from some dark part of Fukawa’s mind, only existing long enough to act on the desires Fukawa hadn’t been able to express. If what Jill said about it was true, then all her thoughts, feelings, and even her personality had been formed in response to Fukawa.

Would Jill have ever been able to interact with people on her own? Had she ever had the chance? She’d been so gleeful at the prospect of being allowed to wander around freely after the second trial had concluded and they’d all known about her existence – and when could she have had anything like that before this? She was a wanted serial killer, and the police report had already identified her as having multiple personalities. Any hint of Jill’s existence would have drawn suspicion to Fukawa immediately.

No, now that Naegi thought about it, he saw that Jill could never have had the opportunity to talk to others, not unless she’d been pretending to be Fukawa. Through however many years she’d existed, her only link to the rest of humanity would have been through her alter ego, the girl whose body and emotions she shared.

And now Fukawa was gone, ripping away the only other person who had consistently been in Jill’s life.

Naegi couldn’t even say for sure that Fukawa hadn’t died hating Jill. After all, Fukawa had been so lost to despair when she’d been erased, Naegi was horribly sure that she’d been furious at all of them at the time. And judging by everything she’d said about Jill, she hadn’t had any positive feelings towards her alter ego at all. If Jill said that Fukawa had hated her in those last moments – well, she was the one feeling the emotions. She was probably right.

But that awful ending didn’t have to eclipse everything else.

“I don’t think she hated you,” Naegi said, looking into Jill’s blood-red eyes. “Not really.”

“Yeah, right. Always got to be a sugar rush with you, doesn’t it?” Jill said, tongue curling close to Naegi’s cheek. “What do you think, would I get diabetes if I took a little taste?”

Naegi gritted his teeth and didn’t pull away, even as her tongue threatened to snake across his skin. “I’m serious. Monokuma’s executions – those bring out the worst in everyone. They’re meant to!”
But that doesn’t mean she hated you all along.”

“What, are you trying to cheer up a murderer now?” Jill laughed, and Naegi could feel her breath hot on his face. “Sorry, Macaroon, but the only thing that’ll get me going now is a nice rush of blood under my scissors!”

“So that’s why you cut yourself?” Naegi asked.

Jill’s expression changed as her eyes jerked over to her arm and the long line of tally marks stretching up. “No. I had to keep count.”

“Oh.” Naegi frowned, trying to follow along. “So wait – these are for yesterday? You mean all of them are for Fukawa? But – even if you want to count her – why would you need more than one?”

“Gotta count every time I kill someone, don’t I?” Jill said, shrugging. “That’s how I do it – the counting is the last thing I do, to seal the death off, like a nice little epitaph to remind me of a happy moment. So I have to do it, every time.” Her hand trembled around the scissors, clutching the metal so tightly her skin went white. “Every time I feel her screaming…”

She looked so uncertain in that moment, like the whole world was shaking around her, and it sent a wave of sympathy rushing through Naegi. Fukawa had been his friend, even if she’d died not knowing that he thought so. He couldn’t let the only part of her that lived on believe that she was equally alone. And so he gathered up his courage and reached up to place a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Jill immediately jerked away, scissors snapping along the edge of Naegi’s wrist as she retreated. “And what the hell is that supposed to be?” she snarled, putting some distance between them. “You think I need your pity, is that it? You think I’m sad and moping because Little Miss Gloomy left me high and dry? Well think again! I’m glad to be rid of that loser – she was nothing but a millstone around my neck, and without her dragging me down I’m free to embrace my gloriously murderous self to the max!”

“Really?” Naegi held his cut wrist to his chest, trying to use the edge of his jacket to put pressure on the wound before it could bleed too much. “Well – I just wanted you to know that if you do miss her, you’re not the only one.”

Jill’s hand lashed out, and Naegi heard a whistling sound beside his head. He turned to see a second pair of scissors embedded in the doorframe, a few strands of his hair drifting down from them. That had been even closer than the last.

Something wet trickled down his cheek. Naegi frowned, reaching up to touch it – and pain seared hot and sharp along his cheekbone and over his ear, in the long line that Jill’s scissors had scored across his face. Black spots exploded at the edges of his vision, and Naegi found himself slumping back against the wall, gasping to breathe through the pain.

“I don’t miss her,” Jill’s voice hissed into his awareness. “I don’t care about her. And I definitely do not need her.” Blood red eyes burned in the center of Naegi’s wavering vision. “Say otherwise again, and you’ll lose more than a little blood.”

Naegi wanted to protest, but he couldn’t find the breath to say the words. By the time his vision had cleared, Jill had gone, leaving nothing behind but the two pairs of scissors still stuck in the wall beside his head. He reached up and tugged at one with his uninjured hand, but they might as well have been hammered in for all that he could budge them.
“Are you all right?”

Naegi looked up at Kirigiri as she peered at his face. “Yeah – I think so.” He would have wiped away the blood dripping down his cheek with the edge of his sleeve if Kirigiri hadn’t caught his arm before he could.

“Germs,” she said, giving his hoodie a pointed look. “You should go down to the nurse’s office and bandage that properly.”

Just the thought of facing all those flights of stairs again so soon after the first time made Naegi’s knees tremble in protest. And besides, he couldn’t go back already – not when he hadn’t even found Togami yet. This was still his best chance at knowing where the other boy would be, and he couldn’t give up on it so easily.

“Not yet,” Naegi said, hoping that his voice didn’t sound as shaky to Kirigiri as it did to him. “Not until we’ve finished checking the floor.”

“Hmm.” Kirigiri gave him a skeptical look. “Well, if you’re sure about it. We seem to be nearly done, anyway.” She pursed her lips. “But as soon as we’ve seen the rest of the area, you’re going to clean and treat that.”

“Sure,” Naegi agreed, relieved that she wasn’t planning to drag him downstairs immediately. Togami wouldn’t have been so easily convinced – he would have insisted that Naegi drop everything else, no matter how important, until he was certain that this new injury had been taken care of.

But Togami wasn’t here to object – that was the point. Naegi felt himself drooping at the thought of the other boy, and so he forced himself to put his imaginings of what Togami would have done out of his mind. Instead, he focused on following Kirigiri as she led the way out of the garden and towards the areas of the new floor that they hadn’t explored yet.

They passed the hallway back to the stairs and headed in the opposite direction. There was another door labeled 5-C tucked in a corner, but it looked like it was just going to be another of the identical classrooms to Naegi. Kirigiri seemed to think so too, heading past it and down a long, almost industrial-looking hallway.

As they walked, Naegi got the unsettling feeling that the lights were dimming around him. It didn’t seem to be true, at least not when he looked up to check the actual state of the lighting – but that didn’t stop the sensation of walking into the darkness.

Approaching the door sent a cold shiver down Naegi’s back as he realized that what he’d assumed was decoration was actually dripping white graffiti. Someone had painted the word RAW down one side of these doors – but since the paint looked like it was long dry, it couldn’t have been any of the students. They’d only gotten access to this area a few hours ago. Had the mastermind done it? If so, why would they bother? The sign above the door declared this room to be a Biology Lab – not exactly the sort of place Naegi would associate with that kind of graffiti.

When Kirigiri tried the door and found it locked, Naegi was almost relieved. Something about the writing on that door told him that whatever was beyond, he didn’t want to see it.

Kirigiri didn’t look anywhere near so pleased about it, though, her mouth twisting in a scowl. “Well, back to the last classroom, and then you’re going down to the nurse’s office,” she said, heading back the way they came.
Naegi sighed in disappointment as they headed back to that final classroom. He remembered how Togami had grumbled that the classrooms were boring when they’d explored the fourth floor together – it hardly seemed likely that Togami would be in there. Maybe he’d been mistaken that Togami would spend today searching the new area of the school – or maybe the other boy had spotted him and purposefully avoided him as they both searched the floor. Naegi wasn’t sure which would be worse.

As they approached the final classroom, a sudden sense of unease hit Naegi, startling him with its intensity. There was something here – something bad, something wrong –

He opened his mouth to beg Kirigiri to stop – but before he could, she swung open the double doors.

And the sour stench of blood and death flooded out, choking its way down Naegi’s throat until he gagged from the foulness. Blackness flashed in and out of his vision as he gasped for breath, his sight flickering in and out as his coughing sent lances of pain through his injured face.

And in between the dizzying explosions of darkness and pain – he could almost see figures in the room, falling and bleeding out across the floor. Dizziness roared in his ears, and through it he could hear screaming, the desperate wails of voices that he almost knew. And in the center, always there at the root of it all – he could almost remember –

Naegi sagged against the door, clutching at it in a desperate attempt to remain upright as the ground seemed to buck beneath his feet – but with the added pain from Jill’s cut to his hand, he couldn’t manage it. He lost his grip on the door, collapsing towards the ground –

Until a pair of strong arms caught him, giving him the strength and support not to fall apart as they lowered him gently to the floor. The familiar smell of fresh soap washed away the reek of corpses, letting him draw blessedly clean breaths. And when Naegi managed to open his eyes again, the ice-blue gaze peering anxiously down at him was the best thing he could imagine seeing.

And then Togami let go, leaving Naegi sitting on the floor in a heap as he straightened sharply. The cold mask from that morning settled back over his features, as if the concern on his face had never been there, and he turned to Kirigiri with a freezing glare.

“What the hell did you do?”
Chapter 95

Chapter Summary

Naegi, Togami, and Kirigiri meet outside the destroyed classroom.

Naegi sat on the floor trying to catch his breath as he looked up at the two students glaring at one another from either side of him. Togami stood in front of the classroom door, just a step beyond Naegi’s reach – though from the distance in his expression, he might as well have been across the room. Togami seemed like he was barely paying attention to Naegi at all, his eyes locked intently on Kirigiri like he expected her to pull a weapon.

She, on the other hand, looked completely unfazed by the glare being directed her way. She crossed her arms and met Togami’s eyes with a faint smile, as calm as if they’d just stopped to chat after meeting in the dorms.

“What makes you think I did anything?” she asked, raising one eyebrow in Togami’s direction.

Togami curled his lip in contempt. “Don’t try to play games with me. He has blood on his face!”

Naegi’s hand flew involuntarily to the cut on his face, wincing as the touch sent another burst of pain through his cheek. When he yanked his hand back, his fingers came away red – the cut was still oozing. Naegi grimaced. Maybe he should have listened to Kirigiri and cleaned it up before doing anything else, if it was going to upset Togami so much.

But then again, if Togami was upset by the sight – then that meant he still cared, didn’t it? It wasn’t that Naegi liked that Togami was unhappy – but if the sight of another wound made him angry, then maybe he hadn’t completely given up on Naegi after all, in spite of what he’d said as he’d walked out of Naegi’s room that morning.

“And you assume the blood is my doing?” Kirigiri asked, a hint of a mocking smile dancing at her lips. “That’s quite an assumption. I’d ask if you have any proof to back it up – but you would have had to be around to get that.”

“I don’t need to prove anything,” Togami snapped. “Not when you do this every time. Three repetitions makes a pattern – a very suspicious one.”

“But she’s telling the truth,” Naegi said, trying to interrupt the argument before it could escalate any further. “Kirigiri didn’t have anything to do with this.”

He might as well not have said anything. Togami didn’t so much as glance in Naegi’s direction, his only reaction to the words a faint twitch of the muscles in his jaw.

“Every time this happens, it’s because you sent him into danger in your place,” Togami said, eyes fixed on Kirigiri. “So let’s hear it – just what kind of idiocy were you trying to do this time?”

“I was investigating,” Kirigiri said. “You might recall the concept if you think back.” She stepped forward, brushing past him as she headed into the ruined classroom, her face not showing so much as a flicker of shock in response to the horrors within. “And I intend to continue.” She disappeared into the room, leaving the two boys alone in the corridor.
Naegi could see Togami preparing to either leave or go after her, and he knew he had to speak up before the other boy could.

“Wait – don’t go yet!” He braced his hand against the wall and tried to lever himself to a standing position, so that Togami couldn’t so easily look past him. “Please – I want to talk to you.”

Togami raised an eyebrow at him, his expression dauntingly cold – but at least he didn’t walk off in response. Naegi decided to count that as a positive sign.

“I wanted to explain what I meant earlier,” Naegi said, staring earnestly up into Togami’s eyes. “I don’t think you understood. It’s not that I don’t care about you – I do! That’s why I want to get out of here. I’d rather fight to have something good than just give up because we might lose it.”

“You’re accusing me of giving up?” Togami’s mouth tightened. “I never once said that I wanted to stay here. I want to get out of this place every bit as much as you do. I just intend to go about it sensibly, instead of your preferred tactic of jumping heedlessly into any danger that presents itself.”


“Oh, really? Then why is your face bleeding?” Togami demanded.

“That doesn’t have anything to do with this,” Naegi said. “I just said the wrong thing to Genocide Jill earlier, that’s all.”

“You always have a reason, don’t you?” Togami closed his eyes like he couldn’t stand to look at Naegi another second. “They didn’t mean to, or it was just an accident, or no one knew what would happen. It’s the same thing every time one of your precious friends gets you hurt, and you’ll never see it differently. You care too much about them all.”

Naegi didn’t miss the bitter emphasis on that word, even if he wasn’t quite sure what Togami meant by it. “I do care about my friends – of course I do. But it’s nothing like the way I feel about you. I can care about them and you – it isn’t a choice of one or the other!”

“Isn’t it?” Togami said, opening his eyes and raising his eyebrows. “I asked you to do one thing, and she asked you to do another. Sounds like a perfectly straightforward either-or decision to me.”

Naegi stared at him. “You think I’ve been choosing Kirigiri over you? That’s – that’s not it at all!”

“And yet here you are with her just hours after we argued,” Togami said, gesturing back at the classroom where Kirigiri was investigating.

That made Naegi frown. Togami might have some points in the rest of what he was saying, but that wasn’t fair at all. He glared at the other boy as anger began creeping up on him. “You don’t get to complain about that – not when you were the one who decided to walk out!”

“I’m not complaining.” Togami’s mouth twisted in disdain as he uttered the word. “I’m expressing justifiable unhappiness with your repeated insistence on making terrible decisions.”

“You mean because I won’t turn my back on Kirigiri and the others?” Naegi shook his head. “Well, if that’s it, then you’re right – I won’t. I’m not going to let you lock me up in a bubble because you think it might be safer. I’m not a child you have to take care of or a trophy you can keep hidden for yourself. If that’s what you think you want, then – then maybe you don’t care about me as much as you think you do.”

Togami glared at Naegi, hot fury burning away the icy mask he’d been trying to maintain. “You
have no idea what you’re talking about.”

But Naegi could only shake his head. “If that’s what you want me to be – I can’t act like that. I won’t choose between you and everyone else.”

“If you cared enough, it wouldn’t be a choice,” Togami shot back.

The anger in Togami’s eyes scorched through Naegi – and almost as painful was the hurt he could see behind the anger. He’d done it again, hadn’t he? He’d told himself that hurting Togami was the last thing he’d wanted to do – and that was exactly what he’d done. How could he have done this?

How could he not? Naegi knew he couldn’t have said anything other than what he had, not when he believed it so firmly. Even ignoring the issue would be as good as lie at this point, when he knew how Togami felt about it. Maybe if he could have expressed himself better, or chosen different words, then he could have gotten through to the other boy – or then again, maybe Togami didn’t have it in him right now to hear what Naegi was trying to say.

Despite Naegi’s best efforts, one of the tears burning behind his eyes forced its way forward, trickling down his cheek to trace a line through the blood. Naegi reached up to wipe it hurriedly away, hoping Togami hadn’t noticed.

But of course someone so observant would have caught that. Togami’s expressed changed as he watched the tear fall. “Naegi…” He stopped, hesitating like he wasn’t sure what he wanted to say. A sliver of hope began to blossom in Naegi’s chest.

And then Togami shook his head, turning back towards the classroom. “Someone needs to make sure that girl isn’t causing trouble in there.” He headed back inside, leaving Naegi standing alone in the hallway, face damp with blood and tears.
Chapter 96

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to cope with his inability to forget Naegi.

Togami strode into the ruined classroom, barely noticing the destruction around him. Despite his best efforts, all his thoughts were still centered on the boy standing pale and shaking outside the classroom doors.

He’d thought that he’d managed to put the miserable hurt of their argument that morning out of his head. Consciously dwelling on thoughts of Naegi had still been like stabbing knives straight through his chest – but if he just didn’t think about it, the hurt had dulled to something almost endurable. And this wreck of a classroom had been the perfect distraction, full of interesting possibilities and potential clues. He’d thrown himself into an investigation, putting any useless feelings very nearly out of his mind.

Until the door had opened and he’d seen Naegi standing at Kirigiri’s side, streaked with blood and on the verge of collapse. He’d moved on instinct, throwing himself across the room to stop Naegi from hitting the ground without actually deciding on the action.

If he’d had time to consider, he never would have done it – let Naegi deal with the consequences of his stupidity for once. Maybe a few extra bruises would have taught him to think a little harder.

But even as he formed the words to the harsh, cynical thought in his head, it felt hollow. Would he really have chosen to let Naegi be hurt if it was in his power to prevent it? Togami would have liked to say a clear, easy yes without any emotional encumbrances – but he couldn’t. Then again, he couldn’t say no, either. He didn’t know what he would have done, or what he would have wanted to do – and that uncertainty twisted through his gut like he’d swallowed a live snake.

It was intolerable – especially given the way Naegi had spoken to him afterwards. For someone who was oh so willing to bend over backwards trying to understand the others, he couldn’t be bothered to spare even a few seconds of thought for what Togami was thinking. To have the nerve to accuse Togami of not caring about him – even the memory of the words made Togami want to turn back and scream at the boy in rage. How could he say a thing like that, mere hours after Togami had laid his heart at Naegi’s feet?

Naegi had argued with him, insulted him, refused to agree with his perfectly reasonable requests – everything that should have made it ridiculously easy for Togami to gouge any lingering feelings for the boy out of his heart. This should have been all the proof he needed that Naegi wasn’t worthy of his love, and erased the constant hurt of his broken heart.

And yet it hadn’t. All it had taken was one pitiful tear falling down the boy’s face, and Togami had been no more than a breath away from surrender. His arms had ached to reach out and gather Naegi to him, so badly that he’d almost been able to feel the warmth of the other boy cradled against his chest. The words had risen up in his throat, sniveling endearments and pathetic assurances of the depth of his affection.

Knowing that he had that kind of reaction lurking in his psyche – it made his face burn with
humiliation. God, Naegi really had ruined him. He couldn’t even hate the brat any longer, not even with every provocation in the world. Even now, part of him still wanted to turn around and return, to take back his own actions, to pretend none of this had happened - that was how much power Naegi still held over him.

Well, that didn’t mean he had to give in. He didn’t. He wouldn’t, not when Naegi had made his own position so plain. He might not be able to stop the prickling along the back of his neck reminding him that Naegi was right there behind him – but at least he didn’t have to act on it. He could choose to focus on something else instead.

And sure enough, when he finally succeeded in returning his attention to the classroom, he found Kirigiri’s behavior more than sufficient to distract him. Of course the wretched girl had seized his moment of inattention to zero in on the most suspicious place in the classroom, where several chalk outlines tangled together at the far side of the classroom, the floor around them marred brown with old blood. Kirigiri knelt just outside the bloodstains, peering down at the central place where the outlines crossed over one another – the place where a huge serrated knife gleamed from where it was embedded deep in the floor.

“Of course you’d gravitate right to the most obviously dangerous item in the room,” Togami said, crossing the room in a few quick steps so that he could stay firmly at her side. “Is it giving you ideas on how to make yourself more of a menace?”

Kirigiri looked up at him with a mildly irritated frown – as if his words were nothing more than a minor distraction. “Did you put this knife here?”

Togami blinked. That wasn’t what he’d expected her to say. Why would she ask if he had stuck a giant knife in the floor? Obviously the knife had to have been placed at some point after the bodies had been removed and the outlines had been drawn, but that was hardly reason to assume that he’d been the one to place it. In that cases, he would have had to have it in his possession to begin with, and he hadn’t seen anywhere in the school so far where anyone could have obtained such a large, shiny –

Shiny. Togami narrowed his eyes at the blade. Yes, now that he gave it a closer look, he could see that it certainly was shiny – far more than anything else in this classroom. Even the metal of the broken desks and chairs had grown dull and smudged, overlaid with the filth of being sealed away with blood and rot for however long this room had been closed.

But the knife shone bright and new against all the rest of it – and the conclusion was inescapable. The knife couldn’t have been sealed in this room from the start, not looking the way that it did. They’d only gained access to the room after yesterday’s class trial – so the knife had to have been placed this morning. And since he’d been in the room before she and Naegi had arrived, the question was obvious.

And Togami didn’t find himself at all inclined to answer it. He crossed his arms and scowled at down at the girl who had been the cause of his argument with Naegi. “And what would you do if I said that I did put it there?”

Kirigiri gave him a long stare, then shook her head. “I’d ask why you feel compelled to waste my time.”

From her tone, Togami knew instantly that she wasn’t talking about the hypothetical scenario he’d posed. She knew he was lying – had apparently been able to read the truth off him as easily as scanning a newspaper headline. Just who was Kirigiri, to be able to see through him like that?
He didn’t know. There was no way he could know, not when she’d been so secretive about her past. But finding out had just rocketed much higher up on his list of questions that needed answers.
Chapter 97

Chapter Summary

Togami, Kirigiri, and Naegi try to investigate the mysteries of the ruined classroom - but other issues keep distracting them.

Before Togami could demand any further answers from Kirigiri, the slow sound of footsteps behind him snapped his attention away from her. But even as goosebumps tingled along the back of his neck at the knowledge that Naegi had to be approaching, Togami refused to show the weakness of turning around to look.

What the hell did Naegi think he was doing, following Togami into this room? He’d nearly fainted at the first sight of it – he had no business trying to enter. But as usual, Naegi didn’t pay any attention to what he ought to do. He edged into Togami’s line of vision, frowning down at Kirigiri. “Why is there a giant knife in the middle of the floor?”

“We were just discussing that,” Kirigiri told him, and the hint of softening to her voice when she addressed Naegi instead of him set Togami’s teeth on edge.

“Well, I don’t think we should leave it there,” Naegi said, biting his lip. “Not – not with the way Jill and Ogami have been acting this morning.”

So Naegi had gone to see Ogami, as well? Togami scowled. Of course he had. Why would he limit himself to visiting only two of the three psychotic girls left in the school when he had the option to complete the set?

“That seems like a reasonable suggestion.” Kirigiri turned to the knife and reached out to pull it from the floor.

“I don’t think so,” Togami snapped, hand flying out to block her. “You aren’t taking that.”

She raised her eyebrows. “And just what do you think I could do with this knife that I couldn’t do with the dozens of other weapons available to us in other parts of the school?”

“Whatever it is, I don’t care to find out.” Togami stooped to yank the knife free himself, keeping it well out of Kirigiri’s reach. “As long as I have this, that’s one less weapon available to you.”

“So you want the responsibility of keeping it somewhere safe?” Kirigiri shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

Her nonchalance made Togami want to lash back with vicious words and insults until he got some kind of angry reaction from the emotionless girl – but he didn’t want to risk further argument about the knife. Not after Monokuma had warned him about the presence of a dangerous weapon missing somewhere in the school.

He didn’t think it was likely to be this knife, of course. For all that it was enormous, it didn’t appear to be anything other than an ordinary blade – but there was no point in taking unnecessary chances. This knife was the first new weapon to turn up after Monokuma’s warning, and he didn’t trust a single one of the other students with it – and Kirigiri least of all.
“But what is it doing in a room like this?” Naegi asked, steadying himself against one of the more intact desks as he frowned at the knife. “Are we supposed to think it was used in – in whatever happened here? It can’t have been – it isn’t even bloody!”

“The knife isn’t the most important mystery to ask about right now,” Kirigiri said, getting to her feet and dusting off the edges of her skirt with a hint of distaste. “What you should be asking is – why is there a room like this in the school in the first place? And after we’ve encountered so many locked doors, why was this room left unsealed?”

Togami curled his lip. So she thought she was smart because she’d come up with the obvious questions after looking through the room? Well, he had no intention of letting her show him up.

“It was put here to be found,” he said, lifting his chin in his most imperious manner. “The mastermind wanted us to see this place. Even at the start of this, in the very first motive that we got, Monokuma has been implying that events here go beyond the fifteen of us who were imprisoned here. This room – this battlefield – is proof of it.”

“But –” Naegi looked around the room, going even paler. “But that means Monokuma must have –”

“What, my fault again?” Monokuma came bounding out to the front of the room before Naegi could finish speaking. He landed in front of the shattered teacher’s desk, grinning out at them like he intended to preside over a lesson – a mockery of an instructor for this ruin of a classroom.

“Come on, now, stop trying to blame everything on me!”

“Who else is there?” Naegi said, all exhaustion disappearing from his face as he turned to glare at Monokuma. “If you hadn’t done anything, there’s no way the classroom would look like this!”

“No, no, no, it’s actually the opposite,” Monokuma said. He laughed. “What do you think – should I give you an itty bitty hint?”

“Yes,” Togami said at once – at the same time that Kirigiri said, “No.”

Togami spun to glare at her. What the hell was she trying to prove? She’d spent the last few days harping on and on about how they needed to find answers, using the same excuse to manipulate Naegi into danger time and again – and now, presented with the opportunity to get a clue directly from the mastermind’s mouth, she wanted to turn it down?

Not that Togami intended to put much trust in anything Monokuma said, of course – but more information was always better than none. Whatever hint Monokuma intended to give them, it would give them some idea of how the mastermind wanted them to view this room. That would definitely be valuable in determining their final goal.

“Uh oh!” Monokuma’s paws flew to his mouth in feigned shock. “Looks like we’ve got a house divided! One for and one against – what’s a bear to do with a vote like that?” He grinned. “Good thing we’ve got a tie-breaker!”

“Do you mean me?” Naegi asked, as Monokuma’s red eye blazed straight at him.

“Well, it can’t be that hard, right?” Monokuma said. “It’s not like I’m asking you to choose
between my pure snowy fluff and my silky midnight plushness, or something hard like that! All you have to do is decide whether you like Togami or Kirigiri better!"

“W-what?” Naegi’s eyes darted from Togami to Kirigiri in a brief moment of nervousness before he shook his head and zeroed back in on Monokuma. “No. This is just about a hint, not about – anything other than that.”

“Ohh? Does that mean it’s a tough choice after all?” Monokuma tilted his head inquisitively. “But don’t you know that you’ve got to choose to agree if you want to raise someone’s flag? And here I was trying to give you the option to make a nice clear-cut decision.”

“I don’t want your help!” Naegi snapped.

“Huh? Is that your answer?” Monokuma asked. “So does that mean you’re picking Kirigiri?” He shook his head, sending Togami a sympathetic look. “That’s too bad! And here I was hoping we could have a touching reunion episode. But I guess it’s only to be expected – after all, Naegi already picked Kirigiri’s side when he agreed to let her try to kill him, right?”
Chapter 98

Chapter Summary

Togami finally learns about the truth about Naegi and Kirigiri's plan to protect Alter Ego.

Togami stared at Monokuma, the bear’s unsettlingly cheerful words echoing through his head. *Naegi agreed to let Kirigiri try to kill him.* That couldn’t be true – no matter how genuinely nice Naegi might be, there were limits, weren’t there? He might be willing to risk his life on Kirigiri’s say-so, but that was different from agreeing to die so that she could win the game. No one sane could be that self-sacrificing.

But then again, Naegi was still suffering from a head injury and the effects of Fukawa’s poison, leaving him too dizzy to stand for long on his own. And then he’d apparently been making his condition worse by climbing five flights of stairs and wandering into nausea-inducing murder scenes. It wasn’t exactly a stretch to think that in this state, he might have been talked into agreeing to something so stupid without fully grasping the consequences.

Slowly, Togami felt his head turn to Naegi’s direction, hoping that he would see confusion or denial on the other boy’s face. But instead of any of the expressions that might have proved Monokuma to be a liar, Naegi had turned towards Togami, face stricken with shock and guilt.

Sudden bursts of pain cut into Togami’s palms, and he realized that he’d clenched his fists so tightly that his nails were digging sharply into his skin. His face felt strange, almost painfully tight, locked in some expression he couldn’t identify. Tension throbbed through his shoulders, a continuous vibration that seemed to shake through his entire body.

“What is he talking about?” Even as Togami said the words, they sounded as though they were coming from very far away, traveling oh so slowly to reach him.

“Oh!” Monokuma gasped in feigned shock. “Was that supposed to be a secret?”

Naegi turned to glare at Monokuma. “Will you just stop already?”

“Aw, so now I’m just the boring B-plot to your heart-pounding rom-com?” Monokuma said. “Does that mean you don’t want to hear my hint about how I sealed off this room? You don’t even care that I didn’t change a single thing in here? There are so many things I could tell you –”

“Just go!”

“I see how it is.” Monokuma shrugged. “Well, don’t come crying to me when you remember just what genre you’re really in!” He disappeared.

Togami barely noticed him going. Hearing Monokuma arguing with Naegi, just as he had during the trial yesterday, had triggered something in his memory. After the regular trial had ended, during the rule-breaking interrogations Monokuma had held, the bear had said something strange.

“If you didn’t think you were breaking a rule, why did you try to hide it with that fake murder plot of yours?”
The words had slipped Togami’s mind with all the confusion that had followed, between the execution and Naegi’s collapse, but now he remembered. Monokuma’s words today weren’t the first time he’d accused Kirigiri of plotting murder – and she hadn’t denied it either time.

That meant that whatever had happened between Naegi and Kirigiri wasn’t something from this morning, but from some earlier point. The only possibility was during the time when Kirigiri had forced that ridiculous separation on them – the time when she had apparently been working with Naegi on that failed plan with Alter Ego.

Chills ran along Togami’s skin as the final pieces of the puzzle slotted into place for him. Naegi wouldn’t have just agreed to let Kirigiri try to kill him to save herself – but he’d been desperately eager to try to protect Alter Ego. It was all too easy to envision Naegi agreeing to some harebrained plot if it sounded like it might help the computer program he insisted on calling his friend.

“Togami – look, I know what Monokuma said sounded bad, but it wasn’t like he’s making it seem.”

Naegi’s words drew Togami’s attention back to him, and Togami narrowed his eyes at the boy’s pale, earnest face. He looked so sincere, so kind – just the way he must have looked at Kirigiri when he’d pledged to go along with her idiocy.

“It sounds to me as though you foolishly agreed to let Kirigiri pretend to kill you in order to protect Alter Ego,” Togami said flatly, cold fury ringing through the words.

“Oh.” Naegi blinked, taken aback. “Well – yeah, that’s actually about how it happened. She was never really going to kill me –”

“You agreed to give her a free hand plotting your death because she crossed her heart she didn’t mean it? Did you even bother to take any precautions in case she decided to backstab you?”

“If I had, it would have been a huge giveaway that it was all an act,” Naegi said. “We needed to distract Monokuma, not set off alarm bells that we were planning something!”

“Because that worked so well,” Togami sneered. “And let me guess – she had some really excellent reasons why you shouldn’t tell anyone about this plan, right? It had to be a big secret that only the two of you knew.” He shook his head dismissively before Naegi could answer, turning to glare at Kirigiri. “I suppose you think you’re clever, manipulating him like that.”

“Naegi wasn’t the one I was trying to manipulate, if you insist on using that word.” Kirigiri crossed her arms. “And the reason I advised him not to tell anyone else was simply that none of the rest of you could have kept it hidden from the mastermind – or are you pretending that you would have let the plan proceed without interference?”

“Of course I would have interfered in something like that!” Togami snapped, rage bubbling through his chest in almost physical explosions. “Anyone would try to stop a plan where you yet again decided to put someone else in that kind of danger!” He glared at her. “And don’t think I didn’t notice just how you arranged things – so that you would be the one arranging the murder. If you legitimately intended this as a distraction, you could just as easily have let Naegi be the supposed murderer while you took the risk that he wouldn’t betray you.”

“No one would have believed Naegi in that role,” Kirigiri said calmly. “And the plan required someone who might plausibly devise a coldblooded murder.”
“So you just jumped at the chance,” Togami said. “You got a willing victim and a green light to act suspicious, all in one fell swoop.”

“Kirigiri wasn’t doing this to try to kill me,” Naegi said, glaring at Togami. “In case you missed it, I’m not actually dead.”

“Because Fukawa acted before she could,” Togami countered. “Who knows just what would have happened if we hadn’t found Hagakure yesterday morning?”

“Nothing would have happened!”

Togami shrugged. “Oh, I know you believe that – but we’ll never know for sure. All we can be sure about is what’s going to happen from here.” He turned back to Kirigiri. “If you were doing something to get Monokuma’s attention, then you must have been acting on an actual, workable murder plan – and so far, I haven’t heard anything that would stop you from enacting it. So if you genuinely never intended to murder anyone, you shouldn’t have any objections to neutralizing your own plan.” He glared at her. “Tell us exactly what was involved in your murder plot.”
Togami interrogates Kirigiri about the details of her plot to "murder" Naegi.

Togami glared at Kirigiri as she considered his demand. Her obnoxious face was as unreadable as ever, but he knew her mind had to be whirring fast behind those expressionless eyes, even if she didn’t show a hint of it. Where had a girl like her learned to put up a mask like that? He knew from experience that it took years of work to achieve such a flawless façade. In fact, though he’d never admit it aloud, her mask might even be a hair better than his own. She certainly employed it more frequently.

After a few seconds of thought, Kirigiri smirked, though Togami couldn’t be positive what the expression meant other than her intention to be as aggravating as possible. “What makes you think I had an actual plan? It would be a much more effective distraction to perform suspicious actions at random, encouraging the mastermind to try to find meaning where I intended nothing.”

Togami shrugged. “If that’s the case, you should have even less of a problem explaining the actions you took. And before you get any ideas about fabricating an alternate plan, remember that I intend to follow up on everything you claim you did for confirmation.”

“Of course you do.” Kirigiri didn’t show anything close to the appropriate level of concern for this threat. “What makes you think that there’s any evidence for you to find?”

“According to you, this murder plot was meant to catch the mastermind’s attention,” Togami said. “You couldn’t have done that with a plan that only existed in your head. You must have done something to put the plan into action – and if you wanted to be certain the mastermind would notice, it would have had to be something that unmistakably indicated a murderous intent. Anything like that would leave some kind of trace.”

“Not if I was careful,” Kirigiri said calmly. “I wanted the mastermind to observe me, but that doesn’t have to involve leaving a trail of my actions. In fact, if I wanted to present a convincing murder attempt, it would make much more sense to hide my actions as much as possible.”

“So you claim to have covered your tracks entirely?” Togami asked. “Fine. Prove it. Explain what you did, and we’ll see whether there are any traces.” He raised his eyebrows. “Unless there’s some reason you don’t want anyone to know your plans.”

“But – wait a second. Wouldn’t it be dangerous to put a workable murder plot out there?” Naegi said. “Especially if it’s all primed and ready to go.”

Togami felt his shoulders stiffen, Naegi’s words hitting him like a cat’s fur being rubbed in the wrong direction. “Are you suggesting that either you or I would use Kirigiri’s plan to murder one of the others?”

“No, of course not!” Naegi said at once, eyes widening as he realized just what his words had implied.
“Exactly. So there’s no problem.” He pinned Kirigiri with another glare. “Well? What are you waiting for?”

“All right, if you’re going to insist.” Kirigiri gave a bored shrug. “I took a kitchen knife and concealed it under my jacket so that the mastermind would watch to see what I’d do with it. After the trial ended and I had no further use for it, I returned it to the kitchen.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her, but she just met his eyes head on with a calm smile. She was lying – he knew she was lying. There was no way in hell she’d used a plan that simple, not if her goal was what she’d stated – but he couldn’t say so. With a plan like that, all the evidence would be gone already. He hadn’t been the one to check the kitchen during the last investigation – Ogami and Asahina had handled that. He didn’t know whether a knife had been missing at the time or not. Even if Kirigiri was lying, he didn’t have a way to prove it.

“Hang on.”

The staring contest broke as both Togami and Kirigiri turned sharply towards Naegi, and Togami couldn’t help the way his heart lifted to see Naegi’s face creased with the same frown he wore during class trials.

“So the plan you made to distract Monokuma – it was just carrying a knife around?” Naegi asked slowly, eyes fixed on Kirigiri as he thought. “That – I’m sorry, but I don’t think that makes sense.”

A rush of bitter triumph flooded through Togami as Kirigiri’s face went utterly blank. So Naegi’s shot had hit home, even if she wanted to hide the fact.

“I mean, you’d have to be around other people for the knife to be a threat, right?” Naegi went on. “But in the time we needed a distraction, there wouldn’t have been any people for you to threaten. We made the plan with Alter Ego right before the nighttime announcement – even if you’d gone to get a knife right after we finished, everyone else would have been in bed pretty soon afterwards. That wouldn’t have distracted the mastermind at all.”

Togami couldn’t stop the smirk that crossed his face at Naegi’s attack on Kirigiri. Maybe this meant he was finally starting to see the girl for the snake in the grass she really was. And even if he wasn’t fully at that point yet, at least he was able to spot the holes in her story and share them. Kirigiri had obviously been banking on the fact that Togami didn’t know the exact details of how and when she’d developed this plan – and it hadn’t occurred to her that Naegi might connect the dots.

“So it sounds to me like you’re caught,” Togami said to Kirigiri. “Either you lied about your plan just now, or you lied to Naegi earlier about your true intentions. Which is it?”

Kirigiri looked from one boy to the other. “You’re accusing me of lying?”

“That’s right,” Togami said. “And don’t try to pretend that you just came up with a stupid plan to distract the mastermind, either. No one in this room believes you’re that much of a fool.”

“Quite the compliment,” Kirigiri said dryly. “Well, you don’t think I’m a fool, then you can’t possibly expect me to behave in a foolish way. I refuse to tell you what my plan was.”

“Because you intend to use it in the future,” Togami said with grim satisfaction.

“I haven’t admitted anything of the sort,” Kirigiri said. “I just don’t see any reason to share my secrets with someone so determined to believe the worst of me.”
“The only reason you would fear something like that is if you have something dangerous that you need to hide,” Togami snapped.

“Is that what you think?” Kirigiri raised her eyebrows at him. “Then prove it.”

Togami gritted his teeth. Why was the blasted girl insisting on being so stubborn? Didn’t she understand that she was cornered? Why was she still demanding proof now? What was there that he could prove?

He ran through the sequence of events again in his head, now that he had Naegi’s additional information about what he and Kirigiri had been doing. They’d been in the bathhouse when they’d made the plan, so the mastermind wouldn’t have known about that part of it. Then they’d carried Alter Ego down to the hidden room to hook him into the network – probably drawing the mastermind’s attention with that suspicious action, regardless of anything that came after.

So whatever Kirigiri had done after that, it would have had to be something meant to distract the mastermind from looking into what she and Naegi had been doing in the hidden room. And if the nighttime announcement had happened immediately afterwards, it had to be something that she could do on her own, something that didn’t require other students’ involvement.

It also had to be something she could have finished during the night, because as soon as he and Naegi had met in the cafeteria after the morning announcement, she’d come in and demanded they find the others, starting the chain of events that had led to discovering Hagakure’s corpse.

*She* had made that demand. Togami frowned at the memory. Now that he thought about it, Kirigiri never had fully explained just why she’d been so certain that something had occurred. She’d dragged them off to search for the other students as if she’d *known* that they would find something terrible. She’d been right about it, yes – but how had she known? Fukawa had managed an almost entirely closed room mystery for her murder, with all the relevant clues at the murder scene.

Wait – no, that wasn’t right, was it? Most of the evidence used at the trial had come from what Naegi and Kirigiri had found in Ogami’s room – but there had been one thing that Togami had found that had been important. Not a physical piece of evidence, but an absence of it. There had been poison missing from the chemistry lab.

Two bottles of poison had been used during the murder – the one Ogami had thrown away in her supposed suicide attempt and the one Fukawa had used to poison her needles. But Togami had noticed all *three* bottles of that particular type of poison missing from the lab. That meant one bottle was still unaccounted for – and it meant that whoever had taken it would have seen that the other two bottles were gone.

He looked up at Kirigiri, a dark smile spreading across his face. “You’ve been hiding the last bottle of Monokuma’s mystery poison.”
Chapter 100

Chapter Summary

Togami forces Kirigiri to explain her real murder plot.

Chapter Notes

I'm very sorry that this chapter didn't actually get posted on Thursday! I thought I'd submitted it, but apparently I only saved it as a draft. I didn't realize that there was an issue until today, when I opened the story to post tonight's chapter. Again, I'm really sorry, and I'll try not to do that again! The real Sunday chapter will be up soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kirigiri’s expression didn’t so much as flicker at Togami’s accusation, but he didn’t need to see it on her face to know he was right. She had to have the third bottle of poison – it was the only thing that made sense.

“When you and the others confronted Naegi and me in the chemistry lab, there were three bottles of that poison in the cabinet,” Togami said, driving home the point so that she’d know she had no room to maneuver herself out of this. “When I investigated yesterday, all three bottles were missing – but we only accounted for two of the three during the trial. Someone else must have taken the third bottle.”

“And you think that must have been me?” Kirigiri asked.

“Well, whoever it was would have had the opportunity to see the other missing poison bottles in the cabinet.” Togami smirked at her. “Tell me, how exactly did you know that something had happened yesterday morning? I don’t think you ever said.”

“Oh, is that what happened?” Naegi asked. “I did wonder how you knew, but I guess that would explain it.” He frowned. “So you were trying to set up a murder plot that used poison?”

Kirigiri looked at him for a moment, then sighed. “Yes, that’s right. I spent most of that night assembling the tools I would need to deliver the poison without being present myself.”

“What could you possibly have needed to spend that long creating?” Togami demanded. “Fukawa couldn’t have taken more than ten minutes on her poisoned sewing needles.”

“I wasn’t attempting to be efficient,” Kirigiri said, a bit of her irritation showing through her usual calm. “In fact, if you’ll try to remember my goal, I was trying to do the opposite and take as much time as possible. If I’d been planning a genuine murder, I would have chosen a less elaborate method – but I thought that a bit of showmanship would appeal to the mastermind.”

“What are you talking about?” Togami asked.
Kirigiri gave him one of her more grating smiles, the look of a teacher addressing one of her slower students. “There was a reason I chose that particular poison. I don’t know how many of the different poisons in the lab you examined, but if you looked through all of them, you would have noticed that this poison has a unique quality.”

“And do you expect us to guess what it is at random, or are you going to get on with it?” Togami snapped, sending her an impatient glare. Even when she was supposedly helping, that girl just had to be obnoxious about it.

And of course, instead of just explaining what she meant like a normal person, Kirigiri looked over to Naegi. “Well? You read the label, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did.” Naegi frowned in concentration for a moment. “If you’re talking about the label – you must mean the way the poison needed to be administered, right?”

She nodded, like Naegi was an overeager puppy that had successfully managed to perform a trick. “Exactly. This poison could be effective in three ways – by consuming it directly, by injecting it into the bloodstream, or by breathing it in. Or to put it another way – this is the only poison that could be administered in a gaseous state.”

“You were going to pump poison into the air?” In his horror, Togami briefly lost control of his expression and gaped at her. “Are you crazy? You’d have killed all of us!”

“Don’t be melodramatic,” Kirigiri said, sighing. “If you’d read the label, you’d know that if the poison is administered as a gas, the victim would have to breathe more than half the bottle to get a lethal dose. I couldn’t possibly have killed everyone with a single bottle even if I’d wanted to try.”

“Then it’s a good thing the other two bottles were already gone by the time you got to the lab,” Togami shot back. “If you’d found all three bottles intact, who knows what you might have done.”

“I had no intention of enacting a mass murder and suicide plot,” Kirigiri said, sounding like she was getting to the end of her patience. “Not even as a pretense. I only had one target.”

Togami’s eyes darted to Naegi as she said those words, a swift and almost reflexive confirmation that the other boy was still alive and well despite her machinations. Fortunately, Naegi didn’t notice Togami’s gaze, his attention still fixed on Kirigiri.

“So you were planning to try to get me to breathe the poison in?” Naegi asked, frowning as he thought it over. “Would that really work? I mean, it started out as a liquid, right? And even if you boiled it or something, wouldn’t it just sort of… float away?” He waved a hand vaguely through the air, presumably to illustrate his idea of chemical reactions.

“In a large, well-ventilated room, that would be an issue,” Kirigiri said. “But in a smaller room, mostly sealed off, the poison gas should have had a high enough concentration for a lethal dose.”

Togami frowned, not liking where she was going with this. “You’re talking about a dorm room.”

Kirigiri nodded. “The rooms have been soundproofed so that any noise inside can’t reach the hallway – and a soundproof seal would also be airtight. There are vents in the wall, of course, but they only circulate fresh air at a steady, measured rate. If I timed the poison distribution correctly, I could have put gas into the room faster than the vents could have pumped it out.”

Her words were clinical and calm, but Togami could envision the picture they painted all too vividly. He could see Naegi trapped alone in his dorm room and forced to poison himself with every breath. Weakened as he’d been already, it wouldn’t take long for the poison to overcome
him, sending him crashing to the ground in a coughing, twitching heap. It would sap his energy relentlessly, every breath robbing him of his own life, until he couldn’t even gasp for air any longer.

It would have been a slow death, forcing the victim to linger breath after breath, unable to resist their approaching end. Someone who could go through with that kind of calculated plan would have to be merciless. Togami might even have been a little impressed in spite of himself, if she hadn’t intended Naegi as the victim. But as it was, she’d now revealed herself to be an even more dangerous enemy than he’d previously realized.

He scowled at Kirigiri, taking in her impassive expression with new eyes. She had muscle-perfect control of her face, not letting a single emotion through unless she wanted it to be seen. Did that mask hide a girl who could cold-bloodedly condemn a boy who called her his friend to a slow, painful death? It looked as though it might.

“Are you done wasting all of our time?” Kirigiri asked, crossing her arms.

Togami curled his lip, but didn’t otherwise deign to acknowledge the dig at his interrogation. “You haven’t explained your methods yet. How exactly did you plan to distribute the poison?”

“It hardly matters at this point,” Kirigiri said. “I’ve dismantled the tools I created to do it.”

Togami glared at her. His first instincts urged him to demand answers, to beat this girl who kept resisting his orders – but while satisfying, that wouldn’t get him what he needed. Whatever tool she’d built wouldn’t be dangerous on its own – it was meant to distribute poison into the air. The poison was the important part of that equation, not whatever other rubbish she’d been making.

“And the poison?” he asked, raising his eyebrows. “Or do you expect me to believe you got rid of that, as well?”

Kirigiri gave him a cool smile. “I wouldn’t trust it to stay gone if I did.”

“So you kept it.” Togami smiled in satisfaction – he knew she wouldn’t throw away a weapon, given the chance. “Let’s have it, then.”

“I don’t have it on me,” Kirigiri said. “I wanted to keep it in a place where I could confirm its whereabouts, but where I wouldn’t have it constantly to hand.”

“So it’s hidden somewhere?” Togami frowned. Where would Kirigiri consider a safe hiding place? “The bathhouse lockers, where Alter Ego was?”

But she shook her head. “No. I did consider it, but this morning, I found another possibility.” She smiled. “I hid the poison in one of the dojo lockers while Naegi and I were exploring this floor.”

Chapter End Notes

So... this story has now officially reached the triple digits. I am honestly shocked that it's gone on for so long! When I started back in November, I definitely didn't think I'd still be writing this in March. I'm glad I am, though - it's a lot of fun!

I really want to thank all of you who are following along. It's lovely to know that other people are enjoying this story as much as I am! Thank you!
Chapter 101

Chapter Summary

Togami demands proof of Kirigiri's claims.

Togami narrowed his eyes at Kirigiri. “So you had the poison until just a few moments ago?”

“That’s right,” Kirigiri said. “I had it with me the entire time since I took it.”

“Wait – you mean you had it all day yesterday?” Naegi broke in, alarmed. “You had a bottle of poison on you while we were investigating Hagakure’s death by the same poison?”

“Hiding it after we discovered the body would have looked extremely suspicious,” Kirigiri said. “And even if someone had noticed, I could have shown them that the bottle was still sealed.” She shrugged. “This is the first opportunity that I had to put it somewhere secure. I’d been hoping that we’d find somewhere on the fifth floor that would work – and fortunately, the dojo lockers did.”

Togami frowned. So if she was telling the truth – which he was by no means certain about just yet, considering her earlier lies – that meant she’d had a bottle of poison hidden on her person since yesterday morning. She’d had it while she’d been investigating Ogami’s room with Naegi, and while they’d held a trial that had involved a missing bottle of that very poison, and –

And while she’d sneaked into Naegi’s room last night.

A chill slithered down Togami’s spine. Kirigiri’s plan had involved distributing poison in a sealed dorm room by some means she had refused to describe – and he had no idea what she might have been doing in Naegi’s room before he’d woken up to catch her. It would have been the perfect opportunity for her to hide something in the room.

The thought made him clench his teeth until they ached. He should never have gone back to sleep after finding her prowling around the room like that! He ought to have scoured the room at once to find whatever she might have planted there. Knowing that he’d walked out that morning and left Naegi behind in a room that might have had poison in it – he had to fight to suppress a visible shudder. He couldn’t let her get away with that. He had to get rid of whatever she’d used as soon as possible – definitely before nighttime arrived.

But after he and Naegi had argued so harshly about Naegi’s unfounded trust in Kirigiri, Togami could hardly expect Naegi to let him search his dorm for murder weapons. He might be persuadable if he thought it could be a way to prove Kirigiri innocent – but even then, she had him convinced this had all be a fake plan. It was just as possible that Naegi wouldn’t care if Kirigiri had left anything in his room, and that hearing Togami try to convince him otherwise would only make him dig in his heels.

But even if he couldn’t investigate the tools at the moment, there was still another way he could check on whether she’d been truthful this time. Togami looked back at Kirigiri, scowling at her unruffled façade. “I want to see the poison.”

“Of course you do.” The faint smile she wore at that had a hint of patronization, he was sure of it.
Togami glared back, wishing he could slap that look off her face just once. “You’ve told quite the story, but you haven’t offered proof of any of it. You say you locked this poison up for safekeeping – but for all we know, you were just hiding evidence. If you’re telling the truth, then open the locker and show us what you really put in there.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Naegi said thoughtfully. “I mean, you said the bottle was sealed when you put it in the locker, right? If Togami and I look at the poison bottle now, then you’d have two witnesses that can confirm it in case –” He bit his lip. “Well, in case you ever needed proof.”

Kirigiri looked from one of them to the other, pressing a finger to her chin as she appeared to weigh her options. “Both of you?”

Togami ignored the unhesitating “Of course!” that Naegi gave her, considering the fact that Kirigiri sounded like she wanted them both to agree to this. What good could it possibly do her to have other people backing up her claims about the poison’s whereabouts? Was she planning to try something with it? But their confirmation of the poison bottle being unopened at this specific time would only be valuable if she’d already done something with it – unless she was planning something that he couldn’t work out yet.

He was almost tempted to refuse to back her up, just to foil whatever plot she was in the midst of – but he had to see that poison bottle. Besides, if it came down to it, he could always refuse to admit what he’d seen later, if it looked like she was trying to use his word to wriggle out of something.

“If necessary, I’ll confirm what we find in that locker,” Togami said at last. “Whatever it is.”

She frowned at him for a moment, then gave a sharp nod before heading briskly for the door.

Togami had no intention of letting her rush on ahead – who knew what she might try if she got there first? But as he reached the door, the sound of Naegi’s slow, labored footsteps made him pause, fighting the urge to go back and help, to wrap a supportive arm around the shaky boy and bear some of the burden for him.

No. No. He was not going to keep chasing after a boy who wanted so little from him. If he turned around and went back to Naegi’s side now, even if it was just to help him walk to the dojo, it would be the first step on a path back to where they’d been – except that this time, he would know how much of a lovesick fool he was acting. No, it was far better to keep his pride, even if his heart was a lost cause.

Togami headed out the door after Kirigiri without so much as a glance behind him. Naegi would make his way to the dojo eventually, and Togami would just have to make sure Kirigiri didn’t get up to anything nasty until then.

He caught up to Kirigiri just as she reached the dojo entrance, following her through the doors without a word. He gave the room a cursory glance, just to check that there weren’t any differences – but no, the whole setting looked just the same, every bit as stereotypically Japanese as it had when he’d visited the room that morning.

“I hope you remember my advice.”

Togami looked sharply in Kirigiri’s direction, only to find her standing far too close to him for his liking. Her words had been pitched low – not quite soft enough for the security cameras to miss, but certainly quiet enough that an ordinary eavesdropper wouldn’t catch them.

He glared at her, taking a deliberate step away to put much more distance between them. “I make a
point to ignore any advice you give.”

“You shouldn’t.” There was something odd about Kirigiri’s face as she spoke – a hardness that he hadn’t seen from her before. Her eyes had a sharp light to them, and her mouth narrowed to a grim line without her usual hint of a mocking smile. “It’s difficult to be sure of anything in this place. The more I find out, the less I trust what I know. So I’ll tell you again – don’t be so careless.”

Before he could formulate an appropriately scathing retort, Kirigiri turned and headed over to lean against the wall beside the lockers, her usual emotionless mask sliding back across her face like the changes had never happened.
Togami finally convinces Kirigiri to open the dojo locker.

Whatever game Kirigiri was playing with her bizarre warnings and her shifting facades, Togami decided that his best bet was to refuse to engage with it. He had no idea what she was trying to achieve by such a vague warning, but he hardly needed her to remind him not to be careless. He was never careless – well, hardly ever. The incident with the unlocked door had been a stress-induced aberration, one that he had no intention of repeating.

So instead of getting distracted by her nonsense, he approached the row of lockers. He’d looked at them before, of course, but if Kirigiri had been meddling with them, he needed to examine them in much more detail.

The lockers had been built from dark, heavy wood with no windows to show which might have something inside, but it was still obvious which one Kirigiri had used. The one on the far right was the only locker that didn’t have its key stuck in the lock ready for use – if those wooden tags could even be called real keys. The design was laughable simple, the sort that people used when they didn’t plan to secure anything of great value within – but of course, with the rule against breaking down locked doors, even the most pathetic lock could be an impassable barrier in this school.

He was so intent on inspecting the lockers that the swish of the door caught him off-guard. He turned his head towards the sound automatically – and his eyes met Naegi’s.

His heart felt as though it shuddered in his chest, jolting electricity through his veins instead of blood. Despite the exhausted lines etched deep into Naegi’s face and bloody wound torn along his cheek, his eyes were as clear and open as ever, exposing every shade of his emotions no matter how much he might try otherwise. Determination, trust, and kindness that went too deep to believe – he felt like he was seeing straight through to Naegi’s soul, and found all of it tangled up with every beat of his own heart.

Only the sound of Kirigiri moving from her place beside the lockers snapped Togami out of his daze. He jerked away, twisting back and staring intently at the lockers as though they held all the answers to this school’s mysteries. Had he really just been staring across the room at Naegi like some kind of preteen in the throes of a first crush? And in front of Kirigiri? No wonder she felt free to make insulting remarks about his carelessness. He had to get control of himself.

When he was sure that his face wouldn’t betray any of his momentary lapse, he turned away and approached the last locker in the row, where Kirigiri already stood. He kept his gaze firmly on her as Naegi approached, not letting his eyes so much as flicker in the other boy’s direction.

“All right, then,” Togami told Kirigiri, gesturing at the locker. “Get on with it – unless you’ve come up with another transparent excuse for delaying.”

“No. I’m prepared to follow through on my decision.” Kirigiri reached into her jacket pocket and produced a wooden tag, identical to the ones in the other locks. She slid it into the lock and, without further ceremony, pulled the door open.
Togami had half-expected the locker to be empty, leading up to some fabricated explanation that he’d have to argue with her about – but to his surprise, there really was a small brown bottle sitting in the bottom of the locker. From what he could tell at first glance, it did appear to be the third and final bottle of the mystery poison. So it seemed that Kirigiri had been telling the truth about this much, at least.

He shot out a hand to grab the bottle before Kirigiri could take it – but she didn’t even reach out to try. She just raised an eyebrow at him, tilting one hand towards him in a “go ahead” gesture. Togami curled his lip at her before lifting the bottle up to scrutinize it.

The first thing he checked was the seal around the top – and just as Kirigiri had claimed, it was whole and unbroken, locking the cap firmly in place. This bottle didn’t seem like it had ever been opened. But that didn’t necessarily prove anything – there were other things she might have faked.

He peered at the label, reading over it to see if it matched what he remembered. He didn’t see any discrepancies – but on the other hand, he hadn’t seen the poison bottle up close during the trial, and his memories from his brief initial examination were fuzzy. Still, no matter how closely he examined the label, he couldn’t find any evidence that it had been tampered with or changed in any way.

Well, there was still one other possibility. He held the bottle itself up to the light, turning it in all directions – but he couldn’t see the twinkle of cracks from any angle. And as he tilted the bottle, the liquid inside moved, but didn’t slosh. The bottle was entirely full, no part of it drained away at all.

Finally, Togami couldn’t think of anything else to check. He looked up from the bottle to scowl at Kirigiri. “It… appears to be intact.”

“Of course.” She smirked at him. “Satisfied?”

He glared at her. “I will find out what you’re planning.”

“Good luck with that,” she said, letting her gaze drift away as if she were too bored to bother paying attention to him. “Let me know if you do.”

“Oh, I will,” Togami said grimly. He’d tell her, all right – as soon as he worked out her plot, he’d rub it right in her smug face.

“Can I see it?”

Naegi’s voice yanked Togami’s attention away from Kirigiri, nearly pulling his gaze back in the other boy’s direction before he remembered himself. Instead, he held the bottle out for Naegi to take, keeping his gaze fixed loftily in the air just above Naegi’s head. It still let a few spikes of Naegi hair intrude on his vision, but he could ignore that, even if it made his fingers tingle with the memory of running them through the soft, fluffy strands.

Those were dangerous thoughts, too distracting to allow at a moment like this. Togami forced himself to turn so that Naegi was no longer in his line of sight as he examined the bottle, focusing instead on Kirigiri. If anything could stop him from being overly sentimental, it was the sight of that girl. She’d locked her impassive mask back on her face as she watched Naegi’s investigation, and she tapped the wooden key absently against one gloved palm. With anyone else, that would look like a symptom of impatience – but with her, he didn’t trust any action she took to mean what it seemed.
Naegi didn’t take quite as long with the bottle as Togami had, but he definitely took the time to give it a thorough look. At least he wasn’t taking Kirigiri’s word for the state of the bottle – Togami could be grateful for that much, anyway. But then again, the apparent confirmation of her claims would probably just bolster his insistence that she was telling the truth.

“Okay,” Naegi said at last, handing the bottle back to Kirigiri before Togami could stop him. “This definitely looks like it hasn’t been opened. So – what do we do now?”

That was actually a good question. Togami hadn’t really considered what they would need to do if it turned out that Kirigiri was actually telling the truth – he’d thought that he’d be able to unmask her for the liar she was. But on the off-chance that this part of it, at least, was true, then that meant this really was the last bottle of the mystery poison. And if that was the case, he had no intention of leaving it in her possession.

“We should get rid of it,” he said at last. “If the three of us go dump it down a sink, then we’ll all know what happened to it – much safer than simply hiding it.”

“No,” Kirigiri said flatly.

“Why not?” Naegi asked her, puzzled. “It sounds pretty reasonable to me.”

“Because as long as this bottle is here, safe and unsealed, it’s proof that it hasn’t been used,” Kirigiri said. “If we open it, then we lose the ability to confirm what happened to it.”

“So?” Togami said, raising an eyebrow. “If that’s really the poison, then what does it matter if we pour it out? It would all be gone, so you wouldn’t need to prove anything.”

Kirigiri shrugged. “Possibly. But I prefer to keep the proof nonetheless.” She set the bottle back in the locker and swung it closed.

But Togami had expected that – and before she could reach for the key, he grabbed it from the lock.
Chapter 103

Chapter Summary

Togami and Kirigiri argue about what to do with the third bottle of poison.

Togami gripped the wooden key tightly in one hand, crossing his arms to press it against his body. If Kirigiri decided to try to retrieve it by force, he had no intention of being easily overcome.

But instead, she leaned back and raised a skeptical eyebrow. “And what do you plan to do with that?”

“Keep it away from you,” Togami said promptly. “Maybe you don’t trust anyone else with access to that poison – but I don’t trust you with it. So far, you’re the only one who has admitted to having a plan to use that poison. Why should I let you be the only one who can get to it?”

“So you intend to keep both the poison and the knife?” Kirigiri asked, an amused smile flickering across her face. “Do you plan to collect all the dangerous items in the school and hide them in your room?”

Togami gave her a withering glare. “Don’t be ridiculous. A determined murderer could make anything dangerous. But if this really is the only poison available to us that can kill by inhalation, then I want it well away from you.”

“And you’re going to take responsibility for what happens to the key?” Kirigiri asked, a smirk curling across her lips. “Well, you’ve certainly had practice with that job.”

Togami shot her a dark look for that jab about his confiscation of Ogami’s key. He was well aware of how ineffective that had been, resulting in nothing but personal inconvenience and getting suspected of murder. He didn’t especially want to go through that again – especially not if Kirigiri was trying to put some kind of strange plan into motion.

But he couldn’t just hand the key over, either. It was bad enough that there were weapons all over the school – he refused to let Kirigiri have sole access to the last remaining bottle of a unique poison. There had to be a way around this, where he could make sure she couldn’t get at the poison without needing to hold onto the key personally.

Could he trust anyone else with it? Ogami was obviously out of the question, barely worth considering, even if Monokuma had lifted her order to commit a murder. She was still a traitor, after all. And Jill – well, there was a time when he might have told her to do it, back when she and Fukawa had been desperate for him to order them around, but those days were long gone. No, both of the two remaining girls seemed to have been badly unhinged by yesterday’s trial – he’d hardly trust either of them with access to poison more than Kirigiri.

And while he trusted Naegi not to try to use the poison himself, he didn’t believe for a moment that Naegi would be remotely effective at keeping it safe from the other students. He had difficulty walking across a hallway, let alone keeping track of a dangerous item. Between that and his continued gullibility when it came to the other students, anyone who wanted to get the key from Naegi could do it in moments. He might as well just leave the key in the lock.
Was there some other option for the key that didn’t involve someone personally holding on to it? Could they store it somewhere, perhaps? But if they did, they’d have to figure out some way to secure the new location – it would be the same set of questions all over again. If there were more students left, it might have been possible to find some location to keep the key where it would always be under observation – but with only five of them remaining, that wasn’t a viable option.

Togami scowled. Maybe he was approaching the entire issue from the wrong direction. The question wasn’t actually about securing the key, after all – it was about securing the poison. The key was nothing more than a means to an end. And unlike the situation with Ogami’s dorm room key, the locker key wouldn’t need to be in continual use. In fact, the best situation would involve never using the key at all.

He looked up at Kirigiri. “You said you want to keep the poison bottle intact as some sort of insurance policy?”

“You can put it that way if you like,” Kirigiri said, shrugging.

Togami nodded slowly. “Well, you shouldn’t need to open the locker in order to use it that way. The only point at which you’d need to produce the unopened bottle would be if someone else had died of poison. If your purpose is what you’re saying, then the safest scenario for you is one where this locker is never opened.”

“That sounds like the safest for everyone,” Naegi said. “No one should need to open the door.”

“None of us should, at any rate,” Togami agreed. “If it came to an investigation, we wouldn’t even need the key. When Monokuma was explaining the rule about locked doors, he told us that he’s willing to open a lock for us – if it’s necessary to our investigation of a murder.”

“So you’re saying that none of us should have the key?” Naegi asked, frowning. “You want to throw it away? But then – that wouldn’t be very safe. Anyone could find it in the trash.”

“Which is why I didn’t mean we should stop at throwing the key out,” Togami said. “I think we should burn it.”

He kept his eyes fixed on Kirigiri as he made the suggestion. If she meant to object – if she tried to claim that there was some reason that she needed to keep the key intact – then he’d have her cornered. She wouldn’t be able to explain her way out of refusing, not unless she admitted just what she wanted to keep the bottle intact for. And either way, whether she actually told the truth about something or was revealed for the liar she was, he’d count that as a win.

“Very dramatic,” Kirigiri said at last. “But I wouldn’t expect any less from you. All right, then, if you’re so set on it.” Her most obnoxious smile danced across the corners of her mouth. “Let’s burn the key.”
Chapter Summary

Togami, Kirigiri, and Naegi discuss their options for destroying the locker key.

Togami hadn’t expected Kirigiri to agree with his suggestion – and the fact that she’d done so almost made him want to take it back. Was this something that she wanted? Had he played straight into her hands?

No – he didn’t believe that, not after she’d fought so hard to hide the poison bottle from them in the first place. She had to be pretending to like the idea so that she could avoid admitting she’d lost. Or maybe she didn’t believe he’d go through with it. Well, if that was the case, then she could think again.

“I’m glad you see reason,” he said to Kirigiri. “We should take it to the incinerator immediately, before anything unfortunate can occur to prevent us.”

“That’s fine with me,” she said, not sounding concerned in the slightest.

“Wait – you want to use the incinerator?” Naegi asked, the sound of his voice breaking Togami’s ability to focus on Kirigiri. “But – isn’t the trash room usually locked?”

That was a good point, actually – one that Togami hadn’t considered. He frowned, thinking back to all the talk of a garbage duty rotation back when it had come up before the murders had started. There had been a schedule, yes – but it had assumed they would have fifteen students around to take part. Once people starting dying, he doubted that rearranging the trash rotation had been on anyone’s mind.

“Yamada had the key, when it came up during the first trial,” Togami said at last. “I haven’t seen it since then.”

Naegi shook his head. “I haven’t, either. But it can’t have just disappeared. Maybe Yamada still had it when he died?”

“No, he didn’t,” Kirigiri said. “Ishimaru did.”

Togami’s gaze snapped back to her. “And how exactly do you know that?”

“I noticed it in his pocket when I was examining his body,” Kirigiri said with a shrug.

“So – what, you had it all this time?” Togami demanded, alarm coursing through him at the thought that she’d had a way to obliterate evidence since the third trial. “And you never said anything?”

“I don’t have it,” Kirigiri said. “I left it in his pocket. We didn’t have long before the trial was going to start, and it seemed unlikely that the trash room had any relevance to that case.”

“Then it still would have been in his pocket when the mastermind – cleaned up,” Naegi said, a grimace of unhappiness crossing his face. “Does that mean it’s just gone?”
“I doubt the mastermind would get rid of something we might need,” Togami said, frowning. “They wouldn’t have wanted to take the trash room and incinerator out of play for any future murderers. After all, they made a point of establishing that they could return other items to us from corpses.”

“Oh – you mean the students handbooks!” Naegi’s face lit up as he figured out what Togami had meant, and Togami had to look away at the sharp pang the sight sent through his chest. “You think the trash room key would be in the entry hall with the other handbooks?”

“That sounds like a reasonable suggestion,” Kirigiri said. “Shall we go down to the first floor to check?”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her as they headed for the staircase, trying to work out whether she was disappointed by this turn of events. She’d provided information about the whereabouts of the trash room key – but he couldn’t be sure whether she’d done it to be helpful or to allay suspicion. Had she even been telling the truth? For all he knew, she’d pocketed the trash room key herself, and this was all a wild goose chase. Maybe that was why she’d been so willing to agree to burn the dojo locker key – she knew they wouldn’t be able to get to the incinerator and would have to give up.

But when they reached the entrance to the stairs, those thoughts screeched to a halt as Togami looked down the first of the many flights they would have to descend to get to the first floor. He hadn’t really thought much about the stairs when he’d walked up them the first time, but now – he couldn’t stop himself from glancing back in Naegi’s direction.

The other boy stood just at the edge of the doorway, eyes closed as he took a fortifying breath. Even with one hand braced against the wall, he looked unsteady, like a single breath wrong might send him tumbling to the ground. Thin trickles of clammy sweat made their way down his face, leaving trails of blood in their wake as they crossed his wounded cheek. He looked pitiful like that, weak and in pain, and Togami couldn’t help the answering ache in his own heart.

But as Kirigiri headed down the stairs without a pause, Naegi slowly forced his eyes open – and Togami hurriedly turned away and began his own descent. The last thing he wanted was for Naegi to catch him staring.

But as he walked down the stairs, Togami couldn’t escape from the knowledge that Naegi was so close behind him in the narrow stairwell. He could hear the uneven rhythm of the other boy’s unsteady steps, and he found himself counting the time between each one. A shadow stretched out in front of him, overlapping with his own, and he couldn’t stop his gaze from tracking the way it trembled.

It was ridiculous. If Naegi was unwell, it was only because he insisted on ignoring his own health – and his stupidity was no concern of Togami’s. Not anymore. He could run marathons up and down the stairs until he collapsed, for all Togami cared. He could drive himself to exhaustion until he fell apart, and Togami wouldn’t – he wouldn’t – he’d –

Togami turned and caught Naegi’s elbow in a steadying grip. It wasn’t the supportive arm he’d given the boy when helping him walk back from the trial ground – Naegi was still bearing most of his own weight, with assistance from his white-knuckled fingers clutching the stair rail. But it was enough to stabilize him and let him concentrate on moving, instead of trying not to fall over.

“Th-thanks,” Naegi said, not looking up to meet Togami’s eyes as an embarrassed flush crept up his cheeks.
“It would be inconvenient for everyone if you fell down the stairs,” Togami said, making sure to keep his voice at his iciest. “This school hardly has the medical facilities to handle it.”

“Right.” For all that he ought to be steadier, Naegi seemed to tremble again for a moment. “I’ll – try not to be an inconvenience.”

Togami gave a huff of annoyance. “Just stop talking.” He couldn’t for the life of him understand why Naegi always insisted on chattering away when he ought to be conserving his energy so that he could walk. It was like the boy wanted to collapse.

Fortunately, Naegi managed to keep his mouth shut after that, and they climbed down the rest of the stairs in silence. Togami tried his best not to let too much of his attention drift to the boy beside him, but even the aggravating sight of Kirigiri a few steps ahead of them couldn’t distract him for long. He could feel the warmth of Naegi’s arm even through the layers of clothing the boy wore, inviting him to press closer. For all that he was only touching Naegi’s elbow, he could feel the pressure of the other boy’s presence beside him, remembered touches tingling along his skin. Togami wasn’t used to denying himself anything he wanted, and he hadn’t realized just how difficult it would be to walk beside Naegi, allowing himself to be only this close and no further.

And being so close – it let him see other things, as well, in the glances he couldn’t stop himself from stealing. Were all those lines around Naegi’s eyes from stress and exhaustion? How long had his lips been tinged with white? Was his head drooping down because he needed rest… or was he just too unhappy to hold it upright?

Togami’s stomach twisted unpleasantly, and with a start, he recognized the sensation as guilt. Naegi was injured, sick, and miserable – and he had been a part of that. He’d said that he wanted Naegi to be safe and protected – and then he’d contributed to this.

When they finally reached the bottom of the stairs, Togami hastily dropped Naegi’s arm and stepped away, telling himself that he was relieved to get away from the conflicting feelings it inspired. After all, Naegi had said that he didn’t want Togami’s protection – or his love. He had no excuse to indulge his weak desire to continue to touch Naegi in the only way he still could.
Togami hurried down the corridor, outpacing Kirigiri in his need to put some distance between himself and Naegi. It was absurd that Naegi could still affect him so intensely – but since it was also apparently true, he couldn’t afford to ignore it. After all, he couldn’t just give in to Naegi because he wanted to stay near the other boy so badly.

So instead of letting himself dwell on how right it had felt to walk at Naegi’s side, Togami made his way into the entrance hall. He spared no more than a glance at the huge metal door or the menacing guns aimed in front of it, merely checking to make sure there was no change on that front before heading directly over to the mailbox. He swung it open and peered inside just as Kirigiri entered the room.

“I see you’re not wasting any time,” she said, walking across the room to join him.

Togami ignored her, focusing instead on the pile of student handbooks in the mailbox. He flipped past Enoshima’s, Maizono’s, the pair of broken handbooks from Owada and Fujisaki… on and on past all the names of the dead. He didn’t see anything suspicious – but as he moved Ishimaru’s handbook, a faint jingling sound came from inside it. He pulled it out and opened it – and there the key was.

Togami frowned at it, nestled innocently against the e-handbook screen. So the key really had been here, after all. He should have felt a rush of triumph at being proven right – but instead, he felt strangely unsatisfied at seeing it. If he’d been right about the key’s location, then that meant that Kirigiri really had been telling the truth about where she’d last seen the trash room key. Or had she? Could she have planted it here somehow, expecting that someone would come looking for it?

No – he didn’t see how she could have done that. Burning the locker key had been his idea, not hers. She hadn’t even wanted to admit she had the locker key at all – she couldn’t have based some elaborate plot around the idea that one of them might outwit her. The whole thing reeked of complexities and confusion and bizarre mind games – as long as he assumed this was all some kind of trick.

Was it possible that it wasn’t? If Kirigiri was being genuine, then a great deal of what was happening now would make much more sense. That would mean that she’d agreed to destroy the locker key because it would be the safest option for everyone. She’d shared information about the trash room key’s location because she wanted to help them find it. And she’d hidden the poison not because she herself wanted to kill Naegi – but to stop anyone else from taking advantage of her plan.

Could all that be true? Could he have misjudged her so badly? Was it possible that when Naegi had defended and trusted her – that he’d been right?
No. There were still too many unanswered questions about her for Togami to go that far. Why had she really been sneaking around Naegi’s room in the middle of the night? What had she been trying to accomplish with that bizarre warning in the dojo, when her entire manner had changed? And of course, at the heart of it, the real question – just who was she, and why did she refuse to share any personal information about herself?

Without knowing any of that, Togami couldn’t trust her entirely – but he had to admit, it did seem like she genuinely wanted to help them destroy the locker key. He didn’t know if she’d lost her nerve to use the poison, or if she’d never intended to do so in the first place – but either way, it only made sense to take advantage of her willingness to rid herself of a weapon.

“All right, then.” He stood up, the locker key in one hand and the trash room key in the other. “Let’s not waste any more time.”

He led the way out of the entrance hall, deliberately crossing the room on an angle that would put him as far away from Naegi as possible. He couldn’t let himself look at the other boy, not right now – not while he was losing his grip on what he ought to believe. Because if he had to reconsider his opinion of Kirigiri’s actions, then – then maybe –

He didn’t let himself complete the thought, focusing instead on the walk to the trash room. Even though Naegi and Kirigiri were walking behind him, the halls felt eerily silent now. With only five students left, the space that had seemed overcrowded with idiots at the start now loomed vast and empty around him. He normally found a measure of peace in solitude – but there was nothing peaceful about the stillness here.

Reaching the trash room door, he swung it open and headed immediately over to the grate blocking access to the far half of the room. There seemed to be a switch on the wall that could be operated using the trash room key – and sure enough, using it moved the gate aside. Togami headed for the incinerator, just as Kirigiri and Naegi entered the room.

“Last chance to object,” Togami said, narrowing his eyes in Kirigiri’s direction. If she tried to change her mind at this point – if she claimed to have come up with an excuse to leave the key intact –

“Go ahead.” Kirigiri stood on the opposite side of the incinerator, staring across at him with a challenging glint in her eye.

Without another word, Togami dropped the key into the empty incinerator, closed the doors, and pressed the button. The incinerator roared to life, fire blazing inside.

Togami stood in silence beside the other two, all three of them watching the incinerator burn. Even if they turned it off now, the locker key would already be destroyed beyond usability. For better or worse, it was gone – and the poison in the dojo locker was inaccessible.

When he couldn’t stand the noise any longer, Togami pressed the button to shut the incinerator off. He swung the door open, keeping well out of the way of the blast of hot smoke the machine disgorged. When it had ceased, he glanced inside – and at the bottom of the machine, he could see the smoldering embers of what had been the dojo locker key.

“There,” he said, stepping aside so the others could look. “It’s done.”

“And all three of us saw it happen,” Kirigiri added.

Togami shot her a suspicious look at that. With the locker key gone, he had to assume she’d been
genuine in her willingness to burn it – but any measure of trust that could have earned her was ruined by remarks like the one she’d just made. Why did she care so much if she had witnesses for what had happened to the locker key and the poison? Just what did she expect to happen? He hated not knowing – but he had no leverage to force an answer out of her.

He scowled, resolving to put off the puzzle of Kirigiri’s motivations for a time when he could better think it through. For now, he had other, more pressing issues to address. He headed back over to the switch on the wall that operated the grate, and frowned down at the trash room key.

“Planning to take possession of that key, too?” Kirigiri asked, raising an amused eyebrow. “You could start a collection.”

Togami grimaced. Being in charge of the trash room key sounded even more tedious than holding on to Ogami’s room key had been – he’d have to either let people in to dump their own trash, or he’d have to deal with their garbage himself. Neither sounded especially appealing.

“Does anyone need to hold on to it?” Naegi asked. “What if we just put it back in the mailbox?”

The mailbox… where only the three of them knew the key had been. And since Naegi was hardly likely to need to use the trash room to dispose of evidence, that meant that if anyone did – well, there would only be one possible suspect. And if that happened, it would finally give Togami an answer once and for all about whether or not Kirigiri really was plotting something.

“That sounds acceptable,” Togami said at last.

Kirigiri gave a single sharp nod. “I have no objections.”

Of course she didn’t. She hadn’t objected to anything that Togami had expected – why would she start now? He looked pointedly away from her as he left the room, doing his best to pretend the obnoxious girl wasn’t there as he retraced their path back to the entrance hall.

But as they headed back, there was one thing that he still couldn’t ignore no matter how hard he tried. Just behind him, Naegi’s footsteps faltered more than ever, with an agonizing slowness that hinted at deepest exhaustion. All this walking back and forth had to be far too much exertion for the other boy. Togami could hear it in Naegi’s labored breathing – he should be asleep in bed, not wandering the halls. Why had Naegi even left his room this morning, let alone gone roaming all over the school?

I want to talk to you.

Naegi’s words from earlier that day echoed through his mind, and a slow, puzzled frown crept across Togami’s face. Had Naegi risked his health wandering all over the school – looking for him? But that didn’t quite fit with the boy who had so vehemently rejected Togami in both of their arguments.

I wanted to explain what I meant.

Was it possible that – he’d misunderstood? A chill of uncertainty snaked through Togami’s mind. He’d thought he knew what Naegi’s words had meant, but – was it possible that he hadn’t?

No. Ridiculous. Togami pushed the thoughts out of his head as he reentered the entrance hall. That was just wishful thinking, a useless fantasy that his mind had conjured to distract him from harsh reality. Even if Naegi had gone chasing after him, the idiot boy probably would have done the same for any of his supposed friends.
Ding dong bing bong.

The nighttime bell startled Togami out of his thoughts. He scowled. He’d spent too long going in circles already – it was time to move on. As the nighttime announcement played, he pulled out Maizono’s handbook, tucked the key inside, and then shoved the handbook back amidst the others. It was unlikely anyone would find the trash room key in there, not unless they already suspected its location.

But when Togami turned around again, he found his eyes gravitating towards Naegi before he could direct them elsewhere. The boy swayed visibly on his feet, even with one hand gripping the wall, and his every breath seemed to shake through his entire body. He looked like little more than a shadow of the boy Togami had first dragged into the library archive to kiss – and seeing him this way made Togami’s heart ache in a way he hadn’t known it could.

Had he done this to Naegi? How much of it had been his fault? If he had been there – could he have made it better?

No. Togami wrenched his thoughts away from that path, striding past Naegi and Kirigiri both. He headed for the door without another word, not trusting what he might say to either of them if he tried. He didn’t know what to think about those two – and until he knew for certain, he couldn’t try to approach them. And so he walked away towards his dorm room, trying to ignore the doubts growing in his heart.

Chapter End Notes

Fair warning to everyone following along - next week is going to be a shorter one than usual. I have company descending upon me, and I won't be able to write at my usual pace. I'm not sure what the exact posting schedule will be, but there will definitely be a new chapter on Sunday. I'll have the days finalized by then.
Naegi watched Togami stalked out of the entrance hall, trying not to let his heart sink as the other boy left his sight. There had been a few minutes when he’d let himself hope that maybe Togami had been softening towards him – especially when he’d taken Naegi’s arm to help him down the stairs. The moment of kindness had taken Naegi by surprise, and he’d thought that maybe, maybe it signaled that Togami was willing to be a little more understanding towards him.

But then Togami had shut down Naegi’s tentative attempt at initiating a conversation, giving him a harsh stop talking in response to Naegi’s gratitude. And as soon as they’d reached the bottom of the stairs, he’d dropped Naegi’s arm like the contact disgusted him. Maybe he really had just wanted to avoid a scenario where Naegi fell down the stairs and ended up with a medical emergency they couldn’t treat.

After all, if Naegi had to be honest about it, that wouldn’t be too remote a possibility. Investigating the entire fifth floor with Kirigiri had taken more out of him than he’d realized, especially with the staggering effects of seeing that ruined classroom. And as he’d been climbing down the stairs, it had all started to catch up to him.

He probably should have gone back to his room to rest instead of going back and forth between the trash room and the entrance hall – but he’d told Kirigiri that he’d watch what happened to the poison so that he could back her up on it if she needed it. And if he and Togami could both support Kirigiri, she shouldn’t need to worry about proving the whereabouts of that poison. He just wasn’t sure why she’d need anyone’s support.

He looked over across the entrance hall to where Kirigiri stood looking after Togami, a faint frown on her face – and he wondered just what she was thinking. She’d handled Togami pretty calmly despite the way he’d kept throwing accusations at her, but hearing him repeat those awful things over and over had to have been upsetting.

Naegi wasn’t quite sure why Togami had been so convinced that her plan to pretend to kill him had been a front for a genuine murder attempt. She’d come up with the plan when they were helping Alter Ego, after all – and at that point, they’d both believed there was a chance Alter Ego could find information to help them escape. She wouldn’t have had a reason to try to kill him at that point, not if there was a possibility they could find a way out of the school without any more deaths.

But even knowing that, it had still been a little unnerving to hear Kirigiri talk so calmly about the way she’d planned to kill him. The thought of being trapped in a room with poison gas made Naegi shudder. That made him really glad Kirigiri was on his side – he’d hate to think what she could come up with if she were really working against him.
But fortunately, that was one thing he didn’t have to worry about. When Kirigiri noticed him looking at her, she crossed the room towards him, giving him a faint smile. “Are you doing all right? Feeling up to making it all the way back to your room?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Naegi said. “I mean, it’s nighttime, so I have to be.”

“Not necessarily,” Kirigiri said thoughtfully. “You might stop somewhere halfway to take a rest – and I’ve heard that baths are quite helpful when treating sudden injuries.”

Naegi blinked. The only real reason for Kirigiri to try to direct him to the bathhouse would be if she had something to discuss that the mastermind shouldn’t hear – but what could she want to talk about now? They’d spent the day together exploring the fifth floor, and she hadn’t made any indication that she needed to talk to him privately. What could have changed?

Well, he supposed the only way he’d find that out would be if he let her tell him.

“All right,” he said. “I’m sure I’ll feel better after a bath.”

“Right.” Kirigiri nodded. “Then I’ll get some bandages from the nurse’s office and meet you in the bathhouse.” She turned and left the entrance hall.

Naegi sighed, pushing himself away from the wall and beginning the long trek back towards the other half of the first floor. He tried to ignore the aches of protest from his legs, but it got harder and harder with every step. At least he didn’t have to backtrack to the nurse’s office, though – he only had to focus on making his way to the baths. It had been really thoughtful of Kirigiri to offer to bring him bandages. Naegi wished he didn’t need people to help him with things like that – but it was nice to know that someone would.

As he entered the bathhouse locker room, his eyes went automatically to the place where Alter Ego’s computer used to sit – but it was empty. Nothing would ever be there again. Everything that he and Kirigiri had tried to do to protect Alter Ego had failed, and now they didn’t even have a vacant dormitory or a crossed out portrait to remind them of the friend they’d lost.

Not that Naegi needed the physical reminders of the dead students. He knew he’d never be able to forget any of them, even the ones he’d hardly known. Still, it seemed wrong that the only place Alter Ego would exist from now on was in the remaining students’ memories – without them, there would be nothing to show he’d ever been.

Naegi sighed, taking a seat on the bench across from the one where Alter Ego used to sit. It wasn’t fair that memories were all he had left of the friends he’d met here, all the people he wished he could have known better – but if that was the case, then he needed to cling to his memories all the harder. He had to remember – and he would keep telling himself that as many times as he needed.

Finally, the door opened just long enough to let Kirigiri slip inside, a small first aid kit in hand. She crossed to sit on the bench beside him before he could get up.

“Thanks.” Naegi reached out to take the first aid kit.

But instead of handing it over, Kirigiri opened it herself. “Treating your own face will be awkward without a mirror,” she said, hands quick and efficient as she pulled out antiseptic and cotton balls. “Hold still.”

She leaned forward to wipe the cotton ball along his cheek, her hand moving uncharacteristically slowly along his face as she cleaned away the dried blood. Naegi had to force himself not to flinch back at how close it brought her face to his own, near enough that he could feel the movement of
her breath against his skin. Goosebumps crawled down the back of his neck like a small army of spiders. Did she really need to be so close just to help him clean his face? Maybe he should ask her to move back, or –

“I snuck into the headmaster’s office last night,” Kirigiri murmured, the words barely audible even with her face so close to his own.

Naegi blinked. “You what?”

“Shh.” Kirigiri frowned at him, pressing the cotton ball harder against his skin to send a small jolt through his cheek. “After Ogami announced during yesterday’s trial that she’d broken the lock, I knew we would only have a short window of access before Monokuma sealed it off again. Instead of going to bed, I waited for an opportune moment and made it into the office.”

Kirigiri put the cotton ball down and reached instead for a box of bandages, so Naegi decided to risk saying something. “Were you all right? Monokuma didn’t catch you, did he?”

“Well, I wasn’t technically doing anything wrong,” Kirigiri said, pulling out a clean white bandage. “After all, the school regulations say that we’re free to explore without restriction. Breaking down a locked door is forbidden – but there isn’t anything in the rules about what can happen after a door has been broken.”

“I guess that’s true,” Naegi said, thinking back to the wording of the rule. “But it still seems like a big risk.”

“I know,” Kirigiri said. She leaned forward again, slowly positioning the bandage to cover Naegi’s wound. “But I thought the potential payoff sounded worth it – and it was.” The faintest hint of a satisfied smile crossed her face. “It turns out that there weren’t fifteen students locked in this school – there were sixteen.”

Naegi frowned, but the pressure of Kirigiri’s hand on his cheek didn’t let him answer her. Sixteen students – that was what Ogami had said, back when he and Togami had been interrogating her about her role as the mastermind’s spy. He hadn’t really thought much about it, since they hadn’t seen anything to suggest there really was another student lurking around – but maybe there had been something in the headmaster’s office to prove it.

“The sixteenth student is named Mukuro Ikusaba,” Kirigiri went on, fixing the bandage firmly to Naegi’s cheek. “She is known as the Ultimate Despair. And while I was searching the headmaster’s office, she found me.”

Chapter End Notes

So I’ve finalized the posting dates for this week, as promised. Unfortunately, company plus the upcoming Easter holiday are taking a lot of my time, so I’m not getting as much writing done as I’d hoped. There will be one more chapter this week, posted on Thursday, 3/24, and then I’ll be back on a regular posting schedule beginning next Sunday, 3/27. Enjoy the cliffhanger, and I’ll see you on Thursday!
Naegi didn’t know what to think in the face of Kirigiri’s calm declaration. She’d “been found” by a mysterious sixteenth student? Was that bad? Had she been in danger? He stared at the girl’s impassive expression, trying to figure out what she’d meant, but he couldn’t see any clues – no remembered shock, no lingering fear, no hint of anxiety. She might have been describing a shift in the weather, not a potentially game-changing revelation about their imprisonment in Hope’s Peak.

Maybe he’d misunderstood what she’d been saying.

“What do you mean, she found you?” Naegi asked. “What happened?”

“What I told you.” Kirigiri shrugged. “Last night, I waited until it was late enough that the mastermind would assume I was sleeping, and then I left my room to go up to the fourth floor. I’d hoped that by moving at night, I could avoid detection – and at first, it seemed like I’d succeeded. I reached the headmaster’s office and found the door broken.”

“Just like Ogami said it would be,” Naegi said, nodding.

“But I didn’t know how long it would stay that way,” Kirigiri said. “I was surprised that the mastermind left the office open for as long as they did, and I didn’t want to waste the opportunity.” She sighed. “And my haste left me distracted enough to be caught.”

“Was it bad?” Naegi looked her over anxiously, wondering if he’d somehow missed a horrifying injury. “I mean – you don’t look like you’re hurt. Did you get away?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Kirigiri said slowly. “No, I’m not hurt, but I wouldn’t say I ‘got away,’ either. If Mukuro Ikusaba had wanted to kill me, I’m quite certain that I’d be dead. But she chose not to. She let me go.”

Naegi frowned. “So you’re saying she’s dangerous? Did she threaten you?”

“No overtly,” Kirigiri said. “Though she did keep herself quite firmly in my path to the door. But I didn’t need threats to tell she was dangerous. I imagine that it was rather like standing in a room with a tiger – you don’t need to see it pounce to know that it could.”

What kind of girl could inspire that kind of description? Kirigiri was usually very direct and clear-spoken, not inclined towards imaginative language. Naegi envisioned a huge hulk of a girl, with muscles to rival Ogami’s – but even then, he had trouble picturing Kirigiri feeling threatened by such a person. This Mukuro Ikusaba really must have made a strong impression on her.

“What did she do if she didn’t threaten you?” Naegi asked at last, when Kirigiri didn’t elaborate further. “Did she say anything?”
“Oh, yes – she said quite a bit, actually.” Kirigiri’s mouth quirked in what might have been a hint of dark humor. “She was much chattier than I would have expected, for an ally of the mastermind.”

“You think she’s working with the mastermind?” Naegi bit his lip. “Well – I guess she’d probably have to be, if she’s been hiding in the school. She could stay out of our way pretty easily – but I don’t think she could avoid the mastermind’s cameras.”

“That’s part of it,” Kirigiri said. “But the real reason I believe she’s working with the mastermind is because she told me so.”

“She just admitted it?” Naegi asked, startled.

“Yes.” Kirigiri looked off in the distance, her hand clenching tight around the box of bandages from the first aid kit. “I’d only just started going through the headmaster’s desk when I heard a voice beside me. ‘The Boss wouldn’t like that.’ And then, when I looked up – there she was.” The box crumpled under her hand. “I never even heard the door open.”

“You mean she’s been in the headmaster’s office this whole time?” Naegi asked. “Or – did she just happen to be in there last night?”

“She couldn’t have been inside when I arrived at all,” Kirigiri said sharply. “I looked around when I entered, and that office doesn’t have a place for a full-grown student to hide. No, Ikusaba snuck up on me somehow.”

Naegi frowned. Of all the students in the school, Kirigiri was by far the most observant. Even the smallest details didn’t get past her. He couldn’t count the number of times she’d set him in the right direction of some tiny clue or hint that he might have overlooked in his own investigation. If she hadn’t noticed Ikusaba approaching – well, then either the headmaster’s desk had been unbelievably distracting, or Ikusaba was even more dangerous than he’d thought.

“You must have been pretty startled to get caught like that,” Naegi said. “Especially by someone you didn’t know.”

“It was unnerving, yes.” Kirigiri’s lips tightened. “More than you realize. It wasn’t just that she caught me unawares. She’d taken pains to conceal her appearance, and it left her looking rather – alarming.”

“You mean – like a mask?” Naegi asked.

“Yes, she had a full-face mask on, but that wasn’t all,” Kirigiri said. “Almost every inch of her skin had been hidden – long sleeves, heavy pants, gloves, and a bulky coat over all of it. Even her voice had an odd tone to it – like she was speaking outside her natural pitch.” She shook her head. “I don’t know if I would even be able to identify her if I saw her again without the disguise. I hope I would – but I can’t be certain.”

“That seems weird,” Naegi said slowly. “Why would she need to wear a disguise when we’re all trapped in here? I mean, she’s still going to be the only one we don’t recognize, whether she’s wearing a mask or not.”

“There could be any number of reasons,” Kirigiri said, shrugging. “It might simply be something the mastermind ordered her to do if she ever had to interact with us.”

“So – the mastermind sent her after you?” Naegi asked. “Is that what she said?”

“No,” Kirigiri said. “Actually, she rather implied that the mastermind didn’t know she’d come after
“What do you mean?”

Instead of replying right away, Kirigiri turned and glanced back at the bathhouse door again, as if she thought it might have opened itself while they were speaking. It seemed unlike her to double-check her own actions like that – but then again, if there really was a sneaky sixteenth student creeping around the school, maybe that was justified paranoia.

Kirigiri looked back down at the box of bandages crumpled in her hand, tugging it open and pulling out a second bandage. She leaned forward to press it to his cheek just below the first one, as if to anchor it in place. With her head tilted near his own, she was able to whisper directly into his ear, so softly that even someone a yard away couldn’t have deciphered the words.

“Mukuro Ikusaba told me that she might be willing to turn on the mastermind.”

Chapter End Notes

Regular updates will resume this Sunday!
Chapter 108

Chapter Summary

Kirigiri tells Naegi about Ikusaba's offer to help them fight against the mastermind.

Naegi wasn’t sure what he’d expected Kirigiri to say that Ikusaba had done – but making an offer to betray the mastermind hadn’t even been on the list. “You mean she’d work with us instead? She’d help us escape?”

“She might,” Kirigiri stressed. “According to her, she’s somewhat limited in what she can do without alerting the mastermind to her actions. She indicated that if the mastermind found out that we were receiving her assistance, the results could be – unfortunate for everyone.”

The end of the last class trial flashed before Naegi’s eyes – the firing squad, Alter Ego’s shattered remains, Asahina’s crumpled body. And when it came down to it, all that had only been for some fairly minor rule-breaking. Just how seriously would the mastermind take a bigger threat to their control?

“Yeah, she shouldn’t risk giving herself away,” Naegi agreed grimly. A thought occurred to him. “But – wait, wouldn’t the mastermind know she was talking to you? Or are there not any cameras in the headmaster’s office?”

“No, there were cameras in there just like the rest of the school,” Kirigiri said. “But she seemed confident that the mastermind wasn’t watching at the time.”

“How could she have known that?” Naegi asked. “Are there limits on the way the mastermind can watch us?”

“If I understood her correctly, I think that may be right,” Kirigiri said. “She knew a great deal about all of us – our actions, our conversations, things that a student in hiding shouldn’t have been aware of.”

“So – if she knows all that, then you think she’s the one watching us through the cameras?” Naegi frowned. “I thought the mastermind was doing that themselves.”

“That was the obvious conclusion,” Kirigiri said, shrugging. “But it was by no means certain. It’s possible that the mastermind has more critical tasks to accomplish, while Ikusaba acts as the observer.”

“Then maybe the mastermind isn’t in the school, after all,” Naegi said. “I mean, if Ikusaba is working for them, they wouldn’t even need to be here.”

“Possibly,” Kirigiri said. “But if that’s the case, there’s probably some kind of monitoring system in place so that the mastermind can check on Ikusaba – but no such system could be perfect. It would have to rely on some level of trust between the mastermind and their ally – a trust that Ikusaba seems willing to exploit.”

The thought of encouraging betrayal sent an uncomfortable twinge through Naegi’s conscience – but if anyone deserved to have their allies turn on them, it was someone as monstrous as the
mastermind. How many friends had the mastermind’s ploys turned against one another already? Every murder had seen trust brutally violated and loyalty undone.

Which brought up another puzzling question for Naegi. “But if the mastermind trusts Ikusaba with that kind of responsibility, she must have been part of this plan right from the start. Why would she turn on the mastermind now?”

“I wondered the same thing,” Kirigiri said. “After all, it does sound quite unlikely that the mastermind’s ally would turn on them now, immediately after we lost our last lead. It sounded highly suspicious to me – so I asked her about it.”

“What did she say?” Naegi asked. “Was the mastermind threatening her, like with Ogami?”

“Nothing quite so simple,” Kirigiri said. “She did work with the mastermind willingly, at least for a time – but she didn’t start out believing in their cause.” She looked away, tapping a pensive finger against her cheek as she spoke. “She claimed that she had been kidnapped a number of years ago, by a mercenary group called Fenrir.”

“What?” Naegi stared at her blankly. “Why would a mercenary group kidnap a kid?”

“She didn’t say,” Kirigiri said. “But that much of her story did seem to check out. Fenrir is a real mercenary group – quite a well-known organization, if you’re familiar with such things. All the members can be identified by a tattoo somewhere on their body of the mythological wolf Fenrir.”

Somehow, Naegi wasn’t all that surprised that Kirigiri would know details about shadowy mercenary groups. “And Ikusaba had one of those tattoos?”

Kirigiri nodded. “She raised the hem of her shirt just enough for me to identify it. I hadn’t seen the tattoo in person before, but it matched what I knew of it. Ikusaba does seem to have been a member of Fenrir at some point in the past.”

“Then does that mean they’re the ones doing all this?”

“I don’t think so,” Kirigiri said. “Not the Fenrir group as it used to be, anyway. Shortly before we arrived here, the Fenrir organization ceased all mercenary work – no one has been able to confirm if it still exists at all. If Ikusaba is to be believed, the remaining members have been recruited into another group – the Ultimate Despair.”

“Right – that’s what you called Ikusaba before,” Naegi said. “But I thought you meant that despair was her Ultimate talent.”

Kirigiri shrugged. “Maybe it was – or maybe the name was simply a jab at the school’s pretentious naming convention. Determining the root of the group’s name wasn’t my priority at the time. I was much more concerned with what Ikusaba’s involvement with Fenrir had to do with her alliance with the mastermind.”

Naegi nodded slowly. “Did she explain it to you?”

“She tried,” Kirigiri said. “She went on for a while about brainwashing and military indoctrination and other things along those lines. According to her, it weakened when Fenrir broke up – and after weeks on her own, watching us day in and day out, the brainwashing snapped entirely. We want to get out of here – and so does she.”

Well, that made sense. Naegi was pretty sure that if he’d been dragged from one evil organization to another and then shoved into a school to watch teenagers murder each other, he’d just want to
Kirigiri didn’t answer right away, staring silently off into the distance like she was watching the scene play out again. After a long moment, she sighed. “The story she told me added up well – too well for it to be entirely a fabrication. The question is whether her offer of assistance is genuine – or if she’s acting on the mastermind’s orders. I don’t know why the mastermind would want her to do such a thing, though.”

“As a trap to distract us from a real escape attempt?” Naegi suggested. “I mean, isn’t that why they gave us the data Alter Ego decrypted?”

“But the data never had any real information that we could use against the mastermind,” Kirigiri said. “Ikusaba does. Even if the offer of aid is a fake, Ikusaba clearly knows a lot about the mastermind’s plans – more than she’s told me so far. Even if she’s attempting to manipulate us, it’s possible that by working with her directly, she could let something useful slip.”

“And if she’s telling the truth, this could be the chance we’ve been waiting for,” Naegi said.

“Exactly,” Kirigiri said. “It doesn’t matter whether I believe Ikusaba or not – we can’t let this opportunity pass us by.”
Kirigiri and Naegi discuss a plan for working with Ikusaba.

Naegi knew that Kirigiri’s declaration only confirmed what had been inevitable all along – of course they would work with this Mukuro Ikusaba against the mastermind. If they wanted to keep moving towards any chance of escape, what other choice did they have?

“All right,” Naegi said, squarely meeting Kirigiri’s eyes. “If we’re going to work with Ikusaba, then what does she want us to do?”

Kirigiri looked at him for a long moment, as if evaluating his response, then nodded to herself. “Ikusaba has access to quite a few of the locked areas in the school, but due to her role as the mastermind’s operative, she hasn’t been able to explore them as thoroughly as she would have liked. Leaving her post repeatedly would draw the mastermind’s attention to her actions, especially if she couldn’t provide them with an adequate explanation. But she suspects that at least one of these locked areas has some kind of leverage that we could use against the mastermind.”

“Leverage? What, like blackmail or something?” Naegi asked, frowning.

“Presumably,” Kirigiri said. “She seemed to have something specific in mind, but she didn’t tell me what it was.” Her mouth quirked up in a strange smile. “She wasn’t willing to trust me entirely either, it seems.”

“So we’re supposed to hunt around for information she already has?” Naegi demanded indignantly. “She could just tell us!”

“But without hard evidence, we’d only have her word on the matter – and we can’t use that against the mastermind,” Kirigiri said. “In any case, investigating without someone else’s guidance is actually my preferred approach. When searching for clues, it’s better to go in with as few preconceived notions as possible. That way, we’ll know our conclusions are our own.”

Naegi grimaced. He wouldn’t mind just being handed the right answer so that they could put this mess behind them as soon as possible – but he supposed he saw Kirigiri’s point. If Ikusaba just told them everything they’d need to know, it would be ridiculously easy for her to manipulate them into believing whatever she pleased. But that didn’t make it any less frustrating.

“So she didn’t even give you a hint about what we’d be looking for?” Naegi asked. “What if we don’t recognize it when we see it?”

Kirigiri shrugged. “We’ll just have to make sure we pay attention. But if it’s something that could be used against the mastermind, it should be difficult to miss.”

“I guess.” Naegi frowned, another thought occurring to him. “But – wait. Wait. If Ikusaba has been working with the mastermind right from the start – then she’d know who they are!”

“She does,” Kirigiri confirmed. “Or at least, she claims that she does.”
Naegi stared at her, not quite daring to believe it. For weeks, they’d been trapped and forced to murder one another without knowing the real reason they’d been put in this situation. He’d wondered time and again about the kind of person who could have been behind this horrible game. Were they finally going to get an answer?

“Well?” he prompted, when Kirigiri didn’t go on. “What did she say?”

But Kirigiri shook her head. “She didn’t tell me – not yet. She said that she didn’t dare – that naming the mastermind now would put her in too much danger.”

“How would it put her in more danger than what she already told you?” Naegi asked, puzzled.

“I can think of several reasons,” Kirigiri said. “And the possibility that this is all a trick is still one of the most likely. But if it isn’t – well, I suppose we’ll find out. She’s promised that she’ll tell me, once I’ve proven myself.”

“Proven?” Naegi echoed, not liking the sound of that at all. “Proven how?”

“By starting to investigate the locked areas of the school,” Kirigiri said. “Once I start going out of bounds like that, I’ll be committed to the investigation. If the mastermind were to find out, they would see me as a real threat to their plans.”

“But what if they retaliate?” Naegi asked. “We’d be breaking the rules –”

“Technically, none of the rules would be broken,” Kirigiri said, shaking her head. “It says right in the school regulations that we’re free to explore and try to solve the mystery with minimal restrictions – so any action that doesn’t break another rule should be allowed.”

“But it would break a rule!” The memory of Asahina burned before Naegi’s eyes. “You said those areas of the school are locked – and Asahina got punished for breaking the lock on Ogami’s door even though she wasn’t the one who actually did it.”

“Yes, but the point there was that the lock was broken,” Kirigiri said. “I won’t need to break anything. Ikusaba has a key for these areas.”

Naegi frowned. Using a key wouldn’t violate the rule about broken doors – but there was still something about this that he didn’t like. “But what happens if the mastermind finds out about this and decides to punish us anyway?”

“Then we’ll have learned something valuable,” Kirigiri said. “In a moment of crisis, will the mastermind keep to their own rules or adhere to them no matter what? Their response to a genuine threat could be enlightening as to their real goal.”

Naegi stared at Kirigiri, seeing nothing but calm determination written across her face as she spoke about the mastermind’s possible retaliation against her. Didn’t she understand what might happen if she’d guessed wrong about what the mastermind might do? “But what if –”

“If you spend all your time trying to avoid danger, you’ll never move forward,” Kirigiri interrupted, looking him straight in the eye. “If the risk means solving the mystery, we have no choice.”

Kirigiri’s words hit Naegi like a physical blow, a painful echo of another argument he’d had mere hours ago. 

Even if I have to take some risks to fight against the mastermind, I refuse to watch my friends lose
His own words echoed in his head, and for the first time, Naegi truly understood what it felt like to hear that sentiment out loud. Solving the mastermind’s mysteries mattered to Kirigiri – so much that she would rather take the risk of dying than continue in this twisted limbo. It was so easy to see how this could destroy her – but that wasn’t enough to make her turn aside. A helpless fear seeped through Naegi’s veins, clenching his hands into useless fists as he thought about everything he couldn’t do.

Was this how Togami had felt this morning, when Naegi had told him the same thing? Had he been overcome with the dread that Naegi was feeling now?

No, Naegi knew it wouldn’t have been like this for Togami – it would have been worse. Kirigiri was his friend, and he did care about her – but not the way Togami had cared for him. The heir had made no secret of the fact that he valued Naegi’s wellbeing very highly – and Naegi hadn’t taken that into account at all when he’d told Togami about the risks he’d taken. And just like Naegi knew he couldn’t stop Kirigiri from acting on her decision, Togami would have felt powerless to stop the pain being inflicted on him.

Maybe he owed Togami an apology. Not the desperate babbling he’d offered at first, when he hadn’t fully grasped what had gone wrong, or the angry justifications of his actions that had only made things worse – but an apology for not understanding how his words and actions would affect someone who cared for him.

Naegi shook his head sharply, pushing those thoughts away. He’d consider what he ought to say to Togami later on. For now, Kirigiri needed him to focus on helping her.

“I think you’re right,” he said at last. “We need to take this risk.”
Naegi and Kirigiri begin to put Ikusaba's plan into motion.

Kirigiri breathed out a long sigh, like his answer had lifted a weight from her shoulders. “I’m glad you understand. I would have continued to investigate without your help – but it will be easier with you.”

Naegi couldn’t help but smile a little at that affirmation of their partnership. Kirigiri spent so much time masking her thoughts that he couldn’t always tell how she really felt about his assistance. He knew she wouldn’t have bothered working with him if he’d been a hindrance – but it was nice to know that she actually thought he could help.

“Okay,” he said, nodding decisively. “So which of the locked areas are we going to first?”

But Kirigiri shook her head. “We aren’t going to any of the locked areas.”

Naegi blinked at her. “But you just said –”

“Do you honestly think you’re up to going anywhere other than to bed?” Kirigiri cut him off with a stern frown. “Sitting down for a few minutes may have let you catch your breath, but the minute you get up, you’ll be right back where you started.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Or are you going to try to pretend you can climb all the way up those stairs again?”

Naegi’s head ached at the thought of attempting even a few steps, let alone the many flights of stairs between them and the locked areas of the school. And even if he could manage to get to wherever they were going – what then? An entire day of investigation had left him too tired to be much use.

“But I thought you wanted my help,” he said.

“I do,” Kirigiri said. “I need you to draw Monokuma’s attention while I sneak into the areas of the school that Ikusaba has unlocked.”

“But if Ikusaba is helping us, why would we need to distract her?” Naegi asked, frowning.

“I don’t know if she’s the one who has actually been operating Monokuma,” Kirigiri said. “That may have been the mastermind themselves, or the two of them may trade off as needed. She didn’t have time to address every detail of the mastermind’s plot. But I think that forcing someone to use Monokuma to interact with you would limit their ability to observe what else is happening at that time.”

“How would it do that?” Naegi asked.

“Ikusaba implied that there are limitations to her ability to observe us,” Kirigiri explained. “I’m almost positive one of them is tied to using Monokuma to interact with us. From the way she spoke, it sounded as though it isn’t possible to monitor us and control Monokuma at the same time. If Monokuma is the mastermind, drawing their attention would distract them. If he’s Ikusaba, it
will provide her with a plausible reason for missing my actions.”

“I guess.” Kirigiri’s explanation did make logical sense, but Naegi couldn’t help worrying about it. “But – look, the last time we tried to distract the mastermind, it failed. Do you really want to try the same thing that got Alter Ego killed?”

Kirigiri went still, closing her eyes. “I’m not planning on dying,” she said, her voice so soft that Naegi had to lean forward to hear her. “The mastermind may have beaten me last time – but now, I know where I went wrong. This time, I won’t lose.”

Naegi stared at her, wondering just what was lurking behind that calm face and faint smile. When she said that she wouldn’t lose to the mastermind, he believed her – but that didn’t reassure him as much as he would have thought. This girl would fight to the bitter end to find the truth she sought – and woe betide anyone who got in her way. Naegi shivered at the chill of her smile – he was glad not to be on the wrong side of that expression.

“So – all you need is for me to get Monokuma’s attention?” Naegi asked at last. He sighed. “It doesn’t sound like very much help – not when you’re going to be sneaking into dangerous territory. I just wish there was something else I could do.”

Kirigiri opened her eyes, frowning at him. “Of course there’s something else. Haven’t you realized it yet?”

“Um.” Naegi blinked at her. “No?”

“I need you to be my failsafe in case something goes wrong,” Kirigiri said, as though it should be obvious. “This plan’s risks are worthwhile because any outcome has a gain for us – but those gains are only valuable if someone knows about them. As I said, I don’t intend to die during this plan – but I’ve been wrong before. If I’ve miscalculated, at least one of the people left behind will need to know the truth.”

“You mean – if Ikusaba is trying to trick you?” Naegi asked.

Kirigiri nodded. “She specifically instructed me not to tell anyone else about her. She claimed to want to limit the chance that it would get back to the mastermind.”

“Then – if she’s really going to work with us, wouldn’t she get mad that you told me?” Naegi asked.

“And if she isn’t, this could go very poorly for me,” Kirigiri said. “And besides – I want to trust you, Naegi.” She looked away, a hint of pink rising in her cheeks at the admission. “I hope that I can.”

“Of course you can!” Naegi assured her at once. “I’m not going to turn on you. We’re working against the mastermind together!”

“I thought you’d say that.” The smile that touched Kirigiri’s lips seemed a little sad – or maybe it was just Naegi’s imagination. After all, why would Kirigiri be sad about his answer? He’d been working with her almost from the start of their imprisonment here. After all the plans they’d already tried, what else would he say?

All the plans – including the last one, involving the fake murder plot and leading to Alter Ego’s death. The entire thing had been a disaster, and after Monokuma’s malicious revelation to Togami in the ruined classroom, the fallout wasn’t over yet. Naegi didn’t want to repeat those mistakes, not if there was a way to avoid them.
“Uh – Kirigiri?” he asked hesitantly. “I know that secrecy is important here, but – well, what would you think about having more than one person to be your failsafe?”

She stared at him blankly for a moment, until her expression shifted into something stiffer. “You want to tell Togami about this.”

Naegi nodded. “Well – yes. I think after what happened today, we all saw why we shouldn’t hide things from each other.”

“We also saw that he’s incredibly irrational when it comes to you,” Kirigiri said tartly. “This plan will dangerous enough without his dramatics.”

“But he only got so upset because I didn’t tell him something important, and Monokuma used it against us,” Naegi argued. “Look, I know this is your secret, not mine, so I won’t tell him if you really don’t want me to – but all of us are stronger when we work together. The mastermind can’t turn us against each other if we don’t leave them anything to exploit.”

“That’s… true,” Kirigiri agreed reluctantly. “And Togami is intelligent, when he bothers to look past his own arrogance. I wouldn’t necessarily object to involving him – but only if he’s capable of being reasonable about it. I don’t want to deal with another round of him screaming about how this is all part of my evil plan to murder you.”

“I don’t see how he could think that,” Naegi said. “You’re the one who’ll be taking the risk this time.” He bit his lip. “So – it’s okay to tell him about it?”

Kirigiri sighed. “Fine – if you really must. But make sure he understands that he has to be careful about it. This is too important for him to disrupt because you two are having a spat.”

“Right,” Naegi said, nodding hastily. “I’ll be sure to explain that.”

“Okay.” Kirigiri stood and headed for the bathhouse door. “Then if there’s nothing else you need to say, I’m going on ahead.” She looked over her shoulder at him, just before leaving the room. “The rest is up to you.”
Naegi sat in the bathhouse locker room for a moment after Kirigiri walked out, trying to give her enough time to prepare before he drew Monokuma’s attention. If he was supposed to provide her with a distraction, he wanted to be sure she had as much time as possible to do what she needed.

Maybe he should have asked her how long he should wait before beginning, or how long a distraction she thought she might need. Now that Kirigiri had left, dozens of questions he should have asked her kept popping up in his head – but it was too late to get answers. He’d just have to do his best, and hope that it would be enough.

He’d probably given her enough time by now – maybe even too long. Naegi struggled to his feet, bracing himself for the rush of dizziness that rocked through his body as he stood. Yes, Kirigiri had definitely been right – there was no way he could have helped her investigate, not like this. He would have liked to be able to do more to help – but since he wasn’t up to it, he’d just have to focus on what he could do.

Once he’d passed through the bathhouse door to return to the main part of the first floor, Naegi braced himself against the wall, trying to ignore the painful knot in his stomach. He wouldn’t mess this up. Everything was going to be fine. He repeated those thoughts just one more time, then looked up towards the closest camera.

“Hey, Monokuma! You can see me, right? Get out here!”

He’d tried his best to sound confident and stern, but even to his own ears, his voice wavered from the lingering effects of exhaustion. Even standing was getting difficult. Maybe he should have tried to do this somewhere that he would be able to sit down?

Well, it was too late to worry about that now. Before Naegi could think about moving, Monokuma came bounding out to land a little too close in front of him, grinning widely.

“Well, well, well – I never expected you to call me out, Naegi!” he said brightly. “Do you want someone to gossip with about your steamy little midnight rendezvous?”

“Uh – what?” Naegi frowned, looking nervously at the bear in front of him. Trying to follow Monokuma’s ramblings was always tricky – but tonight, it was worse than ever before.

As he stared at Monokuma, Naegi couldn’t stop his thoughts from wandering back to one of the first questions he’d had when they first arrived here – just who was the person talking to them through this strange stuffed animal? Was he talking to Mukuro Ikusaba, the girl who had approached Kirigiri and offered her aid? Or was this the true mastermind, the one who’d been behind this entire bizarre scheme of murders and kidnapping? He wished there were some kind of signal, some sort of tell to let him know just who was talking –

But of course there couldn’t be. Even if this was Ikusaba, she’d told Kirigiri not to tell anyone
about her existence. If she found out that Naegi knew, who knew how she’d react? At the very least, she could take back her offer to help – but she could easily do so much worse. She’d only have to say a word to the mastermind, and they’d be finished – especially now, at the very moment that Kirigiri was sneaking into a secret part of the school.

No, even if this really was Ikusaba and not the mastermind, that didn’t make it any safer. Naegi still had to manage a good distraction, one that wouldn’t reveal what Kirigiri had told him.

Fortunately, Monokuma didn’t seem to notice Naegi’s distraction – or maybe he just chalked it up to Naegi’s injuries.

“Oh, I think you know what I mean,” Monokuma said, leaning forward as if to whisper confidentially. “You and Kirigiri? In the bathhouse? Just the two of you? In the middle of the night?” A few droplets of sweat beaded along his face. “I bet it was getting pretty hot in there, huh?”

“What? No!” Naegi couldn’t stop his eyes from darting in the direction of the dormitories, to make sure that Togami hadn’t suddenly materialized in the hall to overhear Monokuma’s insinuations. “It wasn’t anything like that!”

“Aw, are you sure?” Monokuma tilted his head inquisitively. “And here I thought you were going to try to catch them all!” His grin widened, and something about it made Naegi wish he hadn’t decided to stand with his back to the wall. “If you collect the full set, you might just fulfil the requirements to unlock a super duper secret hidden character!”

Naegi grimaced. It was hard enough to follow Monokuma’s rambling even when his head didn’t spin with every movement. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, figuring it was a pretty safe response to whatever the bear meant.

“You don’t? Too bad!” Monokuma heaved a sigh. “Well, whatever. Unlike you, I have absolutely no interest in late night bath scenes. I like to maintain a healthy life of observation, far away from X-rated X-ploits!”

Naegi snorted at that blatant lie. “Sure. Except for those recordings of Togami and me.”

“Well, you can’t expect me to ignore it when it’s right under my nose!” Monokuma shook his head. “It’s so upsetting for a headmaster to see his students acting out that way, you know? It just makes me shudder every single time I see it.”

“Wait – every time?” A chill crept down the back of Naegi’s spine. “You mean you still have the recordings?”

“Of course!” Monokuma beamed at him. “All the grown-ups need something blood-pumping to watch after the kiddies are in bed – and there’s nothing else on television these days!” He threw his head back and laughed wildly.

Naegi felt his stomach lurch, and not just from the lingering dizziness. The mastermind had kept those recordings – and watched them? More than once? He felt like something slimy had begun dripping down his neck, and an involuntary shudder rocked through him.

“You have to get rid of those recordings,” Naegi said, glaring at Monokuma and trying to ignore the flush creeping up his cheeks. “You can’t just keep watching them!”

“Huh? I can’t?” Monokuma asked, sounding puzzled. “Oh, I see, I see – you’re saying that you want them! Is that it? Do you need something to get you through the long, lonely nights?” He
grinned. “Is that why you called me out here? Because I’m more than happy to give you all the copies that you want!”

“No – no, that wasn’t it,” Naegi said. “I just don’t want to think about you *watching* that.”

“You don’t?” Monokuma tilted his head. “Okay.”

Naegi blinked at the simple, uncomplicated agreement. “Just – like that?”

“Of course!” Monokuma said brightly. “I’m a very accommodating headmaster. You don’t want to think about what I’m doing behind closed doors? Well, I can help you out with that!” A wide grin spread across his face. “I can give you something *else* to think about!”
Chapter Summary

Monokuma makes Naegi an offer he can't refuse.

Naegi stared at Monokuma, a familiar dread creeping through his veins at the bear’s too-cheerful words. The air itself seemed to grow heavy around him, the same way that it did when Monokuma summoned them all to the gym to hear his latest motive. He didn’t know what Monokuma was about to say – but whatever it was, he knew that it wouldn’t end well.

“That’s okay, really,” Naegi tried to say, hoping that maybe, just this once, Monokuma would change his mind. “You don’t need to give me anything!”

“Huh? But didn’t you go through all the trouble of calling me out because you want something from me?” Monokuma asked. “No, no, you don’t need to be shy about it – I understand! You called me in the middle of the night because you just couldn’t wait another second to get your paws on one of these!”

With a wild flourish, Monokuma waved his arm to produce a thin, shiny piece of paper, pinched between his gleaming claws.

Naegi eyed the paper with trepidation, remembering all too well the other dangerous documents Monokuma had distributed in the past. “What’s that?”

“Aha, so your interest piques at the sight of it!” Monokuma laughed. “I’ll have you know that this is the rarest of rare items, the highly coveted prize bestowed only after a mortal has truly proven themselves worthy – the legendary trip ticket! This fabulous prize can be redeemed for the opportunity to whisk the student of your choice away for a full-day bonding experience!”

Naegi blinked. “That’s it?” With the way Monokuma had been building the ticket up, he’d been expecting something much flashier. Unless… “Wait, what do you mean, ‘away?’” His breath caught in his throat. “Could we use that ticket to – to leave?”

“Better!” Monokuma said brightly. “The trip tickets can take you to such exciting locations as – the garden! The music room! The school store! And many more of the exciting Hope’s Peak locations, all for the low low price of just one million Mono-coins!”

Naegi sighed, shoulders slumping back against the wall. He should have known that an idea like that would be too good to be true. “No thanks.”

“What’s that? You don’t want one?” Monokuma had the nerve to look shocked at the very idea.

“Well, I can go to the garden or any of those other places any time I want, even if I don’t have a ticket,” Naegi said, shrugging.

“But it wouldn’t have the thrill of going on a trip!” Monokuma said. “Just imagine how much more exciting the cafeteria could be if you and a special someone spent all day there!”

“Why would I want to sit around in the cafeteria all day?” Naegi asked blankly.
A slow grin spread over Monokuma’s face. “Oh, I see what you’re doing. You thought you could get one over on your headmaster – but you can’t fool me!”

A burst of icy terror flooded Naegi. Did that mean Monokuma had worked out that Naegi was trying to distract him from Kirigiri? Or worse – what if Ikusaba’s claims about how the cameras worked had been wrong? The mastermind might have been watching both Kirigiri and Naegi right from the start, and now he’d worked out what they were trying to do –

“You’re trying to negotiate!” Monokuma laughed. “I shouldn’t underestimate you – you’re so much smarter than you look! All right, if that’s how you want to play it, then take this!” He flicked his wrist, and a second ticket split out from the first. “Two for the price of one!”

Naegi tried not to look like he was breathing a visible sigh of relief that this was all Monokuma had meant. “Uh, still no,” he said. “Sorry. I don’t have a million Mono-coins.”

“And you’d let a little thing like that force you to pass on this opportunity of a lifetime?” Monokuma asked with a horrified gasp.

“Uh – yes?”

“How about if I sweeten the pot?” Yet another ticket fanned out from between Monokuma’s claws. “Count ‘em – that’s one, two, three amazing trip tickets! You won’t find a better deal anywhere in the school, I guarantee!”

Naegi frowned. Was Monokuma going to keep offering him more and more of those worthless tickets until he finally accepted? If that was the case, Naegi was starting to think he might as well just give in and take the things before Monokuma decided his refusals weren’t entertaining anymore – if it weren’t for the price tag. Sure, he’d been collecting the coins he’d been finding scattered throughout the school, but he doubted he’d even found a hundred, let alone a million. And agreeing to pay Monokuma money he didn’t have, even if it was in a fake currency, sounded like a dangerous idea.

“I still don’t have that many Mono-coins,” he said. “Offering me more tickets won’t change that.”

“Huh? So you really don’t want to go on a series of heart-throbbing trips?” Monokuma tilted his head. “Or is it that you’re afraid the student you want to go with might not want to spend time with you?”

Naegi couldn’t help the way his thoughts flashed to Togami at those words – the other boy’s hard eyes and cold words, the way he’d stormed off without so much as looking back once. Togami had certainly made it pretty plain that he didn’t want to spend more time with Naegi – but he couldn’t dwell on that right now, not with the way Monokuma was grinning at him. Not when Kirigiri’s safety could depend on his ability to keep Monokuma’s attention.

But before Naegi could respond, Monokuma was nodding to himself with a dark little chuckle. “Oh, I get it now – I see what you’ve been holding out for! All right, then, you’ve got it. Along with these trip tickets, I’ll throw in the ultimate grand prize – an e-handbook upgrade!”

And as Monokuma said it, a sharp jolt came from Naegi’s pocket – the same pocket where he kept his e-handbook.

With suddenly cold fingers, Naegi reached into his pocket to pull out his handbook. He was almost afraid to open it – but he knew it was better to find out the truth. He flipped the cover open, and the words Update In Progress glowed back at him from the screen.
Naegi looked back at Monokuma. “What did you do to it?”

“Oh, nothing much,” Monokuma said. “I just added in a special new feature that will let you enjoy your trip tickets to the fullest – that’s all.”

Naegi decided not to press the issue of the trip tickets again – not in the face of this new, alarming revelation. “What kind of feature? Is it going to explode?”

“Explode?” Monokuma shook his head. “No, no, no, you’d need at least three more upgrades before you unlock the handbook’s explosive capabilities! All I did was add in something extra to help you out – you know, if your boy-toy decides to run off and hide from you again instead of taking advantage of your new prizes!”

“What do you mean?” Naegi asked slowly, not liking the sound of that at all. He might not like it when Togami didn’t want to talk to him – but he definitely didn’t want anything that Monokuma meant him to use to stop that from happening.

“I’ve given your handbook a tracking feature!” Monokuma beamed at him. “Now you’ll know exactly where any other student in the school is, at any time of the day or night! No one will be able to hide from you now!”

Naegi looked reflexively back down at the handbook, just in time to see the Update message clear away. The usual map of the school appeared, but this time, overlaid on it, he could see little icons hovering over different rooms. On the dormitory floor, he could see Ogami, Fukawa, and Togami in their respective rooms, and he could even see himself in the center of the floor, opposite a tiny Monokuma icon.

It looked – useful, actually. Now he wouldn’t have to spend ages searching the school to figure out where any of the other students were. All he’d have to do was look at his map, and then he could go straight to them.

But why would Monokuma do something that would make his life easier? Naegi looked up at Monokuma again, frowning a little. Was it possible that this wasn’t actually the mastermind – that this was Ikusaba? Could this be part of her plan to give them the tools to fight against the mastermind? If so, this would be a really valuable one – he could even use it to keep track of Kirigiri when she was doing the dangerous work of her investigation.

In that case, maybe he ought to stop arguing so hard against it. Maybe he ought to just accept what Monokuma was offering and pretend he didn’t realize the implications.

Naegi took a deep breath, then looked back at Monokuma and smiled. “You’re right, this does look like a good upgrade.”

“I knew you’d see it my way!” Monokuma threw his head back and laughed. “I’ll put the bill on your tab. Enjoy your trips!”

And with that, Monokuma disappeared, the three tickets fluttering to the ground where he’d stood.
Naegi returns to his room to consider the items Monokuma forced him to take.

Naegi winced, looking at the spot where Monokuma had been standing. He hadn’t actually meant to chase the bear away – not when he didn’t know whether Kirigiri had finished her investigation or not. Had that been a long enough distraction to keep her safe? He hoped so – calling Monokuma back so soon would look really suspicious. Besides, he was a little worried that if he kept talking to Monokuma, he'd end up with a dozen worthless tickets and a handbook that could shoot lasers.

Naegi looked down at the tickets that lay scattered innocently across the floor. He was pretty sure that Togami and Kirigiri would both tell him to leave the tickets alone, but he wasn’t sure if he should. Yes, they’d come from Monokuma – but he still didn’t know if that meant the mastermind or Ikusaba.

Whoever had been speaking through Monokuma, they’d made such a big point of giving the tickets to him – more than it seemed like the tickets deserved. Had Monokuma just been taking the opportunity to mock him while leading up to the handbook upgrade, or was there something about the tickets that he was missing? Maybe they weren’t as useless as they seemed.

Either way, he probably shouldn’t leave things just lying around on the ground in the common areas of the school if he didn’t want them – that would be messy. These were just a few papers, after all – he could easily throw them out if they turned out to be useless or dangerous.

He braced a hand against the wall and stooped slowly down to pick up the tickets from the ground, trying to ignore the way it made his head spin. Was the dizziness getting worse? No, it was probably just that he was overtired and needed to rest. He’d be fine in the morning, he was sure of it.

Tucking the tickets into one of his pockets, Naegi began the trek back across the hall towards the dorm rooms. After all the walking he’d done today, these last few steps shouldn’t have been difficult – that was what he kept telling himself. His dorm room wasn’t so far away, not after walking back and forth across the whole fifth floor, or climbing all those stairs. So there was no reason for him to fall heavily against the wall beside his room, clutching at the doorknob in a desperate attempt to keep himself upright.

His shoulder screamed in protest as most of his weight fell on it for a moment, but at least he managed to avoid falling to the ground this time. That had to mean he was moving in the right direction, didn’t it? After all, when he’d been overcome by the sight of the ruined classroom earlier today, he hadn’t been able to stop himself from collapsing. He would have hit the ground pretty painfully, if it hadn’t been for Togami.

Naegi’s eyes drifted across the hall, and just for a moment, he let himself fantasize about what might happen if he walked across to ring Togami’s bell. He envisioned the door opened by a boy who was surprised but welcoming, wearing the same soft smile Naegi had woken up to during the past week. Naegi would blurt out an apology for everything that had happened, only to hear Togami saying the exact same thing. They would stop, and laugh, and then at last he could fall.
forward into Togami’s arms, where he fit so perfectly that he couldn’t understand why he hadn’t
been there all his life. He could relax, just for a few minutes, trusting that there, with this person, he
would be safe.

Except that safety was just an illusion here at Hope’s Peak, as cruel and painful as that daydream.
Naegi closed his eyes against it, trying to ignore the dampness at the edges of his eyes. He
shouldn’t let himself sit around in the hallway dreaming about everything just magically being
fixed – not when he knew it wouldn’t work that way.

Togami was almost certainly asleep, and he’d just be annoyed if Naegi rang his doorbell now. He
probably wouldn’t even answer it – but if he did, he’d be in no mood for a tender reconciliation.
Naegi could still see the expression on the other boy’s face, just before he’d turned and stormed
out of the entrance hall after the nighttime announcement. His eyes had turned to ice, as cold and
haughty as the first time they’d met – like Naegi wasn’t even worth his attention anymore.

But if that was how he really felt, then why had he caught Naegi before he could collapse? Why
had he taken the time to help Naegi down the stairs instead of rushing ahead with Kirigiri? He’d
said it was to avoid the inconvenience of Naegi being injured – but was that really the only reason?
Even with the short time they’d had together, Naegi had fairly easily been able to spot that Togami
was much more inclined to share his negative feelings. If he’d had other, more sentimental reasons
for helping Naegi – then maybe he wouldn’t have said anything about them?

Naegi shook his head, then regretted it as the resulting wave of dizziness washed through him,
strongly enough to leave his vision blurred and wavering. This situation was too complicated for
him to think about now. He probably couldn’t even trust any conclusions that he came to when he
was this out of it – it wasn’t a stretch to think that the dizziness that altered his balance and vision
might also impact his reasoning ability.

And if that was the case, he definitely shouldn’t try to talk to Togami now. He shuddered to think
what he might say if he tried to talk to the heir when he was feeling fuzzy. Yes, he owed Togami
an apology and an explanation – but that could wait for the morning. His head had to be better by
then.

Naegi resolutely turned away from Togami’s door, unlocking his own room and slipping inside.
He made sure to remember to lock his own door, nodding to himself as he tucked his room key
away. Togami’s accusations about his recklessness were unfounded – Naegi could remember to
take precautions for his own safety when he tried.

Naegi stumbled across the room towards his bed, ready to collapse onto it at last. The thought of
trying to do much more than strip off his jacket and hoodie was beyond him, even if he’d probably
regret sleeping in his clothes when morning rolled around. He’d regret it even more if trying to
change into pajamas was just one push too far, and he ended up spending the night passed out on
the floor.

But as he lay down on the bed, Naegi found sleep elusive, no matter how exhausted he was. He
couldn’t stop his mind from drifting back to Kirigiri’s plan to investigate. Had he bought her
enough time? Had she really been able to get into any of the hidden areas of the school?

Well, now he had a way to check. Naegi sat up and took his handbook from his desk, flipping it
open to display the map. The only change to the dormitory floor was that Naegi’s icon had moved
to his room – Kirigiri still hadn’t returned. Well, maybe she was still investigating. Naegi began
flipping through the maps of the other floors, carefully checking each one.

But by the time he’d gone through the whole school, Naegi was frowning. He hadn’t seen Kirigiri
anywhere, not on any of the maps. Had he just missed her – or did that mean something much worse?

No, he was getting ahead of himself. Just because Kirigiri wasn’t showing up on the map, it didn’t necessarily mean anything bad had happened to her. He’d gotten the map from Monokuma, after all – that meant that it was showing information the mastermind had. And if Kirigiri wasn’t on it, then maybe that just meant she’d gone somewhere that the mastermind couldn’t see. They’d already found two areas in the school where the mastermind couldn’t watch them – maybe whatever locked area she’d found was another place that was off the mastermind’s radar.

But no matter how many possibilities Naegi’s mind conjured, he couldn’t shake the lingering worry that something had gone horribly wrong. He checked through the maps again, and then another time, hoping that this time, Kirigiri’s icon would reappear, tangible proof that everything really had been all right.

But every time he checked, the other floors remained stubbornly empty. Naegi wasn’t sure how long he sat up paging through the maps until he finally lost the battle against exhaustion – but through all of it, Kirigiri never reappeared.
Chapter 114

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to reassess his priorities.

When the morning announcement sounded, Togami had already been awake for quite some time. He’d spent more time staring at the ceiling last night than sleeping, trying to ignore the empty space in the bed beside him. He’d thought it was bad enough during the enforced separation, when the others had conspired to keep Naegi away from him.

It should have been easier now, since this time, Naegi’s absence was through Togami’s own choice, instead of being forced on him from the outside. But instead, it was unaccountably so much worse. The bedsheets lay cold against his skin without another person to warm them, no matter how many layers he used. No matter how he tossed and turned, no position was comfortable enough, not compared to the feeling of curling up around the other boy. The fact that he’d been the one to choose to remove those things from his own life did nothing to ease the ache of not having them.

And the worst part of it all was that he couldn’t shake the lingering question that had occurred to him last night – what if his decision had been wrong?

A mere month ago, before he’d arrived at Hope’s Peak, the idea would have been unthinkable. He wasn’t wrong, ever – not about anything. If he made a decision, then that meant that what he’d chosen had to be the best choice, or why else would he have wanted to choose it in the first place? Being wrong was something that happened to other, lesser people – the sort who failed at things, who weren’t able to achieve perfection. The sort of people who lost.

But ever since he’d been imprisoned in this nightmare of a school, the specter of wrong decisions had haunted him. He’d dismissed Naegi when they’d first met, lumping the boy in with the most pathetically average of commoners – only to realize the boy was sharp enough to outwit him where it counted, during those awful trials. He’d been annoyed in their later meetings, calling the boy every insult he could muster – and then he’d seen past the boy’s ordinary exterior to lose his heart to the extraordinary person hidden beneath.

And that miscalculation had cost him. Because of it, he’d had to eat his own words about committing a successful murder and winning the game, acknowledging a change in position that had shown personal failure. Maybe Celeste had been right when she’d said that his attachment to Naegi had weakened him.

It had certainly made him appear to be an easy target. During the last two trials. Celeste had tried to frame him, and Fukawa had tried to kill him – like they thought of him as nothing more than a tool to be used in their schemes. And that wasn’t even taking into account the way that Kirigiri had manipulated him into that separation, using his affection for Naegi to play him like a violin. He’d been tricked before, when he was much younger – but never with so little difficulty. He’d never been forced to go along with a scheme knowing it was happening, and powerless to stop it.

Maybe asking whether he’d made any wrong decisions since coming to Hope’s Peak was the wrong question. Maybe he should really be asking whether he’d made any right ones.
The thought made Togami grit his teeth in revulsion – but he’d always believed there was nothing to be gained by turning his back on reality. He refused to start burying his head in the sand now, just because he knew he wouldn’t like the truth. He had to accept the idea that at least some of the decisions that he’d made here at Hope’s Peak had been deeply flawed. He’d been wrong.

The only question was – how had it started? Where had he begun going wrong? If his judgement was failing him, how could he tell for sure what he ought to believe? Had he misinterpreted Naegi’s feelings for him? Was Kirigiri really as devious as he’d thought? He didn’t know. He didn’t know, and it was driving him mad.

He’d never been forced to distrust his own thought processes before. He’d always had complete faith in his cold logic and dispassionate reasoning abilities. But now – well, he certainly couldn’t call himself dispassionate any longer, not with his sheer need for Naegi clamped like a vise around his heart. He hadn’t thought it was possible for his feelings to compromise his intellect – but it seemed as though that was exactly what had happened.

And maybe that was the start of it all. Maybe giving in to emotion in the first place was where he’d gone wrong. He’d seen the same pattern in other people often enough, even using against them when the opportunity had arisen – he’d just never expected to find himself on the other side of it. He’d lost his ability to think rationally at the same time that he’d lost his heart.

Oh, he hadn’t turned entirely stupid – he wasn’t that far gone. His conclusions about the traitor had been proven right, and he hadn’t misstepped during the last two trials. But when it came to any issue that involved Naegi – no matter how logically he’d thought himself to be acting, the root of his behavior had been his emotions. The first flood of unexpected desire that had consumed him before he’d known what was happening, the corresponding affection that had so thoroughly turned his head, the gut-wrenching terror for Naegi’s safety, the uncontrollable fury at the idiots who had dared to injure someone that he valued – those had been the reasons he’d acted as he had.

But on the other hand – did that make his decisions invalid? Acting solely on emotion was obviously a path to disaster, but would it really have been better if he’d ignored the emotions entirely? After all, his feelings had shown no indication that they were going to go away just because he didn’t want them. If they were part of his reality, then he had to take them into account.

But he could do better than he’d done thus far. The Togami heir didn’t lose to anything – not even to himself. So he’d been wrong. Well, a minor lapse could be forgivable, if the consequences were rectified. Results were what mattered, not processes. So now that he understood, the question that remained was – what was he going to do about it?

His judgement was the real problem, when he thought about it properly. He couldn’t trust his own perceptions of the other students and their actions, not when his observations of them might have been compromised by his feelings. So logically, the correct response to that would be to try to rebuild his foundation for his judgements.

He had to talk to the other students, focusing on what they said. He had to find them, convince them to discuss the events of the past few weeks, and listen. And then – well, then he’d be able to decide what he needed to do.
Chapter 115

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to attend the breakfast meeting, but discovers something alarming.

Togami didn’t waste much time in his room after the morning announcement. The best time to catch any of the other students had always been at their breakfast meeting – he’d never really appreciated having a set time to check in with the others before this.

He was the first to reach the dining hall, which was a surprise. He’d been under the impression that Kirigiri was usually there first, keeping a sharp eye on the door so that she knew just when the others arrived. Still, he hardly objected to having the chance to prepare the ground. He got himself a cup of coffee from the kitchen and settled down in a chair facing the door to wait.

And wait. No matter how many minutes ticked away, none of the other students appeared. Togami frowned, twisting around to peer up at the clock. Had he gotten to the cafeteria later than he thought? But no, it wasn’t even eight o’clock yet – the other students should have been there. What could have stopped them from coming?

A chill ran down Togami’s spine as he looked around at all the empty chairs. In all four of the murders they’d investigated, the victims had been discovered because of their failure to show up for the breakfast meeting. If someone wasn’t here who should have been – well, that was a red alert that had to be taken seriously.

What if something had happened last night, after he’d retreated to his room? It would have had to be something fairly significant, to affect all four of the remaining students – but then again, the dorm rooms were soundproofed. He wouldn’t have heard a thing unless someone had rung his doorbell, so if something had happened out in the hall after he’d locked himself in his room…

Naegi had been in the hall. The world seemed to go white before Togami’s eyes at the realization. He’d assumed that Naegi would have gone back to his own room after the nighttime announcement to rest, like any reasonable person would do in Naegi’s situation – but Naegi had repeatedly demonstrated his inability to view his health in a reasonable way. And he hadn’t been alone – he’d been with Kirigiri. And whatever that girl’s real motivations might be, it was an undeniable fact that she had been involved in multiple incidents that had put Naegi in serious danger.

Before he consciously thought about moving, Togami was on his feet and heading out the door. The rest of the floor was as empty as it had been when he’d passed through earlier – no other students came rushing up, babbling inadequate apologies for their abominable lack of punctuality. He made a beeline for the dorms, approaching Naegi’s room at just a hair under a run. His hand flew to the doorbell –

And paused.

Togami frowned, his own actions catching up to him. He was doing it again, wasn’t he? He’d made a decision based solely on emotions – it had been his fear for Naegi that had sent him racing out of the cafeteria, not a well thought out decision to investigate a strange occurrence.
He let his hand fall away from the doorbell, feeling it clench into a fist as it returned to his side. He couldn’t keep reacting like this, without thinking his plans through. Say he did ring the bell – what would happen then? If he got no answer, he’d be no better off than he was now. And if his emotions had led him to misjudge the situation again – if Naegi just opened the door with some perfectly reasonable explanation of why he hadn’t been at the meeting – what then?

No. He couldn’t bear the thought of standing in front of Naegi, looking that much of an obviously lovesick fool. It was possible that he’d misunderstood Naegi’s reaction to his feelings – but it was also just as possible that he hadn’t. If he was going to approach Naegi again to try to ascertain the truth, then he needed to do so in a way that would be under his own control. He couldn’t let the conversation start because he’d gone rushing out to check that Naegi was safe – not when the balance of power between them tilted in Naegi’s favor already.

It all made perfect, logical sense – but none of it got rid of the anxiety gnawing at the back of Togami’s mind. What if something really had happened? How was he supposed to balance saving what remained of his pride against the possibility that Naegi might be in trouble? If he just knew for sure that something was wrong, that would be one thing – but the unanswered questions left him unsure of the right course of action.

Wasn’t there anything else he could do? If he wanted to find out what had happened to the students who should have been at the breakfast meeting – well, there were three other options he could take.

Kirigiri wasn’t even worth considering – the less time he had to look at her obnoxious smirk, the better. And even if he went to her for information, he doubted she’d tell him anything worth knowing – if she even answered her door at all.

And as for Genocide Jill – well, judging by the wound on Naegi’s face yesterday, losing her alter ego had left the serial killer even more unstable than she’d been already. Seeking her out alone sounded like a good way to get himself pinned to the wall with scissors.

Which left only one person. Togami frowned, looking down the hallway towards Ogami’s room. He wasn’t terribly enthusiastic about facing down Monokuma’s pawn on his own, especially when she could break him like a twig – but on the other hand, Monokuma had said that her order to kill someone had been lifted. He supposed there was nothing stopping her from choosing to do so, just like any of the rest of them – but surely the mastermind would prefer to keep their pawn on hand as a way of manipulating the game, rather than letting her put an end to things.

Of course, now that Togami thought about it – did Ogami actually know that her order to kill had been rescinded? Yes, Monokuma had told him about it – but that didn’t mean the message had gone any further. In fact, Togami wouldn’t put it past the bear to “forget” to mention it to Ogami until it was too late.

Assuming that matters hadn’t progressed that far already. The air around Togami grew colder at the very thought. Was it possible that Ogami, believing herself still in the grip of the mastermind’s demand, had finally chosen to act at some point during the night? No, surely she wouldn’t have done something like that – not so soon after the last trial, when she’d seemed to feel some genuine grief about Asahina’s fate.

He had to find out. Togami turned away from Naegi’s door and headed down the hall, eyes locked on Ogami’s room.
Chapter 116

Chapter Summary

Togami goes to Ogami’s room to investigate why no one attended the breakfast meeting.

Togami frowned up at Ogami’s door, taking a moment to collect his thoughts. Little good could come of rushing in unprepared. He needed to decide exactly what he wanted to say to the traitor.

The question foremost in his own mind was about just what had happened this morning to make everyone miss the breakfast meeting – but he didn’t think that starting with that issue would be the best approach. If Ogami still believed herself to be under orders to kill, he needed to address that question before anything else – otherwise, she might even view his presence in her room as an opportunity to fulfil the mastermind’s demands. Once that issue had been settled, then he could move on to more pressing concerns.

Feeling better now that he had a solid plan in mind, Togami pressed Ogami’s doorbell in a short, brisk ring.

There was no response. Could she have missed it? He rang the bell again, jamming his finger against it for a long, loud burst that no one inside would be able to ignore.

But still, nothing happened. Togami’s scowl grew as the seconds ticked away. Was she ignoring him, or was it that she simply wasn’t in her room?

Well, with Ogami, unlike with the other students’ rooms, he had a way to tell the difference. He’d never gotten the chance to return her room key after that whole mess when he’d confiscated it, so the only means of locking her door still sat heavy in his own inner jacket pocket. Whether Ogami was in her room or not, there was nothing stopping him from going inside to check.

Togami reached for the doorknob, and sure enough, it turned easily under his hand. So it seemed that the mastermind really wasn’t giving their agent any special favors – they were perfectly content to leave Ogami vulnerable to any of the students who might be inclined to take advantage of an unlocked door during the night. That was interesting – and a little worrying. Was there a chance that he was about to uncover a second murder scene in Ogami’s room?

Well, if he was, there was no point in delaying its discovery. Ideally, he would have preferred to have at least one other student with him if he had to discover a body, to avoid any suspicion that he’d been involved – but if he’d known where any of the other students were, he wouldn’t need to enter Ogami’s room in the first place.

Bracing himself for the worst, Togami pushed the door open – to reveal only darkness. He frowned, squinting inside to observe what he could with the limited amount of light trickling in from the hall. The bed was definitely flat and empty, so the room didn’t seem to be dark because Ogami had overslept – and being one of those annoying athletic types, she seemed more likely to wake up ridiculously early than to sleep in this late. Maybe the room was empty, after all, and she’d skipped the breakfast meeting to work out in the locker room or something along those lines.
If that was the case, then maybe he should just leave her key on her desk so that he didn’t have to worry about the wretched thing any longer. Yes, it would be a blatant indication that he’d been in her room – but if she didn’t want him to enter, she should have made the effort to get her key back from him before now. He’d offered her the key back, and she’d refused to take it – so she could hardly complain if he chose to use the key for its intended purpose.

Remembering that Ogami had left weights and other workout paraphernalia scattered across her floor like landmines, Togami reached out to flip the lights before trying to pick his way across the floor.

And as light flooded the dark corners of the room, Togami could see the far wall at last – where Sakura Ogami sat on the floor, staring directly at him from dark, shadowed eyes.

He managed to avoid taking a step back at the unexpected sight, if only just barely. What the hell was Ogami playing at, sitting on the floor of her own room like that? It didn’t escape Togami’s notice that the way she’d positioned herself would have given her a clear view of the door – and anyone standing there, outlined in light from the hall. She’d been watching him from the moment he’d opened the door.

Well, it wasn’t as though she’d seen him do anything suspicious – he could make that argument quite easily if she decided to object. He crossed his arms, waiting for the flood of outrage most girls would fling at a boy who unexpectedly invaded their rooms.

But Ogami didn’t say anything. Other than fixing her eyes on him, she didn’t react to his presence at all. In fact, Togami had the disconcerting feeling that she didn’t intend to do anything – that she would be perfectly content to sit staring at him until the silence made him uncomfortable enough to leave.

Togami scowled. He wasn’t about to be chased off, not by a little staring. He’d come here in search of Ogami, and now he’d found her. This was what he’d wanted, and it had no business throwing him off balance. He strode forward into the room, stopping only when he was close enough to tower over Ogami, and dropped her room key on the floor in front of her.

“There,” he said flatly. “Take that back and be done with it.”

Ogami’s eyes flickered in the direction of the key, but she didn’t move to take it. Well, let her do what she wanted – the key was her problem now. She could leave it on the floor for the next week for all Togami cared. At least if she wasn’t going to make a fuss about it, he could move on without wasting time.

“I’ve spoken to Monokuma about your order to kill, and he says that it’s no longer in effect,” Togami went on. “So if you’ve been plotting a murder, you can stop doing so immediately.”

Ogami didn’t move, not even to ask a question or voice skepticism at his claims. Togami frowned. He wasn’t lying, of course, but it wasn’t as though she knew that. Was she just going to accept whatever he said?

“I can call Monokuma back to confirm it if you want to verify it,” he offered, watching for any reaction at the suggestion that he summon her boss.

Nothing. He might as well have been talking to a doll, unable to give any response but to stare back at him with cold, dead eyes. If it weren’t for the way her gaze tracked his movements, he might have considered checking her for a pulse. As it was, he had to wonder if she’d even heard a word he’d said.
“Can you even hear me?” he asked, giving her an impatient frown. “Or did all the gunfire at that execution damage your hearing?”

At first he thought she wasn’t going to respond – but no, her shoulders shifted upwards in the barest fraction of a shrug. So she could hear him, after all.

But even if her hearing hadn’t been damaged, he was starting to think that something else might have been. There was something about the look in her eyes that he didn’t like at all – an emptiness that he recognized. He’d seen a similar look on the faces of some of his siblings, at the moment they’d realized they’d lost. It was the look of a person who had been beaten, and broken by that defeat.

Togami looked the girl over again, observing her much more closely this time. Judging by the burn marks and dirt on her skin and clothes, she hadn’t even changed or showered since the trial. Her hair hung lank and grimy, and he could still see blood flaking off her face. It seemed inconceivable that someone would sit alone in the dark in such a state for more than a day as some sort of plan – she couldn’t have even known anyone would come in here to find her.

Could she really be sitting here like this because of Asahina? Togami had assumed that the friendship between Ogami and the swimmer had been a front to conceal her betrayal – but maybe there had been a seed of something genuine at the heart of it. After all, Ogami had said that Monokuma approached her the first night they were in the school – by which time, he was fairly sure she and Asahina had already been thick as thieves.

Then, if that was the case – then this wasn’t just the look of someone who had been beaten. This was the grief of a girl who had lost someone she cared for – someone she had treated poorly, who she’d never be able to see again. For a moment, Togami’s frightened vision of Naegi choking on poison gas flashed before his eyes – and to his horror, he realized that a spark of sympathy was flickering through his chest.
Chapter 117

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to have a discussion with Ogami, but has some difficulty getting her to cooperate.

Togami froze, staring blankly down at Ogami as he realized just what reaction her grief had inspired in him. Sympathy – for a traitor? Because of a death where she herself had been part of the cause? If he was that determined to make things easy for her, he might as well just hand her a knife and bare his throat.

But – wait. Togami frowned, stopping his train of thought before it could continue too far down its usual track. He’d left his room this morning intending to pay attention to what the other students said and did, however distasteful the experience of interacting with them might be. He didn’t think he’d been off-base in his initial assessment of Ogami – but then again, there had been a point when he’d believed that about his views of Naegi and Kirigiri, too.

With that in mind, maybe it was worth pursuing this new perception of Ogami. If she was genuinely grief-stricken, it would be valuable to gather information about her new state of mind. And if she was faking as part of some plan of the mastermind’s – well, then he would need to know more about it to figure out what the plan was supposed to be.

But how exactly was he supposed to listen to Ogami when she didn’t seem interested in saying anything? His earlier consideration about how best to interrogate her about the whereabouts of the other students had been based on the assumption that she would participate in the conversation. He’d clearly need to revise that idea.

Should he pretend to some kind of pity for her, and try to draw her out through a show of compassion? No – he dismissed the idea almost as soon as it occurred to him. He might possibly have been able to pull that off in other circumstances – but the time they’d spent trapped here in the mastermind’s killing game had given all the students a much deeper look at one another’s characters than acquaintances normally got in mere weeks. After everything he’d said to make his opinion of the other students clear, he doubted anyone would believe an expression of concern from him.

All right, then – he’d take the opposite approach.

“I suppose you think you’re accomplishing a lot of good lurking around here in the dark,” Togami said, curling his lip in a sneer. “Taking yourself out of circulation is all well and good, but I think we’d all feel safer to have you where we can see you every once in a while.”

He could have made the barb nastier, if he’d felt so inclined – but he was a little concerned that being too vicious would do more than just jar her into action. He didn’t particularly want the reaction he prodded out of her to be something violent.

But apparently he’d judged it close enough – because this time, he did actually manage to get a response out of her. Ogami shifted until she sat straight up against the wall instead of slumping, muscles moving so slowly he could almost hear them creaking. The look in her eyes sharpened to
something less deadened, like she was listening to him in a way she hadn’t been before.

“Did Kirigiri and Naegi send you to check on me?” Her voice scraped roughly from her mouth, like she’d forgotten how to speak aloud.

Togami scowled. “No one sent me. I’m hardly an errand boy.”

It had been a strange question, though. Yes, he knew that Naegi and Kirigiri had stopped by to talk with Ogami at some point yesterday, but why would Ogami think they’d want someone to check on her afterwards? Neither of them had mentioned anything of the kind – though it hadn’t really been the topic of conversation at the time. But he knew Naegi, at least, would never have so much as implied that Ogami might do something to threaten the other students, though Kirigiri might have been a little more realistic about that question.

But on the other hand – there was more than one possible reason to check on someone. And sitting on the floor, alone in the dark, was hardly the decision of a person fully in command of her own sanity.

“What, were you planning to follow through on your earlier threat? While your room was unlocked and accessible to all of us?” Togami watched her almost imperceptibly flinch at the words, his eyebrows knitting together in a frown. “Haven’t you caused enough difficulty for the rest of us without forcing us into another trial?”

Actually, now that he thought about it, he was surprised that she hadn’t found a way to off herself yet. She’d claimed to be on the brink of it before Asahina’s note had disrupted her plans, after all, and it wasn’t like the trial had given her much reason to change her mind. Of course, she didn’t have her bottle of poison anymore, but with murder methods scattered all over the school, it wasn’t as though that was a real impediment.

During the trial, he’d assumed that her story about a suicide attempt had been either a lie to make herself seem sympathetic or part of some obscure plan of the mastermind’s – and he supposed that could still be the case, especially since she wasn’t actually dead. But he couldn’t see how telling them all about her planned suicide attempt would benefit either her or the mastermind, even indirectly. It might possibly have left an opening for a killer to disguise a murder as suicide, but from what he’d seen so far, the mastermind seemed to prefer to be as obvious as possible when offering them all incentives to kill.

He narrowed his eyes down at Ogami, trying to find some clue about her actions in her hollow eyes and thinned lips. She glared up at him, which was no surprise after the way he’d deliberately attacked her – but it wasn’t the furious blaze she used to send towards people who angered her. This was still and silent, like whatever had burned within her before had gone bitterly cold.

“So that’s why you’re here,” Ogami said, her mouth twisting into something grim. “You must want to make sure Kirigiri won’t have to make good on her threat.”

Togami froze at the words. “What threat?”

“They didn’t tell you?” Ogami’s shoulders shifted in a hint of a shrug. “You’re right – I’d been considering ways to eliminate the threat that my continued presence creates for the rest of you. But before I could, Kirigiri and Naegi came to check on me.”

Togami could well imagine just how upset Naegi would have been to realize that he might be close to losing another of his precious friends. He had to deepen his scowl at the thought, to stop himself from showing any weakness at the thought.
“And while they were here,” Ogami continued, “Kirigiri made it clear that if I did kill myself, there would be consequences during the trial.”

“Which would hardly affect you, if you were the victim,” Togami pointed out, puzzled. He wouldn’t have expected Kirigiri to miss a detail like that.

“No, but she knew I wouldn’t want to unleash them.” Ogami closed her eyes, pain flashing across her face. “Kirigiri said that if I killed myself after arguing with Naegi, it would look like he drove me to it – like he was the person who caused my death.”

Togami stared at her. “He – what?” How could Kirigiri possibly have made that argument? Naegi would never drive someone to suicide, intentionally or not – he was the nicest person Togami had ever met, nicer than he thought anyone could be. If that argument had come up during the trial, even if it had failed, it would have been devastating for the kindhearted boy.

And if the mastermind had bought it, Naegi would have been executed as a murderer.
Chapter 118

Chapter Summary

Togami considers the implications of Kirigiri's threat to Ogami.

Togami could hardly believe the thought even as it occurred to him – Naegi, of all people, being condemned as a killer? It was absurd. Naegi had spoken against the killings from the first, insisting that there had to be another option even before they’d had any hints as to what that might mean. Togami had thought at first that it was blind idealism, pathetic naïveté that would either crumble to dust when the boy was put to the test or doom him to an ignominious death – but it hadn’t been. Naegi had stayed strong in all the ways that mattered, trying to convince the rest of them to believe in one another and not give in to the mastermind’s schemes. Togami couldn’t believe that the boy had ever so much as considered murdering anyone.

Which made the idea that Naegi could be responsible for Ogami’s hypothetical suicide all the more sickening. Togami didn’t know exactly what Naegi had said when he’d found his friend apparently grieving alone in a dark room – but it would have been full of more sympathy and distress than Ogami deserved. It might not have helped, since Ogami seemed determined to wallow in the darkness, but it couldn’t have hurt. Naegi would never deliberately say anything cruel –

Or was that right? Togami’s mind flashed back to the memory of Naegi sitting inches away in bed, insisting that he didn’t want what Togami was trying to offer – or glaring at him from outside the ruined classroom, accusing Togami of not truly caring for him.

The memories still burned with painful rejection, but Togami did his best to push aside the hollow ache. He didn’t know what Naegi had meant by that, not really, and he couldn’t let himself be overcome by his potentially faulty recollection of the conversations until he’d figured out exactly what had happened.

But whatever Naegi had meant by the words, they were certainly proof that even the nicest boy in the school could be cruel. It didn’t matter if he hadn’t meant the words to be unkind – an inadvertent wound didn’t hurt any less than one than had been deliberately caused.

So maybe it was possible, after all, that Naegi might have said something to Ogami that might have sent her closer to suicide, however kindly he’d meant it. Even if it wasn’t true, even if the real cause had been Ogami’s guilt over betraying the students and her role in Asahina’s death – well, the mastermind was the one who made the final determination of who the true culprit was.

It would be difficult to claim that Naegi really had driven Ogami to suicide – but Togami didn’t even want to hear someone try to make that case during a trial. The trial arguments were stressful enough, with everyone screaming idiocies at one another and making stupid arguments that didn’t even deserve to be taken seriously. But if Naegi were the one under fire – if there was a real threat that he might be the one dragged off in chains –

Togami shook his head, blinking away visions of Naegi’s pale, terrified face staring back at him through the thick glass of the execution chamber windows. It was ridiculous to worry over something that couldn’t happen – Ogami wasn’t even dead, so any speculation about a trial for her was sheer nonsense.
He narrowed his eyes at her, sitting on the ground in front of him. For all the raw grief written across her face, there was still an aura of a fighter lingering around her – one that was sizing up the opponent standing across from her in a fighting ring.

“Why are you telling me this?” Togami demanded, running through the possibilities in his head as he scrutinized her. She might just be rambling at him because he happened to be standing there – but he was starting to suspect that she had some other reason.

Ogami shrugged. “I assumed you knew. Either Naegi or Kirigiri could have told you about it.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it,” Togami said, a touch of resentment flickering through him. Every time he thought that he knew everything that Kirigiri and Naegi did when they went off together, it seemed like there was some new plot for him to hear about. Though now that he thought about it, that did assume that Ogami’s claims were genuine. “In fact, for all I know, you’ve invented the entire thing.”

Ogami looked at him for a long moment, until Togami was starting to wonder if she’d slipped back into the silent slump of depression that had gripped her when he’d first entered her room – but then her mouth twisted in an unsettling mockery of a smile. “Before he left me here, he tried to apologize for Kirigiri – and he said he was glad that I’m not dead.” She closed her eyes, tilting her head back against the wall like she was baring her throat for him to slash.

Togami had to admit, that did sound like what Naegi would say in that situation – and like it was the same brand of unintentional cruelty the boy had inflicted on him. Telling a suicidal girl that he was glad she was still alive, when he’d apparently been used as the leverage to prevent her death? Togami wasn’t surprised in the slightest that it had ended with Ogami sinking deeper into her own misery. Left to fester in her own despair long enough, she might even have decided to ignore the possibility of how the mastermind would use her death. And if she had…

“I think I agree with him,” Togami said, giving the girl a considering frown. “Even apart from Kirigiri’s stupid claims, it’s better for you to stay alive.”

Her eyes opened again, slowly, and Togami had the rather uncomfortable feeling of a laser sighting on him. “I thought you wanted me out of the picture.”

“It’s true that your death would tie up the loose end of having the mastermind’s spy hanging around,” he said, crossing his arms. “But it would also leave us with an even bigger problem.”

Ogami frowned. “What are you talking about?”

He rolled his eyes. “Am I the only one left who’s bothered to do the math? If you die, there would only be four students left – which would be a very dangerous situation for the rest of us. With only four surviving students, a killer wouldn’t even have to be sneaky anymore.”

“But there would still be too many people for a killer to deal with outside of the trials,” Ogami said, confused. “It would be dangerous if there were only three people left – but four would be safe. There are only two murders allowed per person.”

“Yes – and as long as someone managed both kills before the next trial, they’d win by default,” Togami said. “For a verdict to count, a majority of students have to agree – and with a two-person trial, that would be impossible. The killer would never vote for themselves, so it wouldn’t matter that the other person would know they were guilty – they’d win anyway.” He shook his head. “One more death is all it would take for that to become a possibility.”
Chapter 119

Chapter Summary

Togami and Ogami continue their discussion as Togami tries to determine how much he can trust a former spy.

Togami made sure his expression was impervious as Ogami stared up at him in thinly veiled horror. He had never let any of the others see him flinch from the reality of their situation before, and he certainly wasn’t about to start with her.

“You’ve certainly thought all that out,” Ogami said at last.

Togami shrugged. “It wasn’t difficult – just basic math. I knew from the start that this game would get much more dangerous as more people got eliminated.”

He’d actually thought about it, that first night they’d been here – that there would be a point when someone could win just by killing without needing to win a trial, if they could survive long enough. He’d considered waiting for that point himself – but that had only been his backup plan, if he hadn’t been able to craft a successful murder plot. There was no credit in winning by default – that was barely a step above losing.

But it wasn’t like he could do something like that – not any longer. Even if Naegi had said hurtful things to him, even if he really had meant that rejection, it didn’t change the fact that Togami couldn’t bear the thought of Naegi’s death. Everything else that he valued was so far away, locked in an outside world that seemed more remote every time he thought about it – but Naegi was here, vibrantly alive and inescapably present, tangled up with all the other things Togami wanted until it all seemed too intertwined to undo.

Objectively speaking, Togami knew he hadn’t known Naegi long enough to develop that level of dependence on the other boy. But that didn’t stop the ache in his chest warning him that losing Naegi would be like losing everything.

“So.” Ogami’s cold voice drew his attention back to her, sending his thoughts back to little more than a worry lingering in the back of his mind. “You’re doing the same thing Kirigiri did – using threats to force me to act the way you want.”

“I’m nothing like that obnoxious harpy.” Togami scowled at her. “And when I threaten you, you’ll know it. All I’ve done is point out the consequences that would come from your death – which were obvious enough that anyone whose brain has successfully evolved from primordial muck should have been able to work them out.”

“Well, you’ve done it,” Ogami said flatly. “You and Kirigiri have both tied my hands. Now go away and leave me alone.”

Togami might have been about ready to get out of this unsettling room, which still had the faintly creepy aura of the blood-splattered murder scene from two days ago – but as soon as she spoke the order, he crossed his arms and settled back on his heels. “I’ll leave when I’m ready – and I’m not done with you yet.”
“Don’t tell me you expect me to go back out and join the rest of you,” Ogami said with a small snort of disgust. “I think we’ve all seen what happens when I try to work with the rest of you. I thought you, of all people, would understand that with some people, friendship just isn’t a realistic option.”

“I’m not suggesting we hold hands and sing around a campfire,” Togami said, rolling his eyes. “But even if you’re a spy, you’re still one of the players in this game, no matter what any of us do. You need to check in with the rest of us at least once a day, so that we all know everyone else’s status.”

Ogami frowned at him for a moment, then shook her head. “So you’re annoyed that I didn’t go to the breakfast meeting – after all the times you ignored it?”

“That was different,” Togami said coolly. “I’m not an admitted spy. And as far as I’m concerned, you’ve yet to prove that you genuinely regret your betrayal and intend to act against the mastermind. So –”

“What?” Ogami’s eyes flashed dangerously at the words. “You think I’d still help them – after what they did to Hina?”

Togami stood his ground, refusing to take so much as a step away from the girl in spite of the aura of rising anger he could feel radiating from her. “I can’t rule out the possibility. After all, you helped them after what they did to the others.”

That one seemed to hit home, rocking her back against the wall like he’d struck a physical blow. Now that was interesting – did she regret the deaths of the other students, as well as Asahina’s? After all, if Ogami was telling the truth, then she’d abandoned the mastermind’s cause after the third trial, which hadn’t involved her or Asahina personally. It seemed like a stupid reason to switch allegiances to him – but then again, he’d already decided that he needed to reassess his impressions of the other students. Maybe he would make more progress on that front if he stopped assuming that the others were going to make their decisions intelligently.

Ogami’s breath hissed audibly through her teeth, like she was forcing herself to concentrate on the action. “It’s true that I helped our enemy while the other students fought and died. I’ll bear the shame of that decision for whatever remains of my life – and I understand that it means you can’t truly trust me. But if you believe nothing else that I say, believe this – I would never willingly have done anything to harm Hina.”

Togami frowned at her without responding. Ogami did look sincere, unshed tears glimmering in her shadowed eyes and face pale beneath the grime – but sincerity could be faked easily enough by a skilled actress. But then again, just how skilled an actress did he want to give her credit for being? Ogami was the Ultimate Martial Artist, after all, and that wasn’t a talent that necessarily went with being a convincing liar.

“Your friendship with Asahina did seem genuine,” Togami said at last. He wasn’t willing to concede on any of the other questions of Ogami’s trustworthiness – but for this one, he’d seen too much evidence to keep denying it.

“It was,” Ogami said, some of her old fire returning to her eyes at the sound of her friend’s name. “From the start, I felt a connection to Hina unlike anything I’d experienced before. It was as though we’d known one another all our lives – like we were only rediscovering a friendship instead of forging it anew.”

As she spoke, the memories of his relationship with Naegi flitted through Togami’s mind, hitting a
chord inside him that he hadn’t expected. Once he and Naegi had begun their relationship, the other boy had fit in his arms, in his bed, in his life so easily that it was done before he’d been able to think it through. Rediscovering a connection – if the words hadn’t smacked of the sentimental rot that filled preteen manga, all soulmates and love at first sight, he might have thought it was a good description of what had happened to them.

“I didn’t want Hina to be hurt,” Ogami went on softly, eyes downcast like she’d forgotten she was addressing someone else. “Not her. *Never* her. If the mastermind had waited even a few more days before demanding I work for them – I don’t know if I would have done it.” She shook her head. “Or perhaps I’m only telling myself that now, to try to pretend that things didn’t have to end this way. That I could have protected her.”

She looked up, her eyes blazing into Togami’s with an almost physical intensity. “But you should know better than any of the rest that we can’t protect anyone here.”
Chapter 120

Chapter Summary

Togami’s conversation with Ogami leads him to a new understanding of the situation.

We can’t protect anyone.

The words roared through Togami’s head, etching fire-bright memories across his vision. He could see the first bloody wound that had matted Naegi’s hair to his head and left him reeling – the poisoned needle that had left him too weak to stand – every time he’d driven himself to the verge of collapse, through sheer desperation to find some way to resist the mastermind’s plans.

Togami had tried, with all the skill that had made him his family’s heir, to keep Naegi safe and protected – and time and again he’d failed miserably. Naegi had sustained more injuries than any of the other surviving students so far. Yes, most of them had been because of Kirigiri’s manipulations, but the point remained – Togami’s protection hadn’t been enough.

It had been obvious from the start that mastermind had set up a zero-sum game, of course. Celeste had spotted it the first time they’d tried to talk over the situation as a group. With the way the rules had been drawn, there could only be one victor from among the students. In order for one person to win, everyone else had to lose. But that was only the case if they were working against one another to win the game.

As soon as he’d changed his mind and decided to withdraw from the game, to focus on escape rather than victory, the rules had changed in a way that he hadn’t fully processed. The other students weren’t the enemies he should have been focusing on – the mastermind was. And unlike the reasonably equal competition among the students to become the successful blackened, the fight he’d chosen to have with the mastermind was anything but fair. It wasn’t intended to be, not when the mastermind had given themselves every advantage, from watching the students’ every move to controlling their access to information to enforcing the rules with gunfire and outlandish executions.

Celeste had seen that, too, much faster than he had. *You can win against the other players, but you can never beat the house.* She’d said those words to Naegi before her execution, smiling sadly at the boy as she’d explained why she hadn’t been able to believe in the hope that drove him. She’d seen the impossibility of defeating the mastermind when no one could approach them as an equal. Every time they’d thought they had a weapon they could use, the mastermind had turned out to be in control after all. Alter Ego’s data had been a plant, the cache of documents in the hidden room had been emptied out, and the broken door to the headmaster’s office had been barricaded.

And how could anything be safe from an enemy that couldn’t be fought? How could his claim to want to protect Naegi mean anything when he had nothing to throw against the mastermind but empty defiance?

Ogami smiled at him, full of bitter satisfaction. “I knew you understood.”

To his shock, Togami realized that his face had changed, expression going slack and uncontrolled in the moment that the realization had hit him. His usual aloof mask had fallen for those few
seconds – and Ogami had seen the fear and uncertainty eroding the foundations of his confidence.

He reassumed the mask with a speed born from years of practice, letting icy indifference settle over his features. “Don’t assume that your failure means the rest of our efforts will end the same way. The only guaranteed way to fail is to give up without trying.”

And at that, she actually had the gall to give him a look of knowing sadness, like she’d been able to grasp something that was still beyond his reach. “I thought the same thing once. And because of it, the person I cared about the most paid the price.” She shook her head. “You still think that giving up would be the same as losing – but it isn’t. It’s the only thing we have left.”

“That sounds like the excuse of a loser to me,” Togami snapped.

“Because you haven’t really understood how the mastermind operates,” Ogami said. “They want us to fight, don’t you see? I may not know all the rules of this game, but I know how to read the effect my attacks are having on an enemy. Every hit the mastermind has made against us has left a scar, but we’ve never seen them so much as sweat once, no matter what we’ve tried. As long as we choose to play the game they’ve created, they win. But if we stop playing – it’s the only thing we can do to hurt them.”

“Yes, we can mildly inconvenience the person who imprisoned us here, by sacrificing any hope of returning to our real lives,” Togami said, curling his lip in a sneer. “I can’t imagine how the rest of us failed to come up with such a brilliant plan.”

“It’s better than having your attempts used against you,” Ogami said. “The mastermind has a counter for every choice we make. They’ll take our good intentions and poison them, twisting what we feel for each other into our own destruction. The friendship I felt for all of you made me turn on the mastermind – and that shattered any trust that had been built among the rest of you. I tried to strike a blow against the mastermind – and it took out four of you instead. And – Hina –” Her voice cracked as she said her friend’s name. “Our friendship was the reason she wanted to talk to me, and the reason I let her in. And that was what let the mastermind kill her.”

Togami scowled. “Don’t exaggerate. Asahina wasn’t killed because of how she felt about you, even if it was extremely naïve of her to keep viewing an admitted traitor as a friend. She died because the mastermind deliberately made the rule about locked doors unclear. If Monokuma had spelled out just what it meant to break down a door when he first told us about the rule, I doubt Asahina would have been stupid enough to try her screwdriver plan no matter how desperate she was to talk to you.”

“Which is exactly why the mastermind made the rule vague in the first place,” Ogami snapped, leaning forward. “It was a trap, and Asahina’s friendship for me was the bait that lured her into it. Don’t try to claim you haven’t noticed the pattern – not when you’ve said yourself that trusting Kirigiri keeps getting Naegi hurt.”

“True,” Togami said. “But that abuse of trust is her fault, not the mastermind’s.”

“And does that really make a difference?” Ogami demanded. “It’s still happening. Anything we find here that seems to be good, that looks like it can give us the strength to fight – it’s just another weapon the mastermind will turn on us when we least expect it. The only way to disarm them is to stop trying – stop fighting, stop caring, stop hoping. That’s all we have left now.”

Togami stared at her, disgust roiling within him – not just revulsion at her own words, but at his recognition of the sentiments behind them. It would be better not to fight the mastermind if that brought the risk of losing something he valued – he’d thought that. He’d said it, during the fight he
and Naegi had had yesterday morning.

*I’d rather stay trapped in this hellhole for the rest of my life than lose you!*

He’d meant it as an expression of how much Naegi mattered to him, how far he’d go to protect the other boy – but in the face of Ogami’s words, it sounded different. Giving up one thing to safeguard another had sounded reasonable at the time – but wasn’t it just the first step down the path that would end with sitting alone in a darkened room, refusing to make the slightest move lest it bring about something worse?

He couldn’t let himself move towards ending up like this, broken and despairing with no hope in sight. He’d never lost a contest before he’d ended up here, and he wasn’t about to let the mastermind, whoever they were, be the first to say they’d beaten him – especially not by manipulating him into forfeiting of his own accord.

He glared down at Ogami, with a spark behind the expression that he hadn’t felt for days. “You’re free to roll over and play dead for the mastermind if you like – but I’m not going to follow your lead.”

And with that, he turned and walked out of the room, letting the door slam behind him without so much as a backward glance at Ogami’s startled face.
A loud hammering at his dorm room door jolted Naegi out of a sound sleep. He sat up sharply, blinking fuzziness away from his eyes – and caught sight of the time glowing on his clock. Was it really that late? He threw himself out of bed, panic beginning to set in as the knocking grew louder. How could he have overslept this long?

In a blur of activity, he scrambled into the nearest set of clean clothes and snatched his backpack from beside the bookshelf, before running to the door and flinging it open.

Togami dropped his fist, impatient scowl softening as he took in Naegi’s rumpled appearance. “You forgot to set your alarm again, didn’t you?”

“Sorry.” Naegi tried to look contrite at the fact that the other boy had had to come wake him up – but he couldn’t stop the happy smile that spread across his face as he looked up into Togami’s eyes. Sometimes he thought that just seeing the other boy at the start of every day might be everything he wanted out of life.

Togami rolled his eyes, but he didn’t bother to hide the answering smile on his own lips just before leaning down to press a soft kiss to Naegi’s temple. “Come on, or we really will be late.” He slid an arm around Naegi’s shoulders and began steering him down the hall.

Naegi let him lead the way through halls, painted golden with the morning sunlight, and he let himself press contentedly into the circle of the other boy’s arm. They certainly could have walked faster if Togami had let go – but neither of them made a move to break apart.

As Togami dragged him in the direction of the stairs, Naegi glanced a little regretfully down branching hallway that would lead to the cafeteria. “Do you think I’d have time to get breakfast before the cafeteria closes? Maybe if I run?”

Togami frowned. “I don’t think so. Not if you want to make it on time.”

Naegi’s stomach let out a loud growl of protest at that, making him flush a little. Togami smirked. “But on the other hand, we can’t let you faint from hunger. Maybe if you’re quick –”

“Then you might make it to the cafeteria just in time to see them lock the doors,” came a voice from further down the hall.

Naegi looked in that direction – just in time to see a granola bar fly at his face. He shot up a hand to try to catch it, but it slipped out of his fingers, bouncing off his wrist to ricochet into an open pocket of his backpack.

“Nice catch,” Kirigiri said dryly, falling into step on Naegi’s other side. “That should be enough to get you through the morning.”

“Thanks!” Naegi dug the granola bar out of his backpack with a grin. “You’re always a step
ahead of the rest of us, aren’t you?”

“Someone has to be.” She gave him an amused smile. “But when Togami spends most of breakfast watching the clock like it personally insulted him and then storms out in a huff, it isn’t hard to put the pieces together.”

“Oh, very clever,” Togami drawled, his lip curling into what would have been a sneer if there had been any real animosity behind it. “We’re all well aware of your skill at detection – you don’t have to prove it every time one of us doesn’t explain our actions.”

“Who needs an explanation when you make it so easy?” Kirigiri shot back, eyes dancing with humor in spite of the stern line of her mouth. “And speaking of things I noticed…” She reached into her coat pocket and tossed another granola bar in Togami’s direction – which he caught without a fumble, to Naegi’s annoyance.

“What’s this supposed to be?” Togami asked, giving the bar a dubious frown. “I’m not the one who slept through breakfast.”

“Four cups of coffee aren’t a real breakfast,” Kirigiri told him. “Count yourself lucky that’s all – I heard Fukawa muttering something about home cooking.”

“Ugh.” Togami grimaced. “Maybe I should just get a coffee pot for my room and stop bothering with the cafeteria altogether.”

“What? No, you said you were going to try to eat better in the morning!” Naegi said, looking up at the other boy in concern. “You let me pick out a real breakfast for you yesterday, and you said that it wasn’t so bad!”

“Well, you were there,” Togami said, shrugging. “Nothing’s as bad when you’re around.”

“Really?” Naegi beamed up at him, delighted at the hint of pink that dusted the other boy’s cheekbones as he realized just what he’d said. “If that’s all it takes, then I’ll definitely have to set my alarm so that I can be there every day from now on!”

“Which will make breakfast a little too sugar-sweet for the rest of us,” Kirigiri said. Both Naegi and Togami went red at that, and she laughed.

They finally made it up the stairs and down the hall with barely a minute to spare. Naegi hauled open the heavy wooden door on one of the many Hope’s Peak classrooms.

“Well, looks like you three made it in the nick of time after all! I guess nothing beats teamwork, huh?”

The cheerful voice rang loudly across the classroom, bright and familiar, and Naegi turned towards it to answer. He looked past faces that he recognized, friendly smiles that he knew as well as the back of his hand, until finally his faze settled on the person who’d spoken. He looked up and –

And he fell off the bed, head crashing against the floor with a painful jolt.
Naegi tries to make sense of his confusing dream.

Naegi lay on the floor of his dorm room, gasping for breath as the back of his head throbbed where it had hit the floor. Had that been a dream? But it had been so clear, so vivid – like he really had been walking through the Hope’s Peak halls, sandwiched between a warm, affectionate Togami and a happy, laughing Kirigiri. Even now that he was awake, he could still feel the comforting weight of Togami’s arm lingering on his shoulders.

Normally his dreams were fragmented and nonsensical, a mix of bizarre unreality that stopped making sense once he woke up – but this had felt like a regular morning from his life. His every movement had fallen into an easy rhythm, repeating a pattern that he’d known without having to think about it. He’d walked through those halls like he’d done it every day. The commonplace events would have been boring – if it hadn’t been for the gentle shades of contentment coloring them.

They’d been happy in that dream, all three of them – Togami, Kirigiri, and himself. They’d been friends, enjoying each other’s company even during an unremarkable morning. They’d walked through the halls of Hope’s Peak Academy the way he’d imagined it would be when he’d first gotten the invitation to attend, all bright and welcoming and full of opportunities – the way he’d never seen it in real life.

No, wait – that wasn’t quite true. Naegi frowned, remembering the pictures of the dead students that he’d seen for a few seconds, before Monokuma had snatched them away. The Hope’s Peak Academy in those pictures had been just like the one in his dream, full of light and air with no iron plates blocking the windows. The students in the pictures had smiled with the same carefree joy that had been present in the dream, the sort of smile that he couldn’t imagine crossing anyone’s face in Hope’s Peak Academy as they knew it now.

Maybe his sleeping mind had seized on the glimpses of a false Hope’s Peak from Monokuma’s photos and used them to craft an alternative to reality he found himself caught in now. Thinking it over, Naegi supposed that if he’d had to imagine his ideal school life – well, it would have looked pretty similar to the one in the dream. He and Togami could be together, dating like a normal couple without interference from psychotic bears or arguments about gut-wrenching moral dilemmas. Togami and Kirigiri could get along, their sniping reduced to mere friendly bickering. The biggest problem any of them would have to face would be whether they could get to the cafeteria in time for breakfast.

Naegi’s vision blurred as he stared blankly up at the ceiling, and he realized that for once, it wasn’t a leftover effect from hitting his head – it was because were welling up at the corners of his eyes. The thought of living in a Hope’s Peak like that, where everyone was happy and no one was dead – it sounded like everything he could imagine wanting. He could have spent more time with all the wonderful, brilliant students that should have been in his class, all of them able to bond in a way that had been impossible with the threat of death hanging over them the way it did here.

He’d seen them all in that classroom, just for the briefest of moments before he’d been jolted
awake – every student he’d met here, dead or alive, smiling like there was nowhere else they’d rather be. A tear ran sideways from the corner of his eye, followed by more and more, dripping down until the edges of his hair grew damp. But he couldn’t stop it, not when he could see Maizono waving brightly at him as he entered the room, or Owada startling a laugh from Fujisaki, or Asahina leaning against Ogami’s shoulder. It might have been only a split second in the dream, but he felt like he could see all of them, so much more clearly than he could see the room around him now.

All of them except one person, the one who’d spoken to him in the moment before he’d woken up. Who had that been? He hadn’t been able to get a good look in the dream, although really there hadn’t been any barriers preventing him from seeing. But maybe that was just a little dream logic, where sometimes he found himself unable to do perfectly simple things.

Or then again, maybe he hadn’t wanted to see that person. Everything else in the dream had been happy, peaceful, as close to an idyll as could be – except for when he’d heard that person speak. In that moment, a rush of fear had flooded through him, all heat and anger and terror. He was fairly sure those emotions had been what had caused him to fall off the bed and wake up.

But no – that seemed silly. If that dream had been his mind creating the ideal Hope’s Peak that he wished he could have attended, why would he have included someone that he feared? That would have fit better here in this twisted alternate version of a school, not in his happy fantasy. Maybe that hadn’t really been a person, after all – maybe it had just been his awareness of the real Hope’s Peak intruding on the dream as he started to wake up. Even in a dream, nothing good could last in a place like this.

Naegi sighed, swiping a hand across his face to wipe away the last traces of tears. There was no point in dwelling on the life he wished he could have had, not when it was impossible. If he didn’t stop thinking about it now, he knew he could spend the rest of the day lying on the floor, envisioning what could have been – and if he fell into that trap, he wouldn’t be able to salvage any good things that were still in reach.

He tried to sit up – and gasped as the room wavered around him like a blurry ocean of colors and flickering lights. Pain stabbed through the back of his head, pulsing out from the place where it had cracked against the floor – the same place that he’d been clobbered in the hidden room the night after the third class trial. Naegi didn’t know much about head injuries, but it definitely didn’t seem to have been a good thing.

But it wasn’t like he could stay in his room for the rest of the day. He had to check on Kirigiri and make sure she was all right after her foray into the locked areas of the school last night – after all, he was the only one who knew what she was doing. That meant that if anything had gone wrong, it was up to him to find out about it.

So Naegi slowly levered himself up off the ground, taking care to move his head as slowly as possible to minimize the amount that the room spun around him. He managed to get himself upright, and used the corner of the bed to haul himself up to sit on the edge of the mattress, where he’d fallen asleep over his e-handbook.

The handbook was still where he’d left it, propped open against a fold of his blankets. It showed the first floor dorm area, and apparently Monokuma’s upgrade was still in place, because he could see his own icon sitting alone in his room. But when he immediately looked down the rest of the hall, Kirigiri’s dorm was still alarmingly empty. In fact, he didn’t see her anywhere on this part of the floor, not even in the cafeteria. That wasn’t good at all – Kirigiri rarely skipped the breakfast meeting. Maybe it hadn’t started yet?
Naegi’s eyes automatically went to his clock at the thought of the meeting – and he nearly fell over again at the sight of the time. It wasn’t seven, like he’d been assuming – it was past nine, nearly mid-morning. Had he just slept through the morning announcement? It seemed unbelievable that he could have missed something so loud – but on the other hand, he’d been pretty exhausted. He still was, truth be told, but not quite to the same extent as yesterday, when he’d been practically asleep on his feet.

If it was past nine, then that would explain why the cafeteria was empty – the breakfast meeting time had come and gone without him. Naegi frowned. Did that mean that no one had noticed that he wasn’t there? Or maybe there just hadn’t been anyone else at the meeting to notice his absence. After all, only he and Kirigiri had attended the meeting yesterday.

Which would mean Kirigiri really hadn’t made it back in time, either. Naegi really hoped that wasn’t the case – the mastermind might not notice what she was doing if she was gone all night, but he didn’t think they could miss it if she was missing during the day, as well.

Was she really missing? Naegi flipped through the maps of the school again, just as he’d been doing last night – but Kirigiri’s icon was just as absent now as it had been then. That seemed to mean that wherever she’d gone that the mastermind couldn’t track her, she still had to be there. That, or there was some other reason that the handbook couldn’t show her location…

But no, he wasn’t going to think about that, not unless he found some real evidence that something had happened to Kirigiri. Her absence from the map didn’t prove anything. Even if she didn’t show up in any of the common areas, she had to be somewhere. Maybe if he tried looking around in person, instead of on the map, he’d find some hints. It had to be worth a try, anyway.

Naegi flipped the map back to the dorm area again, just in case she’d returned – and he paused, his eye falling on something strange. He’d noticed before that Togami’s dorm room was empty – but he hadn’t realized that the other boy was elsewhere in the dorms. Now that he looked, though, he could see that Togami was actually in Ogami’s dorm, standing close to her icon near the far wall. But Togami had been very cautious around Ogami ever since finding out that she’d been forced to work for the mastermind – so what would he be doing in her room?

Naegi’s hand slid out towards the map, almost of its own volition, resting his fingertips against Togami’s name. He hadn’t really had a chance to process how much he missed the other boy yesterday, when he’d been caught up with investigating the fifth floor with Kirigiri – but this morning, it was different. Now, he’d woken up alone and miserable, shaken out of a dream when he’d been happy and cared for.

In that dream, he’d started the day by seeing the person that he cared about most in the world, the person he wanted to see first thing every morning – and even though the dream hadn’t been real, the feelings were. Naegi knew that he didn’t want to wake up alone again. He missed Togami desperately – and he wanted the other boy back.
Naegi tries to decide which of his classmates he should search for first.

Kirigiri still hadn’t appeared anywhere on Naegi’s map by the time he’d managed to get himself ready to face the day. He’d hoped that maybe those extra minutes would be enough, but she was still as absent as before.

Naegi frowned down at the map, hesitating just outside his dorm room door as he tried to decide where to go first. If he’d known which direction Kirigiri had gone when she’d left the bathhouse last night, it might have given him some kind of hint about where he could start looking for her – but between his exhaustion and his worries, he hadn’t thought to pay attention to where exactly she’d been headed.

Well, most of the locked areas of the school had been on the fourth floor, hadn’t they? But when Naegi thought about trying to climb up all those stairs again, after how hard it had hit him yesterday, he couldn’t help but wince. Yes, he’d gotten just barely enough sleep last night to take the edges off his exhaustion – but he could still feel it stinging at the backs of his eyes or slowing his limbs with just a little extra heaviness, just waiting to overtake him again if he exerted himself too much. He’d nearly collapsed twice yesterday, and it was all too easy to think that it could happen again today.

And if he was honest with himself, Naegi had to admit that searching the school again wasn’t what he actually wanted to do right now. Without his conscious direction, his eyes drifted further down the hall towards Ogami’s dorm – where Togami still was, according to the map.

Naegi stared at the door, fighting the urge to move towards it. He wanted to throw the door open and insist that Togami hear him out one more time, so that he could offer the apology that he knew he should have given at the start. He wanted to explain everything he’d realized yesterday, now that he was awake enough to find the words to do it. The warm contentment woven throughout his dream last night had only made it worse, when Naegi had woken up to feel it evaporate – and it had left him with the stark understanding of just how badly he wanted it back.

But pursuing it now would be selfish. Naegi bit his lip and forced himself to turn away, heading down the hall in the other direction. He had to search for Kirigiri. They’d both known she would be taking a risk by agreeing to Ikusaba’s deal, and she hadn’t returned to tell him whether it had been okay or not. Naegi knew that was much more important than any personal drama he might be having, no matter how much his desire to fix his love life might occupy his thoughts. He was the only one who would know if Kirigiri was in danger. Once he’d found out whether she was safe, he could think about trying to fix his relationship with Togami.

Of course, if Togami had been on his own, Naegi wasn’t sure if he would have had the strength to stick to that resolve. But the other boy hadn’t been alone and approachable – he’d been in Ogami’s room for a surprisingly long time, considering his earlier suspicions that she was still working for the mastermind. But if he was starting to get past that, even if it was just enough to have a conversation alone with her – well, Naegi didn’t want to interrupt that. If the remaining students were going to have a prayer of working together against the mastermind, that was one of the
bridges they’d need to figure out how to rebuild.

As the stairs heading up from the first floor came into view, Naegi’s steps slowed until he came to a halt at the bottom of the staircase. He looked up, biting his lip as he debated. Did he really want to try to do this?

Kirigiri’s face flashed before his eyes, wearing that last sad smile she’d given him moments before walking out of the bathhouse to risk her life for the rest of them. It didn’t matter if he wanted to do this – he just had to get through it, that was all. He didn’t have another choice. He set his jaw, made sure he had a solid grip on the handrail, and began the slow climb up the stairs.

But when he reached the second floor, he paused, another thought occurring to him. If it really was true that one of the reasons Kirigiri might not be showing up on his map was that she was in an area without any cameras – well, there was an area like that on the second floor. He didn’t think the hidden room had had any locked areas that Ikusaba might have opened, but maybe it was still worth checking out. He left the staircase and headed over to the boys’ bathroom – and paused, hand on the door.

He’d promised Togami that he wouldn’t go back into the hidden room without telling him first. Okay, yes, he’d made that promise when they were still together, so it would be reasonable to assume the promise ended when the relationship did – but Naegi knew he didn’t want that relationship to be over. And if that was the case, then didn’t that mean the promise wasn’t over, either?

Naegi dropped his hand from the door, taking a step back. No. He wasn’t going to break his promise, not again. Maybe if he’d known for sure that he could help Kirigiri by going back into the hidden room, his answer would be different – but as long as it was just speculation, he wouldn’t go without telling Togami first. He would show Togami that he could keep his promises, that Togami’s concerns did matter to him – even if it was a little late. He’d just have to hope that it wasn’t too late.

He turned, preparing to head back for the stairs and continue his slow trek upwards – but before he could, a loud crash rang out from the other side of the second floor.

Even before he’d processed the sound, Naegi was already running in its direction, one hand outstretched along the wall so that he didn’t pitch forward as his sudden change of pace sent the world tilting around him. He tried not to let himself look at the stomach-churning whirl, focusing instead of the solidity of the floor beneath his feet and the steadiness of the wall at his side.

As he approached the library door, he could hear other noises – not quite loud enough to carry as much as that first crash had, but still enough to make it plain that something unusual was happening in there. He couldn’t hear any screaming or any other indications that someone might be in trouble – but after this long in Hope’s Peak, he knew enough to be alarmed by anything out of the ordinary.

Naegi grabbed the library door and tried to throw it open – but only a few inches in, it crashed into an obstacle with a resounding crack, snapping it back towards him. Jerking backwards to avoid being hit, Naegi lost his balance and toppled to the floor in a painful heap.

What had that been? Why had something been in the way of the library door? Ignoring his protesting joints, Naegi hauled himself back to his feet and tried to open the door again, but more cautiously.

The same barrier stopped it a second time, no matter how much of his weight Naegi tried to put
behind the door. He craned his head at the gap, and he could just manage to see that the obstacle seemed to be one of the waist-high bookcases, fallen on its side and knocked far away from its original place in the middle of the floor. But the bookcase wasn’t the only thing he could see.

Even from the narrow glimpse that the door afforded, Naegi could tell that the library was in ruins. Books had been flung in all directions, scraps of shredded paper littered the floor, and slashes had been gouged deep into the walls and furniture.

And in the middle of it all, he could see Genocide Jill, kneeling on the floor and clutching a half-shredded hardcover book to her chest.
Naegi knew his attempts to open the library door had been too noisy to miss, but it didn’t seem like Genocide Jill had heard him approach. She certainly didn’t react as he pushed fruitlessly at the door again – she just stayed kneeling in the center of the destroyed library, staring at the scraps of torn paper that littered the floor around her. For once, she wasn’t wearing her usual cheery grin – in fact, from what Naegi could see, she didn’t seem to have any expression at all, her face blank and slack.

“Uh – Jill?” Naegi called, trying to get her attention. “Are you okay?”

She didn’t respond, but Naegi couldn’t tell if that meant that she hadn’t heard him or that she was just ignoring him. Part of him wondered if maybe that meant that he should take the hint and go away, leaving Jill to her thoughts while he continued looking for Kirigiri – but then he looked at Jill’s face again. With her usual bright sharpness drained away, she resembled Fukawa more than ever, flooding Naegi with a sour rush of guilt. He could still see Fukawa as she’d been in the moment before Monokuma’s electrodes wiped her away for good, drowning in her own terror, convinced that none of the others had cared about her.

He’d let Fukawa believe that she didn’t have any friends among the other students, and it had cost the lonely girl her life. If he’d just tried harder to make her understand that it wasn’t true, then maybe, maybe she wouldn’t have felt driven to kill. He couldn’t know for sure that it would have made a difference – but he could avoid making the same mistake again.

“Jill, I’d really like to talk to you,” Naegi said, rattling the door a bit so that she might notice. “Can you let me in?”

And then suddenly, she was staring directly at him, without her head appearing to go through the motions of turning at all. With his hand on the door, Naegi was able to brace himself enough that the force of her blood-red eyes didn’t push him a step backwards, but it was still a near thing.

“Oh, you want to come in?” she hissed, the words barely loud enough for him to hear. “You want to talk again? So two sets of scissors weren’t enough, is that what you’re telling me? If that’s the case, I’ve got plenty more!”

Naegi winced. He didn’t really want Jill to whip out her scissors in his direction again, not when the wound on his cheek still throbbed if he opened his mouth wrong – but if she’d really wanted him to go away, he was pretty sure she would have actually thrown the scissors instead of just threatening. “Look, I heard some weird noises from in there, and I just wanted to know if you’re all right.”

“Yeah? Well, if you’re oh-so-worried about it – I’m a-okay! Never been better, that’s me!” Jill tried to laugh, but the sound caught in her throat. “So get lost before something worse happens to you, Big Mac – wouldn’t want to make my White Knight mad.”
And with that, she took a flying leap backwards, carrying her out of range of the gap in the door.

Naegi frowned at the sliver of library that he could still see. Jill obviously wasn’t going to open the door for him – but should he really just leave her like that? It didn’t seem right, not when she was so clearly upset. The only way he could think of for the library to have been trashed so badly was if she’d done it herself – and if she had, then she was nowhere near as okay as she claimed. But it wasn’t like there was anything he could do if she wanted to keep him out...

“What’s this? Do I spy a student in need of administrative assistance?”

Naegi jumped at the sound a voice right behind his shoulder, jerking around to see Monokuma grinning up at him from far too close for comfort. “What do you want?”

“How sweet of you to ask! I’ll take a nice fresh picnic basket, with no park rangers in sight!” Monokuma laughed. “But what about you, Naegi? You can’t fool your headmaster – there’s something you want now, isn’t there?”

Naegi followed the line of Monokuma’s gaze to the blocked library door. “Are you saying you could open it for me?”

“Of course I could!” Monokuma said brightly. “There’s not a door in this school that I can’t open if I want to! The question you should be asking is if I would!”

Naegi knew there had to be a catch, since Monokuma was never helpful, not without some devious ulterior motive – but he couldn’t see what it was. “Okay, then – will you open the door for me?”

“Hmm… let me think.” Monokuma tilted his head for a moment. “No.”

Naegi heaved a sigh. He should have known that it wouldn’t work. Why would Monokuma offer to be genuinely helpful when he could be a disappointment instead?

“Aw, don’t be like that!” Monokuma said. “I can’t go around opening doors without a good reason – what kind of headmaster would violate his students’ autonomy that way? No, the only way I could open a door for you would be if you had some way to make me – some kind of contract that you could use to compel me to do what you wanted!” He grinned, his red eye gleaming. “But you wouldn’t happen to have anything like that, would you, Naegi?”

Naegi stared at Monokuma for a long moment. The bear couldn’t really be suggesting what Naegi thought he was, could he? Was anything in Hope’s Peak really that easy? It seemed incredibly unlikely, but still – he couldn’t stop himself from checking. He reached into his pocket and pulled out one of the three trip tickets Monokuma had thrown at him last night.

He hadn’t given the tickets more than a cursory glance at the time, but even that had been enough for him to notice that they’d been created with the same unsettlingly childish artwork as the graffiti scribbled on the classroom chalkboards. A tiny image of Monokuma leaned out of an airplane soaring across the ticket, waving up at the viewer with a happy grin. Naegi grimaced, flipping the ticket over to hide the creepy sight.

And when he did, he realized that the back of the ticket was covered in writing.

*This trip ticket can be redeemed for one day’s heart-pounding excursion for the bearer and any one additional student of their choice.** **Locations include any area within the bounds of Hope’s Peak Academy that is unlocked at the time of redemption.***

**All deceased students are disqualified from participation in trip ticket adventures!***
Naegi stared down at the writing, unable to hide the disgust that crossed his face at that final line. Of course Monokuma would want to rub it in that they’d all lost the opportunity to spend more time with the dead students. But as for the rest of it – well, even if Fukawa was gone, Jill definitely wasn’t dead. And the library door had only been barricaded, not locked. This ought to work – Naegi couldn’t see any reason why it wouldn’t.

The only thing that still made him hesitate was the wide grin on Monokuma’s face as the bear watched him think. Did he want Naegi to use one of the tickets to get the library door open? Why would the mastermind want that? Or was this Ikusaba again, trying to help from behind the scenes? But if that was the case, Naegi couldn’t see why she would want to risk giving herself away to try to help like this, either.

But even if he couldn’t see the benefit to the mastermind, he could definitely see why it would help him. He couldn’t think of very many reasons that Jill would want to barricade herself alone in the library, and none of them were good. If he could get inside and talk to her face-to-face, instead of through the tiny gap in the door, maybe he could make her understand that she wasn’t alone – and stop her from trying to do anything drastic. If he could help Jill, the way that he hadn’t been able to help Fukawa – well, maybe that was worth going along with whatever it was Monokuma wanted him to do, just this once.

“Okay.” Naegi took a deep breath, then held out the trip ticket to Monokuma. “I’d like to trade this in for a trip to the library with Genocide Jill.”
Chapter 125

Chapter Summary

Now that he's gotten the opportunity to talk to Genocide Jill, Naegi isn't sure what to say.

Before Naegi could change his mind, Monokuma sprang forward to snatch the trip ticket from his outstretched hand.

“Excellent choice, Naegi!” he said, beaming up in a way that sent Naegi’s stomach plummeting through the floor. “One thrilling day with a serial killer, coming right up!”

A loud burst of staccato explosions sounded from just inside the library, sounds that were all too familiar after the last trial’s executions. Naegi jumped away from the door, too many questions running through his head. Were there guns somewhere in the library? He hadn’t seen any, not like the ones in the locker rooms or the entrance hall – but he wouldn’t put it past the mastermind to hide weapons, either. But even if there were hidden guns in the library, why were they firing now?

A chill snaked through his blood as a horrible thought occurred to him. There was only one person in the library right now, after all. What if Monokuma had used his request as an excuse to whip out the weapons – and unleash them against the person Naegi had named? What if he’d made Jill a target? What if –

The library door swung slowly open, letting out the stench of burnt wood and scorched paper as the door’s movement forced the splintered remnants of the bookcase out of the way.

Naegi blinked at it, stepping forward through the library door to get a better look. He could see bullets lodged in the bookcase and floor around it, and it looked like they would have hit at just the right angles to fracture it. And once it had been in pieces, the bookcase hadn’t been sturdy enough to stand against the weight of the door, breaking the barricade and letting the door open.

Had the gunfire really just been Monokuma’s way of honoring Naegi’s request? That seemed bizarre – and it left Naegi even more worried about what he’d gotten into than he’d been a moment ago. He turned around to face Monokuma again –

Just in time to see the library door slam in his face. Naegi reached for the doorknob – but he was a little too late. The lock clicked into place just as his fingers closed on the handle, leaving him to rattle at the door as uselessly as when he’d been on the other side.

Naegi leaned his forehead against the door, trying not to groan as he finally made the connection, now that it was too late to do him any good. The ticket had specifically stated that it was good for an all-day trip. Monokuma had even repeated it before opening the door. So if he could use the ticket to get Monokuma to open the door for him, of course it could be used against him, too – to force him to spend the rest of the day on the “trip” he’d asked for, whether he actually wanted to or not.

“Looks like someone doesn’t know how to take a hint.”
Naegi lifted his head away from the door and turned towards the other side of the library, where Jill was staring at him with cold red eyes. She hadn’t produced a pair of scissors yet, hands crossed in front of her instead, but Naegi didn’t find the lack of obvious weapons as reassuring as it should have been.

“I – uh, I just wanted to see how you were doing,” Naegi said, wishing that he’d thought this plan through a little more before he’d decided to use Monokuma’s trip ticket to enter the library.

“Yeah? Well, take a good long look!” Jill flung out her arms to pirouette, long skirt flying out as she spun to show legs covered in even more bright red tally marks than he’d seen yesterday. “I’m running at one hundred and ten percent of amazing, no doubt about it!” She stopped short, braids whipping around her from the momentum. “So get lost.”

“Well – I don’t think I can,” Naegi said. “After Monokuma got rid of your barricade, he locked us in. Neither of us can get out now, not without breaking the rule about locked doors.”

“Is that so?” And without warning, Jill leapt forward to land at his side, hurling herself over the remnants of the bookcase with an unnatural strength that Fukawa had never shown any hint of possessing. She grabbed the door handle and shook it until the hinges squealed in protest – but it didn’t budge any more for her than it had for Naegi.

“I’m sorry,” Naegi said, sighing. “I didn’t realize that would happen when I asked Monokuma to open the door. I wouldn’t have done it if I’d known it would get both of us stuck in here.”

“Oh, you’re sorry?” Jill put one hand on her hip and narrowed her eyes at him. “If you really want to make it up to me, you can stay the hell out of my way.” She leaned forward, tongue rolling out of her mouth to curl lasciviously in front of his face. “Or I might just have to show you what being sorry really means.” And with that, she bounded back over to the larger walls of bookcases, sending a storm of paper scraps fluttering up from the floor as she went.

Naegi looked after her, wondering if he should try to follow her and press the issue – but he could see the telltale silver flashes of her scissors as she wove her way through the shelves. He raised a hand to his cheek, fingering the bandage from when he’d annoyed the genocider yesterday. Maybe if she wanted to be left to trash the library in peace, he should just let her. After all, slashing up inanimate objects wasn’t exactly the worst thing she could be doing with her scissors.

He took a few steps away from the door, looking around for an out-of-the-way place to sit until Jill calmed down enough to talk to him – and he frowned as his foot crunched down on the cover of one of the destroyed books. Some part of him objected to treating books that way, even if the book in question had already been ruined beyond recognition. He bent down to pick it up, figuring that he could at least toss it in the trash if there was no point in putting it back on the shelves – but then as he got a better look at the cover, he froze.

The name Toko Fukawa blazed up at him, stark and unforgiving on the shredded cover. It looked like there had been a picture of a man on there once, staring off into the distance with wistful grace – but his handsome face had been obscured by the deep slashes in the cover, carved in the shape of a fanged mouth in a wide, monstrous grin.

Naegi set the book gently on the corner table, then picked up another of the scattered books. Sure enough, Fukawa’s name stared back up at him again. The only difference was that this time, a string of Xes and Os marred the cover, like a child’s offering of hugs and kisses.

Instead of putting the book aside immediately, Naegi flipped this one open. Nearly half the pages had been ripped out, and most of the ones that remained had been torn or defaced in some way.
Bright red ink had been scribbled through the book, sometimes in random designs and sometimes with vicious words. One of the pages, which had included a scene steamy enough to make Naegi blush, had the word LIAR scrawled across it, the ink bleeding through the paper to stain the pages beneath.

Goosebumps crawled along Naegi’s neck as he stared down at the page, giving him the distinct feeling that he’d looked into something never meant for his eyes. He’d had the same feeling once, a couple years back, when he’d accidentally caught a glimpse of his sister’s diary – like he’d looked uninvited into someone’s soul. He hastily closed the book and turned back to the table, planning to put it down without examining it any further –

And he came face to face with Jill, sitting on the table with the first discarded book dangling from one hand. She caught his eyes in her cold red gaze and gave him a sharp grin. “Read anything interesting lately?”
Chapter 126

Chapter Summary

Genocide Jill shares her literary criticism about Toko Fukawa's novels.

Naegi dropped his gaze from Jill’s, looking back down at the ruined book in his hand. “Sorry,” he said, offering it back to her. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“Huh? What’ve you got to be sorry about?” Jill didn’t take the book back, her grin only widening. “Books are there to be read, that’s why Gloomy got them all dolled up for the world. If she wanted them to be a big secret, she’d have left them as sticky journals tucked under her pillow. She’d want you to read her sordid little fantasies!”

“I don’t think they’re sordid,” Naegi protested. He’d gotten one of Fukawa’s books from the library when the second floor had first opened, feeling a little curious about just what sort of books an Ultimate Writing Prodigy might produce – and while he was pretty sure a lot of it had gone well over his head, he could tell there was a really emotional love story along with the racier parts.

“Oh, so you have read them!” Jill said, tossing the book from one hand to the other in a rustle of loose pages. “Great! Then you can give me a little literary feedback. See, you may not have noticed, but I’ve made a few edits to Gloomy’s pretty little prose – just a few minor tweaks, but I think they really add to the artistic merit of the work!” And without warning, Jill seized a handful of papers from the book, ripped them out, and flung them in his direction.

Naegi flinched back at the onslaught, half-expecting scissor blades to be concealed among the pages – but no, only plain printed paper drifted to the floor around him.

“So let’s hear it!” Jill said, red eyes pinning him in place. “You wanted to talk to me so bad you dragged out that bear to open the door – so go on, tell me what you have to say!” And now her scissors finally materialized in one hand, spinning around to point in his direction. “And don’t you worry about being harsh – I take constructive criticism really well!”

Naegi looked from the scissors to the papers scattered around him, not quite sure what Jill actually wanted from him – but he didn’t see an option other than going along with her demands. He stooped to pick up one of the most intact pages and looked it over, trying not to be too disconcerted by the intensity of her stare.

The page looked like it had been a dialogue between the main character and her love interest, but it was a little hard to tell. All the love interest’s lines had been written over with long repetitions of the words FAKE, LIES, TRASH, and other vitriol. And when he looked at the heroine’s responses, it seemed like every line of dialogue had been obscured by the same sentence, written over and over in tiny print.

**TOKO FUKAWA WANTS TO BE ME.**

“I think I really captured the essence of what she was going for!” Jill said. “Why bother with a hundred thousand of her boring words when I can do the same thing in less than ten, right?”
“Well – I think there’s probably a little more to the novel that just that,” Naegi hedged.

“Oh, that’s what you think? Well, you’re wrong!” A splintery crack rang through the air as Jill slammed her scissors point-first into the tabletop mere inches away from her own leg. “I’ve been reading it all, page after page after page of this tripe, and all I saw was a pathetic little girl’s wet dreams about finally being more than the coward she is!”

Naegi blinked. “You mean – you hadn’t read any of her books before?”

“Well – I think there’s probably a little more to the novel that just that,” Naegi hedged.

“Oh, that’s what you think? Well, you’re wrong!” A splintery crack rang through the air as Jill slammed her scissors point-first into the tabletop mere inches away from her own leg. “I’ve been reading it all, page after page after page of this tripe, and all I saw was a pathetic little girl’s wet dreams about finally being more than the coward she is!”

Naegi blinked. “You mean – you hadn’t read any of her books before?”

“What, you think I had nothing better to do than wade through all the drivel she spewed?” Jill laughed, the edge to the sound sharp enough to cut. “I don’t waste my time hunched over a heap of papers playing pretend about what it would be like to do the things I want – I do them!”

Her arm shot out to hurl the book across the library, and it hit the nearest bookcase with a crack that knocked a couple more books to the ground. Naegi started to move towards them, his automatic instinct to pick them up, before he remembered and caught himself.

Apparently Jill had noticed anyway. “Don’t bother,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Every time I get rid of one there’s still a dozen more, every single one infested with the same insipid little reader stand-in. I don’t even know why she bothered giving them different names – she should have just called them all Toko and been done with it!”

Naegi frowned. Sure, Jill usually seemed eager to voice her contempt at the drop of a hat – but there was something about this that felt different from the insults she’d flung at Asahina or her derision of boys other than Togami. “It really bothers you, doesn’t it?”

“Oh, you think so? You think I care about Gloomy’s stupid fantasies?” Jill leapt down from the table, landing directly in front of him to lean down and glare directly into his face. “The only thing that bothers me about that crap is that I didn’t get a look at it sooner! If I had, I would’ve known not to waste my time.”

“What do you mean?” Naegi asked, not quite following this sudden shift in what Jill was saying.

“Don’t you get it?” Jill snapped. “She dreamed up a whole stable of adorable boys, made sure that every one of them would leave their girls – and book after book after book, not a single one of these twits dies in the blood-soaked glory they deserve! Responsibilities, other women, fatal disease, shitty timing – they have a thousand and one excuses for bailing, and she just lets them get away with it!”

“So – you mean you’re mad because the books don’t all end with the heroines murdering their ex-boyfriends?” Naegi asked slowly.

“All? Hah – she didn’t even have the guts to write one!” Jill snarled. “She went on and on about googly-eyed stares and pounding hearts and other crap, like that was what she really wanted!”

Naegi frowned, thinking about all the things Fukawa had said – her obsessive fantasies about Togami, her habit of linking ordinary actions back to something sexual, her intense pride in her romance novels as being true literature. “Wasn’t it?”

It was the wrong thing to say. Jill’s face twisted at the words, turning into something almost as ugly as Fukawa had always described herself to be. “You think I don’t know what she wanted?” Her voice rolled out low and deep between them, closer to a growl than to ordinary speech. “You think I’m confused about the hopes and dreams screaming in my head? I know what Toko Fukawa really wanted, deep down in her worthless little heart, and this,” she tore the page from Naegi’s
hand so fiercely that it ripped down the middle, “was not it.”

“Okay,” Naegi said hastily, dropping the scraps of paper from his hand. He hadn’t meant to upset her that much. “I was just wondering, but I guess you’d know better than me.”

“That’s right,” Jill said, taking a step closer. Instinctively, Naegi found himself taking a step backward, trying to maintain the same amount of distance between them. “You get it, don’t you, Makyutie? You understand. I know what she really thought. I know what she was hiding with every fluffy little mask of heroine she tried to use to disguise herself.”

Only when Naegi’s back hit one of the bookcases did he realize that Jill had still been walking towards him, backing him halfway across the ruined library. He tried to take a step to one side, so that he wasn’t pressed up against the wobbling shelf – but Jill sidestepped in front of him before he could.

“What are you doing?” Naegi asked, his eyes darting towards her hands. She didn’t have her scissors out, not yet – but somehow, that didn’t make him feel any better.

“Oh, just talking.” Jill grinned at him, her tongue glistening wet and red as it curled between her lips. “You wanted to talk, didn’t you?”

“Well – yes,” Naegi said, leaning back against the shelf as Jill’s tongue flicked too close to his face for comfort. “But maybe we could keep doing that sitting down?”

“And disrupt our cozy little chat?” Jill’s hand slammed into the shelf inches from his head, making it sway alarmingly at Naegi’s back. “I don’t think so. You’re going to stay put right where you are.”
Naegi tries to explain his views on friendship to Genocide Jill.

With Jill standing so close in front of him, Naegi couldn’t have moved if he’d tried – so instead, he braced himself against the swaying bookcase as best he could, meeting her blazing eyes directly. He didn’t know what Jill wanted from him, or why she was keeping him pinned in front of her – but until she explained, he wasn’t going to cower or try to hide. He couldn’t do that to her – not after Fukawa.

“All right,” Naegi said, hoping his voice sounded steadier to Jill’s ears than it did to his own. “If that’s what you want, I’m not going anywhere.”

Jill narrowed her eyes at him. “Well, don’t you think you’re brave? Standing here all sugar and spice and oh so nice, acting like we can all get along if we just try hard enough. Does it make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside?”

“No,” Naegi said, his shoulders dropping a little as he was forced to remember just how badly everyone had proven they could get along over the past few days. “Nothing here does. I’m not pretending to be some brave hero, or whatever it is you think I’m doing. That’s not why I came in here to talk to you. It’s just – we don’t have anything else to rely on but each other, you know?”

“You think so? How sweet!” A wild laugh tore its way from Jill’s throat. “So you want me to rely on you, is that it? Better tell my White Knight if that’s how you feel – you know I’m game for a double feature any time!”

“You think so? How sweet!” A wild laugh tore its way from Jill’s throat. “So you want me to rely on you, is that it? Better tell my White Knight if that’s how you feel – you know I’m game for a double feature any time!”

“‘That’s not what I meant!’ Naegi protested, a little alarmed at that misinterpretation. It had to be deliberate, right? Even if she wasn’t aware of his fight with Togami, Jill couldn’t really think he was propositioning her for a threesome in the middle of the library. “I just meant – well, friends should be able to trust each other, that’s all. So I wanted to be someone you could trust.”

Jill had gone very still in front of him as he said the words – and only as he noticed it did Naegi realize just how unusual that was for her. She always seemed to be moving somehow, whether she was bounding across a room, twirling her scissors, or gesturing wildly. The constant motion almost never stopped, drawing any available eyes in her direction. But now – now she wasn’t moving at all, and in spite of himself, a faint chill of warning began to creep its way down Naegi’s spine.

“Friends, is it?” Jill’s voice was little more than a hiss through the air, hardly audible even though she was so close to him. “Friends should trust each other? So are you my friend, then?” She leaned closer still, until he could feel her breath hot on his face. “Or were you hers?”

Naegi stared at the girl in front of him, but it wasn’t just the genocider he saw looking back at him. Another girl with the same face had said the same thing to him at the end of the last class trial, in those few moments she’d had to explain herself after they’d all voted for her guilt.

_You’d be her friend._
You’d rather have her around than me.

Naegi had never felt that way, not once – but he could see how those thoughts would have wormed their way into Fukawa’s head. The two personalities couldn’t both exist at the same time – everything about them had to be one or the other, writer or genocider, depressed lack of confidence or cheerful extroversion. When their whole lives were divided by a sharp line of either/or, of course both girls would see a move towards one as a move against the other.

But no matter how understandable those kinds of thoughts might be, Naegi hated even having to acknowledge them in the privacy of his own head. Liking one of the personalities didn’t mean he had to hate the other. Fukawa would never get the chance to understand that idea – but Jill still could.

“I’m both of your friends,” Naegi said. “I was hers, even if she didn’t know it, and I’ll be yours – if you want me to be. I know I haven’t actually spent that much time with you, but – well, that doesn’t have to matter. Not if we don’t let it.”

Jill’s eyes tracked him like a snake’s, flicking across his face to follow even the tiniest change in his expression. “Just like that?”

Naegi nodded. “Just like that.”

Her hands slammed against the bookcase, almost shaking Naegi off his feet as the entire structure rattled behind him. His head cracked back against the hard wood, too close to the same place that he’d fallen to the floor that morning, and bright stars of pain burst across his vision. He couldn’t see anything but searing white, but that didn’t stop him from hearing the words Jill snarled in his ear. “Then you’re an idiot.”

Naegi’s vision cleared to find Jill leaning in so close that he could feel wisps of her bangs brushing his forehead, glaring at him with eyes as red as freshly spilled blood.

“You think you can just call someone your friend, and it happens?” Jill said. “That saying the words is enough to make it true?” She laughed again, so loudly that the sound rang painfully through Naegi’s aching head. “If that’s the case, then tell me – how exactly are you supposed to be someone’s friend if you haven’t got their back?”

Naegi blinked, trying to push back the aching in his head enough that he could focus on what Jill was saying to him. “But – I do. I wouldn’t turn on you or anything like that. You can trust me.”

Her laugh stopped sharply, leaving the air ringing with the sudden silence. “Bullshit.”

Naegi didn’t reply, not quite sure what to say to such a stark answer.

“How can anyone trust a person who can’t even pick a side?” Jill demanded. “You say that you’re friends with both of us? Well, all I hear is a coward trying to wriggle his way out of a tough choice.”

“That’s not true!” Naegi protested, stung by the accusation.

“Oh, so it’s just a coincidence that you never once thought to say any of this while Gloomy was still out and about?” Jill laughed again, bitter and cold. “Not a bad play, really, even if you won’t admit it. If she’d heard someone who’d claimed to be her friend saying the same thing about me?” She shook her head. “She’d have hated you as much as she hated me.”

It was the same thing Jill had said to him yesterday, moments before she’d thrown her scissors at
him – that she could feel Fukawa’s hatred of her. He didn’t believe that the death knells echoing through Jill’s head could be the entirety of how Fukawa had felt about her alter ego – but the last time he’d tried to say as much, he’d ended up with his face sliced open. There had to be some other way to approach the issue, to calm her down and make her understand.

“I’m not making any kind of play,” Naegi said at last, squaring his shoulders and straightening his spine. “Maybe – maybe Fukawa would’ve seen it the way you think – but if she had, I’d have tried to explain it to her, too. Right now, with the mastermind manipulating us, it’s would be so easy to turn on each other – but if we want to have any chance at all, we can’t let them. We have to trust each other – all of us do.”

Jill snorted, a puff of heat against Naegi’s cheek. “So you’re saying you’d even drag the dead kids into your little fantasy world? Planning to join hands with the corpses for a campfire singalong?”

Naegi felt the lines of grief crack across his face, just for a moment, before he managed to pull himself together again. “No, not that. But – even if the others are dead – we can’t let everything that’s happened twist them into something they weren’t. The only reason any of us turned on the other is because the mastermind keeps forcing us to be the worst parts of ourselves. But that isn’t everything – and whatever Fukawa felt in that last moment isn’t everything, either. It couldn’t have been. I mean, you don’t hate her, right?”

Jill didn’t answer, staring back at him with an expression Naegi didn’t know how to read. “Is that what you think?”

A shiver of unease flickered through the back of Naegi’s mind at her words – but he wasn’t sure what he could do about it, other than tell the truth. “Yes.”

“Really?” Jill tilted her head to look at him from an angle, a snort of laughter escaping from her. “You think I don’t hate a gloomy little coward who had to build herself a wall of words just to pretend she had something worth living for? Someone who spent all her life wishing she could be someone else so hard that she actually made it happen – and then didn’t like what she got? You think I wouldn’t hate a girl like that?”

Naegi nodded slowly. “Right.”

“You’re really sticking to it!” Jill laughed again, louder than before, and Naegi could feel the bookcase wobble behind him as she pressed forward. “You sure don’t give up once you’ve got an idea in your head, huh? You actually believe that Gloomy and I could’ve –” A giggle choked off the words for a moment. “Could’ve gotten along, learned to coexist – even been friends!”

“I don’t know about that,” Naegi said hesitantly. “I mean – I don’t know very much about how split personalities work. But it seems like it would’ve been a good solution for you both.”

“Oh, I’ll just bet you think that!” Jill’s laughter shook through her so hard he could see her trembling, harsh and broken. She drew back a hair, arms falling to her sides – but Naegi couldn’t bring himself to move away. “Living in a golden little bubble where you can make the world what you want it to be! Tossing aside any part of reality that doesn’t match!”

Jill’s laughter rose in wild cackles through the air, jagged as shattered glass. “You’re just like her!”

As she screamed those final words, her hands shot forward to shove against Naegi with a flash of silver that screamed bright across his arm – and hit the shaking bookcase with just a little more force than it could withstand. As it collapsed in an avalanche of tumbling hardcover books and splintering shelves, something dragged Naegi backwards with it, pinning his arm to the crumbling
shelves. He fought not to move with it – but when he tried to pull his arm away, agony blazed through him with unexpected ferocity. White hot and blinding, the only escape from it was to let the pain drag him down into the merciful darkness of unconsciousness.
Chapter 128

Chapter Summary

After his argument with Ogami, Togami tries to come up with a plan for how best to thwart the mastermind.

Togami sat in the cafeteria, scowling down at the half-eaten remnants of the late lunch he’d put together for himself, and tried to decide what his next move should be. It had been all well and good to storm out of Ogami’s room in a haze of righteous anger, determined to find some leverage that he would be able to use against the mastermind – but all the determination in the world didn’t mean much unless he could figure out some way to translate it into action.

And he’d tried – everything he’d thought might work, and several things he hadn’t. But all of it had come to nothing. He’d even rechecked all the locked doors in the school, on the off chance that one of them might have reopened somehow – but of course they hadn’t. Even the headmaster’s office remained stubbornly closed, in spite of the fact that the mastermind hadn’t managed to repair the damage that Ogami had done to the door. The broken lock didn’t seem to make much difference with a heavy barricade blocking the way.

The thought of all those locked doors turned his stomach, and Togami finally shoved away from the table in disgust, taking his plates to dispose of in the kitchen. He hated sitting around here counting off the wasted seconds when he could have been doing something more useful. He knew there had to be a clue *somewhere* in the school, or the mastermind wouldn’t have bothered locking any of the doors – and it burned that he couldn’t get at it.

The memory of the obstinately closed door of the headmaster’s office frustrated him the most. It had been open earlier, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that if only he’d been just a little faster, he could have seen whatever the mastermind had squirrelled away in there. It *had* to be something useful, he knew it, or they wouldn’t have made such a point of barricading the door after Ogami had broken it.

Barricading – not relocking. Togami stopped short in his tracks in the middle of the dining hall. The lock on the door to the headmaster’s office had been broken so thoroughly that it couldn’t be used again – meaning that even though the door was currently impassible, it wasn’t technically *locked*. Did that mean that the rule about locked doors wouldn’t apply any longer?

It was a critical question to answer, since Monokuma had already demonstrated just what could happen if they played too hard and fast with loopholes in the school regulations. Asahina had been caught in a gray area of the rules, one that could have been interpreted in multiple ways – and Monokuma had chosen the most damning one. If that was the case, then Togami knew he would have to be very sure that he was operating within the exact wording of the rules if he wanted to try anything with the headmaster’s door. He probably ought to go upstairs and verify the state of the door one more time, before he made any serious plans.

But instead of leaving the cafeteria, Togami hesitated, looking around the empty room one more time. He’d been sitting there for nearly an hour, lingering over his meal, with the vain hope in the back of his mind that if he stayed long enough, someone else might show up, too. It was a reasonable assumption – everyone needed to eat, after all. Even if they’d all given up on the
breakfast meeting, as this morning suggested they had, no one could avoid meals entirely. Staying in the cafeteria during regular mealtimes seemed like it ought to bring him into contact with one of the other students eventually.

He certainly hadn’t managed to find them any other way. For all that he’d seen as he searched the school today, he might as well have been the only person left. He hadn’t expected to see Ogami out and about after leaving her festering in her own grief in her dorm room – but the other three remaining students still should have been somewhere in the school. He wasn’t too bothered by not seeing Kirigiri or Genocide Jill – but the fact that he hadn’t caught so much as a glimpse of Naegi was really starting to worry him.

He’d managed to dismiss his concerns after leaving Ogami’s room that morning, trying to convince himself that he was being realistic instead of letting his emotions run away with him. He’d gotten no answer when he’d finally nerved himself up to try Naegi’s bell – but the boy had been so exhausted the previous day that maybe he’d just slept through the noise. In fact, it might have even been better if he’d decided to sleep in instead of dragging himself out to the early breakfast meeting, since that would be an indication he understood that he needed to take better care of himself.

Of course, he still hadn’t answered when Togami had gone back to try the bell again before heading to the cafeteria – but it still might have been all right. It had been nearly noon by that point, so Naegi might have just gotten up and left. It didn’t necessarily mean there was any reason to be alarmed.

But as more and more time passed without letting Togami see the other boy, it was much harder to come up with reasons not to worry. The knowledge that he hadn’t seen Naegi since yesterday, nearly fifteen hours ago now, filled his chest with a hollow ache that he couldn’t quite ignore. He wanted to be near Naegi again, so that he could finally get the chance to listen to what the boy had been trying to tell him – and not just that.

Togami was starting to find that the longer he spent away from the other boy, the more acutely his feelings of affection hammered at him, to the point that the anger and pain of their fight was beginning to dull in comparison. Rather than focusing on what it had felt like when he’d believed that Naegi had rejected him, he found himself thinking about the way Naegi smiled at him, open and warm, his eyes bright with trust even after Togami had made an empty threat to kill him. Naegi hadn’t smiled at him since they’d fought – and Togami couldn’t believe how much he missed it. There was something bleeding and raw in his heart that wouldn’t heal until he saw Naegi smile at him again, free from pain and distress.

He had to admit that he’d come to the cafeteria at least partially with the intention of waiting here until Naegi finally showed up, or at least until one of the others appeared who might know where the boy had hidden himself. If he left now, even if it was only for a few minutes to look at the headmaster’s door again, he’d be running the risk of missing any of the other students who might stop by. And if he didn’t find anyone today, he wouldn’t know for sure whether Naegi was actually all right or not. The thought of spending another day in this limbo, with matters between the two of them still unresolved – it was intolerable.

But on the other hand, would it be any better to waste his time sitting around waiting for something that might never happen? That was exactly the sort of thing that he’d decided only a few hours ago that he wouldn’t do any longer. Yes, he wanted to be sure Naegi was safe – but if he let that stand in the way of pursuing a potential lead, then he’d trapped himself here more thoroughly than the mastermind ever could have.
Naegi wouldn’t want him to make that choice, especially not in his name.

That decided it. Togami turned for the door and headed out of the dining hall, striding briskly towards the stairs. He would go up to the fourth floor, examine the headmaster’s door again, and then return to the dining hall to wait while he thought about possible plans. He always appreciated the opportunity to multitask.

But he was only halfway up the first flight of stairs when he heard a riot of steps above him, clattering down from the second floor at full speed. He only had a moment to dodge to one side before Genocide Jill came tearing around the corner, barely avoiding a collision.

Jill screeched to a halt as she recognized him, spinning towards him like a homing beacon – and Togami froze as he got a good look at her. Splatters of blood stained the genocider’s pale skin, gleaming wetly on her hands with every spasm of her twitching fingers and tangling through the hair straggling from her normally tidy braids. She didn’t seem to notice, staring at him with wild eyes than seemed even less stable than she normally did.

“What happened?” Togami forced the words out through numb lips, taking a step towards her before he could even register that it might not be a good idea.

Jill’s eyes seemed to look straight through him – like she was so preoccupied with her own thoughts that he wasn’t even on her radar. “I – I didn’t want to do it.”

Togami went as cold as if she’d thrown a bucket of ice water over him. “What do you mean?”

“I just wanted him to stop talking,” Jill said, a pleading note entering her words.

*Him.* There was only one other *him* left in the school.

Togami lunged forward and seized Jill’s shoulders, forgetting for the first time that this was a serial killer he was manhandling. “*What did you do?*”

Jill trembled in his grip, though he couldn’t tell if the emotion causing it was fear, shock, or something else entirely. “He wouldn’t stop. He kept telling lies, and he *wouldn’t stop.*” She stared up at him, blood and bruises stark against her pale face. “So I made him.”
Chapter 129

Chapter Summary

Togami finds out what happened to Naegi while he was alone with Genocide Jill.

The world tilted and spun around Togami at Jill’s words, everything else receding in a nauseating whirl that knocked his perspective askew. Waves of ice washed over him, choking him with bitter cold instead of air. He couldn’t see, couldn’t feel, couldn’t hear anything except those words, branded fire-bright across his soul.

_I made him stop._

Those words from a serial killer who targeted attractive young men, who had admitted she found Naegi adorable – bile clawed its way up Togami’s throat, acrid and burning.

“Where?” He could barely get the word out.

Jill’s eyes flickered along Togami’s face, then past him down the stairwell. “I don’t –”

“Oh, where is he?”

“The library, but –”

Togami was up halfway up the stairs before she’d finished speaking, paying no heed to whatever that sentence would have been. He’d gotten the only words that mattered from her, and he couldn’t trust anything else she tried to say. Not until he’d seen the truth of the situation for himself.

He’d never run so fast in his life, tearing around the bend of the stairwell and down the hall towards the heavy library door. Maybe he’d open it to find he’d misunderstood what Jill had meant, that it wasn’t what he feared, that Naegi was safe and everything was perfectly fine –

He seized the handle and wrenched it open – and knew immediately that nothing was fine. It might never be fine again.

The scene in the library might have been his worst nightmares brought to life. Some destructive force had torn the room apart, leaving books scattered and furniture destroyed – and in the center of it all, amidst the collapsed ruin of one of the largest bookshelves, Naegi lay crumpled and unmoving. The silver gleam of scissors flashed from his side, and on the ground around him, Togami could just make out a few red letters in a familiar bloody scrawl.

Togami cursed how slowly his legs seemed to move as he threw himself across the room. It took hours before he could move, at least a year for every step. Untold eternities seemed to pass before he could finally drop to his knees at Naegi’s side and lay his fingers against the curve of the fallen boy’s neck. He held himself frozen, couldn’t take so much as a breath, not even daring to pray as he waited –

Until he felt the tremble of a pulse faint beneath his fingers. Soul-deep relief shuddered through him, escaping from his throat with a single voiceless sob. Naegi was still alive. Whatever else had happened, however badly he’d been hurt, he was _alive_. And Togami would do whatever it took to
make sure he stayed that way.

Which meant he couldn’t just sit here counting Naegi’s heartbeats beneath his fingers. Naegi might not be dead, but he’d still been badly injured, if the blood trailing down the bookcase was any indication. Togami knew he had to figure out exactly what the boy’s injuries had been. He gritted his teeth until they ached, trying to force himself back into some pretense of objectivity before turning his attention to the rest of the scene.

Togami had thought that after all the murders he’d witnessed here in Hope’s Peak already, he’d developed an immunity to the sight of blood – but it seemed that in this case, just as with every other aspect of his life, Naegi was the exception. As he looked at the bright red stains on Naegi’s left arm, soaking his sleeve and dripping down the edges of the bookcase, the world seemed to pitch precariously beneath him, everything going unsteady and off kilter. Shock, he realized distantly as he found himself gasping for breath – he was probably going into shock at the sight.

And he couldn’t afford to do that. More to the point, Naegi couldn’t afford it. Togami clenched his hands until he knew his fingernails had to be gouging deep into his palms, though he couldn’t quite feel the pain it ought to be causing. He had to get a grip on himself.

Don’t look at the big picture, that was the way to do it. Focus on the small details, without thinking about what they meant. Follow the trails of blood to track the shallower lacerations on the back of the head, the face, the hands. Check for active bleeding, anywhere that the blood hadn’t stopped flowing yet. And finally, when the sight could be borne, look at the left arm.

Look at the scissors, driven through defenseless flesh and flimsy cloth to embed themselves in the wooden shelf beneath. Look at the blood, glistening damply on the dark shiny wood and dripping to the floor. Look at the letters, smeared on the ground nearby in the same bright red, spelling out BLOO before trailing away.

Fury bloomed hot and bright in his chest at the sight of those letters, burning away the fragile emotional distance Togami had tried to construct. No barrier he could create could possibly stand against the rage blazing through him at Genocide Jill’s half-written signature. I didn’t want to – that was what she’d said, as though she expected him to believe those letters had just materialized on the ground on their own.

Because whatever she tried to claim, however shaken she might have pretended to be – this hadn’t been an accident. The scissors and the writing proclaimed it as loudly as if the words had blared from a megaphone. Naegi had said something to annoy Jill – and she’d tried to murder him for it.

Tried – and failed. Togami had to remember that. However much blood Jill had spilled across the library floor, Naegi wasn’t dead. And as much as the alternative horrified him, Togami couldn’t understand why it hadn’t come to pass. Jill had clearly been halfway there, going so far as to draw her scissors and begin her signature crucifixion. Why had she stopped? If it was just because the shelf had collapsed, why not carry Naegi to another spot and finish the job? Had she not been able to move him? Maybe the scissors had been embedded too deeply into the shelf?

Togami shook himself. It didn’t matter why Jill hadn’t gone through with it. She was a mentally unstable serial killer driven even crazier by losing the other half of her personality – she probably wasn’t even capable of acting rationally anymore. There was no point in trying to analyze her logic, not when she might not have used any in the first place. Naegi was the important thing now – the only thing left that mattered.

He braced himself to look again, knowing it wouldn’t be enough but doing his best anyway. He had to assess the damage to Naegi’s arm. It was unforgivable that he’d let himself be delayed this
long already. If the injury was still bleeding – well, he might not know much about first aid, but he knew that wouldn’t be a good sign.

Togami turned back to Naegi, looking over the boy’s wounded arm and trying not to think too hard about the quantity of blood around it. Was the blood still pouring out, that was the question he had to answer. But he couldn’t quite tell, not with the fabric of all Naegi’s layered jackets blocking his view. Slowly, with a gentleness Togami hadn’t even known he possessed, he reached out to nudge the topmost layer of fabric out of the way.

It wouldn’t budge.

Togami frowned at it, puzzled. His normal instinct on finding something that didn’t move when he wanted it out of his way would be to yank harder – but he didn’t think that would be a good idea in these circumstances. Instead, he leaned forward, trying to get a better angle on what might be holding the jacket in place.

On closer examination, looking past the eye-catching red of too much blood, Togami realized that there was another color on Naegi’s arm that shouldn’t have been there. Circled firmly around his arm, wrapped flush around the base of the scissors, he could see long strips of navy blue cloth – the same color as Jill’s skirt.

Togami stared at the cloth blankly, not quite able to comprehend its presence on Naegi’s arm. It almost looked like the sort of bandage he might have decided to apply, putting pressure on the wound to slow the bleeding. But – that couldn’t be right. The only person who could have put it in place was Genocide Jill – and why would she go to the trouble of destroying her own clothes to bandage Naegi’s wound when she’d been the one to inflict it in the first place?

No – it couldn’t actually be a bandage, or anything else meant to help. It probably had some other terrible purpose, maybe something to do with the crucifixion process that she hadn’t been able to complete. That had to be why it was holding the scissors in place in the middle of the wound.

Those scissors – Togami could hardly stand the sight of them. He’d looked through too many pictures of Jill’s victims, pinned up and killed with identical weapons, to bear having them anywhere near Naegi, let alone leaving them stuck through his arm. They should come out. He reached out to grip the handles –

“No, don’t touch them!”

Togami jerked his hand away at the shout, twisting around towards the door. Ogami stood there, bracing herself against the doorframe, with Jill just barely visible behind her.
Chapter 130

Chapter Summary

The students try to figure out how to treat Naegi's wounds.

Togami scrambled to his feet, placing himself between Naegi and the girls in the library doorway. “Don’t come any closer,” he snapped. They’d have to go through him before they could attempt whatever they’d come to do to the unconscious boy.

“Would you prefer to let him die of his wounds?” Ogami asked, her voice flat and her face expressionless as she watched him. “If so, say the word and I will leave you to your idea of treatment. Remove the weapon and watch him bleed out on the floor if you like.”

Togami wouldn’t have flinched at a physical blow, but those words struck him hard. He knew so little about how to treat injuries – it was entirely possible that he might have inadvertently made matters worse if he’d tried to help Naegi and gotten it wrong. But what else was he supposed to do – sit by and hope the injuries got better on their own? He knew that was a surefire path to disaster.

“Then what are you suggesting – that you can do better?” he demanded, crossing his arms. He’d meant the question to come out as a sarcastic sneer – but the words that reached his ears had a strange, pleading emptiness twisting them out of recognition.

Something in Ogami’s face changed at the words, the harsh chill in her eyes retreating a hair. “Yes. It’s common for athletes to injure themselves while training, so I’ve picked up some skill with first aid.”

“And that qualifies you to treat this?” Togami gestured behind him.

Ogami’s gaze flickered past him, skimming over the expanse of the bloody scene. “No. I do not claim to be a doctor – but I’m the best option here.” She looked back and met his eyes. “Do you want my help, or should I go?”

Togami hesitated, two sets of instincts warring within him. Ogami was a traitor, a spy who’d spent weeks deceiving them all and helping the mastermind keep them in this nightmare. She’d been ordered to kill one of them, even if Monokuma had since lifted the command. And that wasn’t even taking into account the fact that when he’d last seen her a few hours ago, she’d been so sunken in despair that she hadn’t even bothered to clean the days-old blood and grime from her skin. She was the last person he wanted to trust anywhere near Naegi, and he had to struggle not to scream at her to get as far away from him as possible.

But – when it came to the question of medical treatment, she had a point. Much as the fact galled him, Togami knew he wasn’t up to the task of giving Naegi’s injuries the treatment they needed. He could curse himself as much as he liked for not using some of his earlier free time to read up on first aid – but that wouldn’t help now. It made sense that Ogami might have more of the necessary skills to help Naegi than he did.

The two impulses clashed through his head in the seconds that he stood between Naegi and Ogami, thinking through possibilities and trying to decide what to do. She was a traitor – but she could help
– but he couldn’t trust her – but he had no other choice – the thoughts flashed round and round in his head in a maddening chain of questions. How could he let her near Naegi? How could he not? Once choice could give her the chance to hurt Naegi, an injury that would be his own responsibility for letting her have the chance – but the other would hurt Naegi by his own inaction.

A chance or a certainty, that was what it came down to. And he couldn’t choose to do nothing.

“Fine. Do it.” Togami stepped out of the way, giving Ogami a clear path to the other boy. “Help him.”

Ogami gave him a single nod before entering the room. Togami kept a close eye on the girl as she approached Naegi’s side, and when she knelt beside the wreckage of the shattered bookcase, he positioned himself less than an arm’s length away. If she tried something suspicious, he would catch it – and find a way to stop her.

But she didn’t try anything like that, at least not immediately. Instead, Ogami examined both Naegi and the debris around him with quick, efficient movements, apparently unmoved by the blood spilt through the area. Togami tensed when she first reached out to touch Naegi – but all she did was check his pulse, then make some minor adjustments to the position of his limbs to make his injuries more accessible. The scissors occupied her attention the longest, a deep frown lining her face as she peered at them from every angle.

Finally, she looked up, leaning back away from Naegi for a moment as she met Togami’s eyes again. “Well, he certainly seems to be making good use of his talent.”

Togami blinked, not sure what to make of the apparent non sequitur. “What?”

She sighed. “I don’t know if it’s good luck or bad, but this isn’t a fatal injury. The scissors missed any major arteries – if they had done otherwise, he wouldn’t have survived long enough for anyone else to arrive. It might still have gone badly without quick action, but it looks like the bandages and the pressure slowed the bleeding enough to keep him alive.”

Alive. All Togami’s joints seemed to give way to sudden weakness, and he slumped down with a single exhaled breath shaking through his cold lips. He’d thought so, he’d repeated the words to himself, but hearing the confirmation from someone else made it real in a way it hadn’t been before. Naegi was alive, and he would stay that way.

“His recovery won’t be easy,” Ogami went on, glancing back at Naegi’s arm. “Not with the limited resources we have available to us here.” She shook her head. “Even in ideal conditions, he would need stitches, medication, physical therapy – things too far beyond my skills.”

Togami gritted his teeth, swamped by hatred for everything this prison around them represented. If they’d been anywhere else, mere mention of the Togami family name would have brought the best doctors in the world to Naegi’s side without delay. He could have had surgeons, therapists, whatever it took to fix something like this and make the injury disappear as if it had never been. If they weren’t in here –

But he couldn’t dwell on that now. He redirected his scowl at Ogami, straightening again to look her in the eye. “Then what do you expect to do now? Do you intend to abandon him just because you can’t fix everything with a wave of your hand?”

“No. I’ll keep doing what I can,” Ogami said. “But I’m going to need your help.”

“Anything.” The word was out of his mouth before he made the conscious choice to say it.
She nodded. “We have to move him out of that mess – which means removing the scissors.” She took a deep breath, half-closing her eyes in thought. “I – I think I can do that part, but that shelf isn’t entirely stable. If it moves during the process, it could make the injury worse. I’ll need someone else to hold his arm and the shelf steady while I do.”

“Done,” Togami said at once.

She gave him a long, assessing look. “There will be more bleeding once it’s out – a great deal more. You’ll have to remain still.”

“Yes, I assumed as much. I’ll manage.”

She frowned, twisting to glance behind her. “Is Jill still here? Perhaps she might handle it better.”

“That murderer is not coming anywhere near him!” Togami snarled, leaning sharply forward. “I’ve said I’ll do it. Tell me what you need and let’s get on with it!”

Ogami sighed. “All right, if you’re sure. Then before we begin, I’ll need something to staunch the blood flow when it restarts.”

Togami glanced around the library, but he didn’t see anything that might do as a bandage. Presumably that was why Jill had had to tear her own clothes to hold the scissors in places.

Her clothes…

Togami shrugged off his jacket and offered it to Ogami. “Will this be enough?”

She looked it over and nodded, pulling his room key out of the pocket and handing it back. “It should do for now. All right, then. Put your hands here and here.” She indicated two places on Naegi’s wrist and elbow, where Togami could hold Naegi’s entire arm in place. “Try to hold the shelf as well.”

Togami put his hands where she’d said, trying his hardest not to focus on whose arm lay limp beneath his grip. It was easier if he kept his eyes away, and so instead of looking down, he watched Ogami instead as she moved across from him, face intent on the boy below.

She reached down to take hold of the scissors, tilted her head to judge the angle – and drew the silver blades out in a single smooth motion. Togami held Naegi’s arm firm against the shelf as she did, not letting the flesh twist or tear as the scissors came away. Something wet oozed over his fingers, warm and sticky – but he didn’t look down, not until Ogami had his jacket pressed hard against Naegi’s arm.

Slowly, Togami released his grip, giving Ogami better access to wrap the jacket in place to slow the fresh bleeding. So that was all she’d needed – just a few moments of pressure? He couldn’t understand why she’d seemed to doubt that he could do it.

He raised his hand to readjust his glasses – and saw bright red stains dripping from his fingers.

Blood.

Naegi’s blood.

Togami stared down at it, the roaring rush of wind in his ears drowning out anything else in the room, as black spots bloomed at the edges of his vision.
Naegi’s blood was on his hands.

Bright red seemed to consume his vision, flooding out until it was all he could see – until the darkness bled into it, and he felt himself collapse.
Chapter 131

Chapter Summary

Togami demands explanations from Genocide Jill.

The painful press of the floor against his side gradually forced itself onto Togami’s awareness, his shoulder aching with a dull, constant throb. What had happened? Why had he been sleeping on the floor, instead of somewhere sensible like a bed? Frowning, he opened his eyes to try to figure out where he was.

And the first thing he saw was Genocide Jill, sitting directly beside him and peering down into his face.

Togami shoved himself away and up to a sitting position, ignoring his aching shoulder in his haste to get away from the genocider. What the hell had she been doing hovering over him like that? Had he actually been stupid enough to fall asleep somewhere that wasn’t secure from her, or –

And that was when he got a look at the wreckage of the library around him – and remembered exactly what had happened.

The scissors.

The blood.

Naegi.

Togami twisted around to look behind him. The broken pieces of the bookcase still lay there on the ground where they’d been, still streaked red with blood and gouged from scissor blades – but Naegi was gone.

“Where is he?” Togami snarled, shoving himself to his feet and looming over Jill. “What did you do to him?”

“Nothing!” Jill vaulted up to her feet as well. “Well, nothing new, but you already knew about the scissors. Best thing about a trademark, it doesn’t leave room for questions! Gotta have a way to separate the true artists from the amateurs!”

“Shut up.” Togami snapped, glaring at her. He didn’t have much patience for her blather in the best of times – but with Naegi badly injured and missing due to Jill’s own actions, it was intolerable. “I’m only asking once more. Where is Naegi?”

“The Ogre’s taking him downstairs,” Jill said, waving a hand towards the door. “Said something about sterilization.”

Downstairs – that had to mean the nurse’s office. Togami turned and strode for the door, picking his way across the trashed floor a little more carefully than when he’d entered. There seemed to be another destroyed bookcase just beyond the door, this one scored with – gunfire? He shook his head, not bothering to spare it more than a glance as he headed past. None of Naegi’s injuries had been from bullets, so what did it matter if something had shot at a piece of furniture?
As he left the library and hurried to the stairs, the familiar patter of footsteps came from behind him. Togami swung around sharply to find Jill trailing a few steps back, the same way she’d kept trying to do after first revealing her existence.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he demanded, crossing his arms.

“Sticking by my White Knight,” Jill said promptly. “That was a nasty spill you took, baby! Gotta make sure there’s nothing wrong with that sexy head of yours.”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business,” Togami snapped. “Get lost.”

Jill tilted her head, one hand on her hip. “But I thought I’d go with you to check on Makyutie –”

“You’re not getting near him again!” Togami’s blood seemed to burn in his veins at the thought of Jill being anywhere in the vicinity of an unconscious Naegi. “One of your murder attempts is more than enough!”

“Please – what kind of two-bit hack do you think I am?” Jill tossed her braids dismissively. “When I try to kill people, they die! I told you, I just wanted to shut his mouth.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to say so before jamming your scissors through his arm?” Togami shot back. “You had a wide range of options that didn’t involve any stabbing – but you picked the one that left him bleeding out and unconscious with a bookcase fallen on him!”

“If he didn’t want to get stabbed, he should’ve stayed out of my way!” Jill said. “I told him to leave me alone, over and over and over again – and he just kept yammering at me!”

Togami could well believe that Naegi had done exactly that. After seeing Fukawa’s execution, Naegi would have been concerned for the remorseless murderer. He would have wanted to make sure she was all right and had whatever support she needed to cope with losing one half of her psyche. And Jill had taken advantage of that kindness to attack him.

“Baby, you gotta believe I didn’t want it to turn out like this,” Jill insisted, leaning forward intently. “Your boy’s cute, don’t get me wrong, I can see the appeal – but he’s never been the one I wanted to kill.”

“What, because you wanted to kill me instead? You think that makes it better?” Togami laughed, harsh and sharp. “And whatever you want to say, you can’t have been that committed to the idea.”

She blinked. “What –”

“I saw the floor,” he cut her off viciously. “You started writing your signature there, in his blood.” He shook his head. “Don’t pretend that this was some sort of mercy. The only reason you stopped is that you knew we’d all recognize your murder method. If you’d thought for a second that you could get away with it –”

The memory of Naegi pinned with the scissors and covered in his own blood flashed before Togami’s eyes again, a nightmare made vividly real. The knowledge of how easily it might have been so much worse choked him, burning hot and wet behind his eyes.

“You can’t believe that!” Jill protested indignantly. “When I want a boy’s blood on my hands, getting caught or not doesn’t matter. And – okay, you’re right, I thought about it. With him lying there all nice and vulnerable, who wouldn’t? But I stopped – because I couldn’t do that to you.”

Togami stared at her blankly. “What are you talking about?”
“I’m not saying I wouldn’t jump on a nice two-for-one special if I got the chance,” Jill said. “But taking him and leaving you behind? I wouldn’t do that to you.” She grinned at him. “If I ever rip your heart out, it won’t be metaphorical.”

Ice roared over the fire in his blood at that, alternating waves of hot and cold rushing through him. She knew. She knew just what Naegi meant to him, and how it had hit him to see the other boy so broken. He didn’t know if he’d gone pale with rage or red with mortification as he stared at Jill – but whichever it was, his expression made her take a step back.

“White Knight –”

“Get away from me.”

Jill’s smile fell from her face, leaving her looking lost without the mask of a grin across her face. “Master Byakuya – please –”

“Shut up.” Togami took a sharp step towards her, and she retreated in turn. “I don’t want to hear you talk. I don’t want to see you. You’re nothing but a criminal, a squalling child who destroys what she can’t have, and you don’t deserve to live under the same roof as someone like Naegi. You will not come near him or me again, do you understand?”

“But –” Jill’s red eyes were as stricken as if he’d slapped her. “Not ever?”

The word never burned on the tip of his tongue – but Naegi’s face flashed before his eyes. Not the pale, broken boy who had lain bleeding on the floor, but the boy who looked up at him with eyes bright with hope and pleaded for him to believe that they could all be friends if they just tried hard enough. Togami hadn’t believed it, not really – but Naegi had.

“Not until he asks me to change my mind,” Togami said finally. “Now get away from me before I change my mind.”

And with that, he turned and stalked down towards the stairs, leaving Jill alone in the hall.
Chapter 132

Chapter Summary

Togami goes in search of Ogami and Naegi.

As soon as Togami rounded the bend of the stairs that took him out of Genocide Jill’s line of sight, he sped up as fast as he could without tripping as he hurried down the steps. He should never have let her delay him so long, not when he didn’t know where Ogami had taken Naegi or what she might be doing to him – but he couldn’t let a murderer come trailing along after him, either. For all he knew, she’d seize the opportunity to finish the job.

Unless someone else did it before she got the chance. Yes, Ogami might have seemed eager to be helpful in the moment of crisis, but she didn’t exactly have the best track record for holding to her convictions. With Togami unconscious and Jill occupied with her obsessive stalking, Ogami could have done anything she pleased. It would be all too easy for a slip of the hand to have tragic consequences – and anything that happened could be blamed on the injuries Jill had already inflicted.

As soon as he reached the foot of the stairs, Togami was running those last few yards to the nurse’s office. He threw the door open to find Naegi lying pale and unconscious on one of the beds with Ogami bending over him, clean cloth and antiseptic in hand.

Togami crossed the room to Naegi’s side in a blink, dropping to one knee beside the bed and reaching out to feel the boy’s neck for a pulse again. He hung suspended in a breathless, terrible limbo – but no, there it was, proof of life beneath his fingertips. The fragile beats were weak, faltering – but they kept coming, over and over, because Naegi never gave up on anything. He wouldn’t be defeated, not by something like this.

He could have sat there for hours, tracking every beat of Naegi’s heart until the other boy woke and confirmed in his own words that he was all right – but Ogami’s movements on the other side of Naegi’s bed provided a constant reminder that nothing was over yet.

From what Togami could see, the collapsing bookcase hadn’t been kind to the boy, leaving smears of old dust along with the injuries. That had to carry some risk of infection – who knew what kinds of filth might have been breeding in all that grime? Ogami seemed to be making good progress in cleaning Naegi’s other injuries, using antiseptic and bandages to treat the lesser cuts and scrapes that dotted his exposed skin. Hopefully that would be soon enough.

Should he try to help her? Togami was about to offer – but then he looked down at his own hands. His stomach roiled as he focused on the red stain of his fingers touching Naegi’s neck, still dark with the other boy’s blood, and he had to look hastily away again. He needed to wash his hands, to get rid of the reminder of Naegi’s injury as well as to make sure he didn’t contaminate any of the medical equipment. He glanced around the nurse’s office – but just as he’d thought he remembered, there didn’t seem to be a sink on hand. What kind of second-rate excuse for a clinic didn’t have running water in the room?

That meant the closest sink would be in the bathroom next door. It wasn’t too terribly far – but the distance wasn’t the problem. To get there, he’d have to leave the clinic – and Naegi. Every time
he’d let Naegi out of his sight, something terrible had befallen the other boy – and that had been when Naegi was awake and alert. How much worse would the risk be now that he was unconscious?

Ogami’s presence didn’t do anything to reassure him, no matter how diligent she might seem in Naegi’s care. Two minutes could be more than enough time for her to change her mind again. He remembered the girl he’d left sitting alone in her shadowy dorm room, the girl who’d told him that they couldn’t protect anyone and giving up was the only option. It was all too easy to envision her sliding back into that cloud of gloom, deciding that helping Naegi wasn’t worth the effort after all.

And if it came to that, Togami realized that he didn’t even know why she’d changed her mind in the first place. He’d been so shocked by the bloody scene in the library, so startled by her appearance in the middle of it, that he hadn’t thought to ask what she thought she was doing. There had been no time, not in that moment of immediate crisis – but there was time now.

“What exactly were you doing in the library, anyway?” Togami asked, narrowing his eyes at her. “It was awfully convenient that you just happened to decide to leave your room for the first time in two days right when there was an injury for you to treat.”

“It wasn’t convenient.” Ogami didn’t look up from where she bent over a long, shallow gash along Naegi’s shoulder. “Jill told me what happened.”

Togami frowned. He’d suspected that was the answer, since it was the only possibility that didn’t involve an unreasonable number of coincidences – but that meant that Jill must have run straight to Ogami’s room after he’d left her on the stairs. “Why would she do that?”

Ogami shrugged. “She found the situation beyond her ability to handle, and apparently she’d heard somewhere that I’ve had some experience with first aid. She insisted that I come upstairs to help without delay.”

Togami could well imagine just how Jill had insisted, with threats and flashing scissors. “And so you came running to avoid being her next victim.”

“No.” Ogami’s hands went still for a moment, cloth pressed unmoving against Naegi’s shoulder. “It was just that when I was faced with the choice – I found that I couldn’t bring myself to choose inaction after all. This still may end badly, if the mastermind decides to intervene – but if I had stayed out of it, that wouldn’t have made it better. And whatever happened because of my inaction would have been my fault.”

What could have happened – Togami shuddered, unable to stand the thought of such a thing. “So you’ve finally decided to use your head for something other than spewing useless drivel.”

“Something like that.” Ogami went back to cleaning Naegi’s wounds.

Togami scowled, unable to avoid seeing the meaning of her words. Jill had brought someone with the ability to help Naegi, stopping Togami from removing those scissors in what he could see now would have been a disastrous decision. She’d bound Naegi’s wounds to buy enough time for real help to arrive. She’d even told Togami where Naegi was both times he’d asked, without any arguments or lies. With all of it added up together – she’d probably saved Naegi’s life.

He shook his head sharply. He refused to feel gratitude towards the girl who’d endangered Naegi’s life in the first place, especially when Naegi was still unconscious.

At that thought, his gaze dropped to the other boy as though the forces of gravity were pulling it
Did Naegi look a little better, or was it his imagination? Naegi had been in such a bad state already that it was difficult to tell what signs he should be watching for. Was it a bad sign that he was still unconscious, or was this just his body seizing the opportunity to recover from all the abuse it had endured over the past few days? Maybe he’d moved from unconsciousness to true sleep without waking up in between.

Sleep… why did he feel like there was something he should remember about that? He frowned, sifting quickly back through his memories, until –

“The school regulations!” Togami jerked around to peer into all the corners of the room, in case Monokuma might have been watching them from the shadows all along.

Ogami stared at him like he’d suddenly started speaking in tongues. “What are you talking about?”

“Sleeping anywhere other than the dorms is against the school rules,” Togami said impatiently. Didn’t any of the others bother to so much as glance through the rules after the first time they’d heard them? “Being unconscious must not count, since Fukawa never had any problems when she fainted – but we can’t rely on that for something long term.”

“Right.” Ogami set down the antiseptic and cloth, glancing around the office with a frown. “We’ll need to bring along anything we need to treat him, then. His room key should still be in one of his pockets –”

“No. Not his room.” Togami had had enough of Naegi being out of his reach. “Put him in mine.”

Ogami nodded. “All right, then. He shouldn’t be alone until he wakes up, anyway.”

“He won’t be,” Togami said with grim determination.
Chapter 133

Chapter Summary

Togami and Ogami move Naegi from the clinic to the dorms.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Moving Naegi from the clinic to the dorms was a more complicated procedure than Togami had expected. Ogami didn’t just scoop the boy up in her arms like a load of laundry – she went to some trouble to brace his arm solidly for the trip, ensuring that it wouldn’t shift around and worsen his injuries as she walked. She also seemed concerned about the position of his head, so much so that Togami was developing some dark suspicions about whether the collapse of the bookcase had added to Naegi’s existing head wound.

All in all, by the time Ogami had Naegi settled in her arms to carry him to the dorms, Togami was starting to feel some flickers of grudging respect for the girl. She obviously knew what she was doing, and she was using that knowledge to take very good care of Naegi, without arguing or complaining about it. She could have chosen to deny her first aid knowledge, to stay in her room, to leave Naegi to rot – but she hadn’t done so. He would have to think about what that meant later on, when there was room in his head for anything other than his immediate concern for Naegi.

But right now, as he walked back towards the dorms with his arms full of bandages, bottles, and other supplies from the clinic, thoughts like that slid out of his head every time he looked at the boy cradled gently to Ogami’s chest. Naegi had been hurt – and unlike any of his previous injuries, this would demand more treatment than a few days of rest. Jill’s scissors had left a hole in Naegi’s arm – not a huge hole, perhaps, since Jill’s scissors blades were fairly narrow, but that fact remained that there was now empty air in a place where Naegi should have had unmarred flesh and blood.

Togami knew people did recover from injuries like this one – but that was when they had immediate access to real medical care. With only a few cobbled-together bits of first aid training and the limited supplies of the nurse’s office, he had no idea how Naegi would recover – or if he ever would. If Naegi went too long without a real doctor to treat him properly, there was every possibility that he would bear the consequences of this injury for the rest of his life. Images of Naegi trying to cope with limited mobility, persistent tremors, or nerve damage flashed before his eyes, and he ground his teeth until they ached in an effort to hold back his fury at the thought.

It wouldn’t happen. He wouldn’t let things turn out that way. He’d already decided that he was going to work at finding a real way out of this prison – this just meant he had a shorter timeframe to work with than he’d thought. There had to be other things he hadn’t tried yet, places to search or plans to attempt, and he wouldn’t rest until he’d tried all of them. He’d even work with Kirigiri if that was what it took.

If she ever turned up again, anyway. Togami frowned as they passed her dorm room, giving her door a brief glance of suspicion. Now that he thought about it, why hadn’t she shown up yet? She could usually be counted on to turn up whenever anything odd happened, poking and prying into everything like it was her god-given right to know it all. He couldn’t think of a time when she hadn’t.
No, wait – that wasn’t quite right. Kirigiri had always turned up when he was around for major occurrences, but there had been one time when neither he nor she had been there – during the third murder investigation, when Celeste and Yamada had knocked him out and locked him up. He’d been the primary suspect in that case, yes, but the other students had also wondered about her – because she’d been missing for the same period of time. And if he put the pieces together about what she’d told Naegi after the trial, it was fairly obvious where she must have been.

Kirigiri hadn’t joined the murder investigation because she’d been investigating something more important – the mysterious hidden room she’d found, the source of a potential clue or weapon to use against the mastermind. That was the only thing that could possibly be important enough to take priority over the life-or-death class trials. And if she wasn’t here now, when the boy that she kept insisting she viewed as a friend and partner had been brutally wounded – did that mean that she’d found something else?

Togami scowled. There was no point in getting his hopes up like that, not when it was just as likely that she’d decided to spend the day in the garden or the music room and just hadn’t noticed that a disaster had occurred several floors below. She’d have to return to the dorms eventually, if she didn’t want to break the rule about sleeping elsewhere. When she did, he’d find out just where she’d been if he had to drag every word out of her.

But that was something to worry about later, after Naegi was properly settled in his room, where Togami could make sure that any threats were kept well away. As Ogami stopped in front of his door, Togami shifted his armload of supplies so that he could reach into his pocket for his room key.

He had a brief moment of hesitation as he opened the door. Letting Naegi in was one thing – but Ogami was another issue altogether. His instincts all growled a hair-raising protest at the thought of an admitted traitor having access to his bedroom.

He squelched them, standing aside to let Ogami carry Naegi past. He’d already tacitly agreed to the idea that she could enter when he insisted that she finish treating Naegi in his room instead of the other boy’s. Besides, it wasn’t as though he was giving her free rein of the place – he fully intended to keep a close eye on her every moment that she was in the room.

He had to keep watch on what she was doing to treat Naegi, of course – but it wasn’t just that. He still had the enormous knife that he, Kirigiri, and Naegi had found in the ruined classroom yesterday. He’d done his best to hide it, unscrewing the cover on the air vent to tuck the knife where it couldn’t be spotted from inside the room – but that was no reason to stop being cautious. After all, with the mastermind’s cameras trained on them at all times, the knife’s location wasn’t really a secret.

But Ogami didn’t show any interest in the air vent, heading directly across the room to lay Naegi on the bed. She frowned intently as she positioned his arm, taking care to hold it level and jar it as little as possible. When she finally had him placed to her liking, she stepped back and shook her head. “That arm really ought to be elevated. I should have brought an extra pillow.”

Togami shrugged, setting the bottles and bandages he was holding onto his desk, where they would be in easy reach of the bed. “There were plenty in the nurse’s office.”

“True.” Ogami turned and headed for the door. “Very well, I’ll be back in a moment.” She headed purposefully towards the clinic.

Not at all inclined to take any chances, Togami locked the door behind her. He wasn’t about to let the others barge in at will, not with Naegi lying defenseless on his bed.
He would have liked to go sit by Naegi’s side – but he could feel the faintly itchy sensation of drying blood clinging to his hands. The thought of leaving traces of Naegi’s blood on anything he touched in here was repellant – even if he were able to clean it off later, he’d always know that it had been there.

So instead of going to the bed, Togami headed into the bathroom, scalding his hands with the hottest water the faucet could produce. It couldn’t wash away the memory of the bloodstains, but at least he wouldn’t have to deal with the reality any longer.

Of course, he knew this wouldn’t deal with all of the physical reminders of Naegi’s injury, not after the way he’d helped Ogami hold Naegi’s arm steady. Blood had splattered up his arms, across his shirt, and he could see that it was darkening to a stain. He’d probably end up throwing this outfit into the incinerator – there was no way he’d ever get it clean enough again.

He really needed to shower and change clothes before he could be truly clean – but even the few seconds he’d already spent away from Naegi’s side were wearing on him. He dried his hands, wiping away the last hint of blood from them, and returned to the bedroom. He pulled his desk chair over to the side of the bed and settled down at Naegi’s side, prepared to sit there watching every one of the boy’s slow breaths until he woke.

Chapter End Notes

Due to some real life commitments, I'm going to have limited posts this week. There will only be new chapters on Tuesday and Thursday. Things should be back to a regular schedule next Sunday.
Chapter 134

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to think of something else that he can do to help while Naegi is unconscious.

Togami watched the rise and fall of Naegi’s chest, letting the repetition soothe away at least some measure of his fears. As long as every breath was the same, without slowing or failing, then that meant nothing had changed. Naegi wasn’t fading away, his life draining out of him with his blood. He was still there somewhere.

But it also meant there had been no change for the better. By the time the doorbell buzzed to signal Ogami had returned from the nurse’s office, Togami hadn’t seen anything to indicate that Naegi might be close to waking.

Ogami didn’t seem overly concerned to see Naegi still unconscious as Togami let her back into the room, an extra pillow in one hand and a small bag filled with a collection of bottles in the other. She set the bottles with the rest of the medical supplies, then headed directly over to the bed. She began positioning Naegi’s arm on top of the pillow, bracing it in place so that it wouldn’t move too much even if he began thrashing in his sleep.

“How much longer until he wakes up?” Togami asked her, once he was sure he could say the words without his voice breaking in the middle.

Ogami shook her head. “I don’t know. Most of my knowledge comes from what I picked up during training, with the idea that a doctor would be available to take over by this point. It probably depends on why he’s unconscious in the first place.”

“He’s been on the verge of collapse since that poisoned needle,” Togami pointed out.

“And if that’s the case, his system may just need time to recover,” Ogami said. “The pain and the blood loss would have been a bad shock. But – well, it also looks like he hit his head when he fell, and I can’t tell how badly. If the head wound is what knocked him out, and he’s still unconscious from it –” She looked away. “I won’t lie to you. That would be very bad.”

Togami heard all the words she wasn’t saying. Brain injury. Neural hemorrhaging. Coma. Naegi might still be alive, but if he’d survived only to spend the rest of his days as a vegetable, or a broken shell of himself – the entire world seemed to shudder to a halt at the thought, everything going white and far away.

The pressure of a hand settling firmly on his elbow brought him back to himself, and Togami rapidly blinked away the fuzziness from his vision to realize that Ogami had caught his arm and guided him back to the chair. He scowled, shaking away her grip. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Making sure you don’t collapse,” Ogami said, unruffled by his glare. “One unconscious boy is enough. Sit there and try to breathe.”
“I’m fine,” Togami snapped.

“People who are fine don’t faint.” She frowned at him. “If you have to get up, don’t do it too fast.”

Togami grimaced. He would have liked to say that he’d never do anything as ridiculous as faint during a crisis – but recent events proved otherwise. At this point, he was probably better off following Ogami’s advice so that he didn’t lose consciousness a second time – especially not now, when doing so would leave her to do as she pleased in his room, with Naegi out cold on the bed.

Instead of protesting again, he settled back in the chair, crossing his arms and scowling. Ogami nodded once, then turned back to Naegi to finishing cleaning as many injuries as she could reach. Togami watched from the chair, keeping track of her hands and exactly which supplies she’d used at any moment, but he didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

Finally, Ogami leaned back and sighed. “I think that’s the best that I can manage for now.” She gripped Naegi’s wrist for a moment, taking his pulse. “He isn’t getting worse. He’s fighting.”

“Of course he is.” To his absolute disgust, Togami heard his voice catch on the words. He cleared his throat, as though that were the only problem with his ability to speak clearly.

Ogami’s expression shifted at the words, but she didn’t acknowledge them, a reaction that made Togami’s ears burn. She knew how Naegi’s injury had left Togami twisted up and bleeding from his own internal wounds, and she pitied him for it. Words burned on his tongue, harsh and fierce and hurtful, words that would burn that condescending emotion into pain and fury.

But all that would accomplish would be to make the martial artist storm out of the room in a rage. Normally Togami would take anger over pity any day – but he couldn’t afford to make that trade now, when Ogami seemed to be the only one left in the school with any medical skill at all. So he swallowed the sharp words back, doing his best to pretend he hadn’t noticed that she’d looked at him as though he were something vulnerable and weak.

“So there’s nothing else that can be done?” he asked, trying to redirect her thoughts to a different path.

It seemed to work, more or less. She looked back down at Naegi, eyebrows knitting together as she studied him. “Well – there is one other thing that might help. I checked the refrigerator while I was back in the clinic, and it seems that Yamada didn’t use quite all of the bags of blood stored there when he faked his death.”

“You’re suggesting a transfusion?” Togami demanded, snapping to attention. “If you know how to do that, why the hell didn’t you do it already?”

“Because I don’t know how,” Ogami said flatly. “And I doubt that jabbing him at random with a needle would be helpful.” She shook her head. “Besides, I don’t think the clinic is equipped to do a transfusion.”

Togami frowned. He remembered seeing a whole pile of syringes in one of the drawers when he’d searched the clinic during the last investigation – but no, that wasn’t quite right, was it? Those had been the sort of single-use needles used to inject a few drops at a time. A blood transfusion would require something different – some kind of tubing to connect the blood bag and the injection point. And Ogami was right, he didn’t recall seeing anything of the sort.

“So the mastermind provided us with stored blood, but not a method to do a real transfusion?” Togami said, looking up to scowl directly into the nearest camera. “They only disguised that room
as a clinic to mock us. It was never anything more than a place for potential killers to find the means to counterfeit a murder.”

“I’m not certain that’s true,” Ogami said slowly. “When Monokuma spoke to me alone, he didn’t always talk to me in my room. Sometimes he brought me up to the fourth floor, before it was open to the rest of you – and he said that he hadn’t gotten the blocked off areas of the school ‘ready’ for you yet.”

“And the nurse’s office wasn’t immediately accessible,” Togami said, frowning as he tried to follow her train of thought. “So you’re suggesting that the mastermind removed critical equipment from the clinic before they let us inside?”

It made all too much sense, now that he thought about it. If they really were in Hope’s Peak Academy, as all the available evidence suggested that they were, then that clinic should have been fully stocked at one point. Granted, blood transfusions weren’t generally considered part of a school nurse’s role, but if the school had supplied blood bags for it, presumably they would have had the rest of the equipment available. If the equipment was missing, the mastermind had to be the one who had removed it. And since the clinic hadn’t been opened at the same time as the rest of the first floor…

“If you’re right, then that means the equipment to do a blood transfusion is still in the school somewhere,” Togami said.

“In the mastermind’s possession,” Ogami pointed out. “I don’t think they’ll give it back just because you ask nicely.”

“I wasn’t going to be nice about it,” Togami retorted. He turned back to the camera and raised his voice. “Monokuma! We want to talk to you!”
Chapter 135

Chapter Summary

Togami waits for Monokuma's response to his call.

Chapter Notes

Regular posting will resume next week. That means new chapters every day Sunday to Thursday, then no posts Friday and Saturday. I'll be continuing with that schedule unless I have a note saying otherwise.

Togami waited impatiently for a response to his summons, glaring up at the camera so that the mastermind couldn't fail to notice that he was addressing them directly. But as the seconds ticked away, no response came.

“Monokuma!” Togami called again, a peremptory demand that had never before failed to bring underlings scurrying to do his bidding. “Stop hiding and show yourself!”

Nothing happened.

Togami looked around the room, goosebumps crawling down the back of his neck. For all that Monokuma made this nightmare worse with every foul word he spewed, his unexpected absence was even more unsettling. He’d never ignored any of the students before, even when they’d called in the middle of the night or without warning. He always seemed to turn up whenever they talked about the mastermind or their imprisonment too long, to remind them with his stupid puns and mad cackles that they could never escape from his notice.

Monokuma couldn’t have failed to see what was going on. Jill had attacked Naegi in the library – that kind of violence, complete with splattered blood and collapsing furniture, should have gotten the mastermind’s complete attention. And surely they had to be watching now, to see whether these events would play out in a way that would require another class trial.

So why was there no answer?

“Monokuma!” This time Ogami was the one who called, her voice booming with the deep lung capacity of a well-trained athlete. “We want to speak with you!”

No one could have missed that – but Monokuma still failed to appear.

Which meant that either the mastermind was deliberately choosing to ignore them – or that for some reason, Monokuma couldn't appear.

Togami’s mind raced through the possibilities, evaluating and discarding different theories. Could something else be happening in another area of the school? Jill and Kirigiri were still at large somewhere – one of them might have managed to do something significant enough that the
mastermind didn’t have any attention to spare. But did the mastermind have limits to their attention? Surely they must have expected that at some point, they would need to respond to events in multiple areas of the school – someone who had come up with a plan as detailed as this couldn’t have overlooked that possibility.

Then was Monokuma deliberately choosing to ignore them as some kind of power play? The mastermind must have heard the conversation that Togami and Ogami had just had, about finding medical equipment and using it to help Naegi. Was Monokuma refusing to appear just to make it obvious that their efforts were in vain? But that didn’t fit with the way Monokuma usually responded. Even if he intended to refuse their demands, Togami would have expected the bear to show himself and do it to their faces, taking obnoxious glee in the suffering his words would cause.

But what if this wasn’t deliberate? With all the technology required to cover the school with security cameras, it was probably more of a surprise that the mastermind hadn’t encountered any technical difficulties in their observation so far. It was possible that something had gone wrong on their end, preventing them from watching as usual. But if that were the case, what were the odds that it would have happened now, at the exact moment that he’d called out for Monokuma to appear? That seemed like an incredibly unlikely coincidence, unless the setup was far more error-prone than he thought and this was just the first time it had intruded on their notice.

But whatever the reason might be, the main point was the same. Monokuma wasn’t answering when summoned, and that meant that Naegi’s situation wasn’t the only major event happening in Hope’s Peak right now.

Togami’s mind burned with the need to find out more, to gather information on this question and figure out some way to turn it to his advantage. This was the first potential weakness that the mastermind had shown, and the familiar roar of a rising hunt rushed through his blood, compelling him to seek out vulnerabilities and use them to tear apart his prey.

But – he turned towards the bed, where a different kind of weakness lay stretched out before him. Naegi had been so badly hurt, on top of all his other injuries. Even if he was more stable now than he’d been, he was by no means safe or well, not yet. Not when he still hadn’t woken up. Ogami had said it herself, Naegi shouldn’t be left alone in this state – and just moments ago, Togami had sworn that he would be the one to stay by Naegi’s side.

Go or stay? Whichever he chose, part of him screamed in protest of the decision. He had to act on this change to learn more about the mastermind now, or the opportunity might never come again. And he had to stay with Naegi, to watch for any signs that he might be worsening and hold him to life by whatever means necessary. Two things he had to do, two paths he had to take – but he couldn’t do both. He had to make a choice.

What would Naegi want him to do?

It was a strange to find that thought rising to the forefront of his mind. He usually made his decisions by evaluating his own wishes, what he would gain or lose from different options. But now, with Naegi unconscious, not even able to speak up in favor of one path or the other – somehow, his wishes seemed more important than any other concern. And from everything that the other boy had said during their arguments in the past couple days, Togami knew exactly what course Naegi would urge him towards.

He looked up at Ogami, who still watched the security camera with a worried frown. “Something’s happening here – something important. We can’t ignore this.”
“What?” Ogami blinked. “You believe this to be more than – than some kind of mockery on Monokuma’s part?”

“It has to be,” Togami said, some of his impatience at being forced to spell it all out bleeding into his tone. “It could mean a chance to learn something about Monokuma or the mastermind, something that they don’t want us to know.”

Ogami frowned, trying to follow his train of thought. She still hadn’t worked out all the implications of this. Well, of course she hadn’t. Ogami might be without peer when it came to fighting, but Togami knew she wasn’t in his league when it came to brains.

Togami took a deep breath, steeling himself for the decision he was about to make. “We can’t let this opportunity go to waste. I’m going to investigate what happened.”

“All right,” Ogami said, nodding firmly as she took the chair at Naegi’s side. “I don’t understand, but I know you wouldn’t leave unless it was truly important. Go and do what you must. I’ll take care of him for you.”

Togami hesitated, studying Ogami’s serious expression as she promised to protect the boy he loved. Could he trust her? She’d betrayed the students, and then turned around and betrayed her new allegiance to the mastermind. Her word was worth nothing more than ashes.

She’d saved Naegi’s life. Yes, words were important, but at the end of the day, actions meant more. And today, over and over, Sakura Ogami had protected Naegi. How did that stack up against the betrayals? When did one balance out the other? Could broken trust ever be regained?

Naegi would have trusted her.

Togami met Ogami’s eyes and nodded once, accepting her words and her oath. “I’ll be back when I’ve learned something useful.”

He didn’t let himself look at the bed, for fear that his newfound resolve would crumble at the sight of the boy lying there. Instead, he turned for the door and strode out into the hall. He had answers to find.
Chapter 136

Chapter Summary

Togami begins his investigation into Monokuma's silence.

Out in the hall, Togami didn’t look back at his door, heading out of the dorms and straight for the more public areas of the school. There was no point in lingering in the area – he had to find answers as quickly as possible so that he could return before Naegi could get worse.

The first possibility to address was the slim chance that there had been some kind of technical failure unique to his room. Once he’d reached the middle of the central area of the first floor, Togami looked at the nearest camera and raised his voice again. “Monokuma!”

He let a full minute tick by before nodding to himself. He hadn’t really expected a response, since he was fairly certain the mastermind would have taken immediate, drastic measures if an area of the school had fallen off the grid – but it had been worth confirming that question before moving on.

Togami frowned, considering his next move. So Monokuma wasn’t responding to a direct summons – but most of the time he showed up to speak to the students without being directly called. There had been several occasions when Monokuma had popped out unexpectedly to enforce the school regulations or shoo the students away from something forbidden. Would his newfound silence extend to ignoring rule breaking?

Togami headed for the stairs, making his way up to the fourth floor and its collection of annoyingly locked doors. If he wanted to see if he could get the mastermind’s attention, that seemed like a good place for it. Not that Togami actually planned to break the locked door rule – but in the past, Monokuma had intervened before anyone could make the attempt. If anything was going to bring Monokuma out of hiding, this ought to do it.

On the fourth floor, Togami headed for the closest locked door, the one in the central area leading to the mysteriously named data center. He’d never been certain exactly what this room was meant to be. Every other area they’d unlocked had seemed like something that could plausibly be found in a very well-equipped school – everywhere except this room. The A/V room should have covered electronic equipment, so why have a second space devoted to technology? And why keep it so firmly locked away? Togami had puzzled over it when the room had first been revealed, but he hadn’t come up with any good answers.

All he knew for sure was that the door was locked, and that the mastermind apparently had some investment in keeping it that way. So Togami gave the strange, sleek door a long look, then reached out and put his hand to the knob.

All the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and quivered as his fingers closed around the cool metal, as if he’d touched a live wire instead of a simple door. The sensation of something watching him crawled across his skin like a flurry of bristling spider legs, and in spite of himself his shoulders twitched from the physical sensation.

But when he turned to look at the hall around him, it was just as empty as it had been a moment
ago. Monokuma hadn’t materialized at the sight of Togami’s hand on the data center door any more than he had at the sound of Togami shouting for him to appear.

Well, Togami hadn’t really done anything yet, no matter how it felt to him. He tried to turn the doorknob, rattling it against the lock as loudly and obnoxiously as he could. He even yanked on the door for good measure, shaking it in place as if to try to pull it off the hinges. It didn’t work, of course, since the door was much too solidly built for him to open, but the attempt should have looked good.

Or then again, maybe it didn’t. The mastermind would have known exactly how strong these doors were, wouldn’t they? Maybe they knew Togami didn’t have a shot of breaking the lock by rattling it – and more than that, they knew Togami knew it. They could be choosing to maintain their silence because they didn’t feel threatened.

Well, then maybe he needed to make an effort to be more threatening. If a false effort wouldn’t work, a real one just might. Of course, Togami still wasn’t quite desperate enough to try actually breaking a rule – but he didn’t necessarily have to. He turned away from the data center and crossed to the other side of the fourth floor, where the headmaster’s office lay.

He couldn’t make a real attempt to get into the data center without violating the locked door rule – but with the broken lock to the headmaster’s office door, that rule might not apply. Yes, the door was barricaded, but if he could work out a way past the barrier, there was nothing to stop him from going inside. If the mastermind was still watching, they would have to take an attempt to get past the barricade seriously.

Togami stopped in front of the double doors leading into the headmaster’s office, crossing his arms and glaring at them for a moment. He’d already investigated them pretty thoroughly this morning, but that had been before it had occurred to him that these doors wouldn’t fall under the rule about locked doors. He’d inspected the doors, but the only thing he’d done to try to get through had been to test the handles. Well, now he’d see what else he could come up with.

He knelt down in front of the doors, studying the wood around the knobs carefully. From what he could tell from the way the wood splintered around the knobs, it looked like Ogami had broken the locks by applying force at the right angle. If that was all it had taken to open these doors, the locks couldn’t have been very high quality – which was strange, considering the unbreakable locks the mastermind had installed on the dorm rooms. Why rely on the rule about locked rooms to keep the students out of this office, instead of just installing another one of the unbreakable locks?

Well, whatever reason the mastermind might have had didn’t matter. The important thing was that the doorknobs would be the weakest part of the door now, especially after Ogami had already broken them. Togami stood, glancing up at the nearest camera to make sure that it would have a clear view of him – and then spun to land a solid kick on the thin line where the two doors connected.

It hurt, but he’d been prepared for the pain. He’d had enough self-defense training to take care of himself, in case one of his rivals for the position of Togami heir had decided to eliminate the competition in a more permanent way than he personally had preferred, and he knew how to kick without breaking his foot. He knew he was no match for someone like Ogami, of course, and he wouldn’t have had much of an effect on an untouched door. But after the abuse the door had already undergone – did it give a little under his foot?

He rattled at the handle again to check his suspicions – and it seemed like maybe, just maybe, he could move the doors a hair more than he’d been able to manage before kicking them. It was a barely perceptible change, though, and at this rate it would take the rest of the day to achieve
anything useful – but it did seem like this might eventually lead to something.

And it still hadn’t gotten a response from Monokuma. Togami turned to look directly up into the camera, so that his words would be impossible for the mastermind to miss.

“It looks like your barricade isn’t worth much after all – and since this door isn’t locked, you can’t do anything to me for breaking through it. If you don’t want to talk, I’ll just have to get the answers I want from behind this door.”
Togami waited for a response, looking around the hall to see if Monokuma might finally show himself – but nothing happened. The hall stayed as empty as before, silence hanging in the air around him with suffocating force.

If anything was going to get a reaction out of Monokuma, this attempt to get through the headmaster’s door should have done it. That limited the range of possibilities rather drastically – either Monokuma had completely changed his method of interacting with the students with little provocation, or he really had been rendered unable to respond. And the longer the silence persisted, the more Togami was starting to think it might be the latter. It could still be a trick, of course, he hadn’t ruled that possibility out – but he didn’t see what benefit the mastermind would gain from such a ploy.

So if Monokuma really wasn’t answering, the next question was – what should he do in the mastermind’s absence? He would need to stay just on this side of any rule-breaking, of course, just in case the mastermind had orchestrated this to lure them all into flouting the school regulations, but that still left a few possibilities.

And foremost among them had to be the one right in front of him – the door to the headmaster’s office. Togami had begun trying to break through it to see if he could get Monokuma’s attention – but maybe he should forget about that and focus on breaking in for real. Even if the broken lock on the headmaster’s door meant that it no longer fell under the rule about locked doors, there was nothing stopping Monokuma from creating a new rule about barricaded doors, or even specifically about this room. As long as Monokuma was determined to remain silent, it might be a good idea to take advantage of his absence.

Togami studied the door again, identifying the place where the wood showed the most impact, and then aimed another kick at that spot, identical to the last. But this time, the blow sent a sharp jolt up his leg as the unforgiving wood of the door connected with the same part of his foot as the last kick. A gasp of pain hissed through his teeth as he set his foot carefully back on the ground, testing to see if he could bear to put weight on it.

His foot throbbed as he gingerly let part of his weight rest on it – but it didn’t buckle. Nothing broken, then, that was a relief. He hadn’t realized just how different it would be to kick solid wood repeatedly instead of a punching bag or a practice partner. Togami glared at the splintering section of the door, noting the miniscule changes from that last strike. He couldn’t keep this up long enough to make a serious difference, not in the dress shoes he was wearing.

Well, there was no reason he ought to bother with it. He’d been the one to pursue the investigation because it was likely to require brain power – but if it needed muscle, Ogami would be a much better choice. She’d have a much easier time breaking through the door than he would – and he could wait with Naegi while she worked.

With that plan in mind, Togami left the headmaster’s office hallway and headed briskly back for the stairs. Although Monokuma did seem to be out of touch for the time being, there was no telling how long his absence would last. He didn’t dare dawdle, not when he was already using precious time to return to trade places with Ogami.

But as he began hurrying down the stairs, the clatter of running footsteps rang out below him. Togami’s eyes narrowed at the sound. Ogami and Naegi were safely tucked away in his dorm room, and while he hadn’t locked the door, he didn’t think either of them would leave. Kirigiri
might still be roaming around the school, but he doubted anything would make the calm girl lose her cool enough to run. No, the most likely source of those footsteps had to be Genocide Jill – and while he could think of plenty of reasons for her to run down the stairs, none of them were good. He sped up in pursuit.

And sure enough, he turned the last corner and hurried down those last few stairs onto the first floor just in time to see the tail end of Jill’s braids disappearing into the clinic. The room where, as far as she should have known, Naegi would have been recovering from her attack.

Fury seared red lines of fire across his vision, and before he knew it he’d torn through the clinic door after her. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Huh?” Jill whirled around, a brilliant smile spreading across her face at the sight of him. “Aw, White Knight, I knew you couldn’t quit me! What –”

“What are you doing here?” Togami snarled, taking another step towards her. “I told you to stay away!”

“Sure, and then you came running in here after me!” Jill laughed, her fingers tapping away at her sides in a frantic rhythm. “Talk about mixed messages!”

Togami glared at her. “Do you find it amusing that Naegi is still unconscious from the wounds that you inflicted?”

That wiped the smile off her face as a shiver twitched through her whole body. “What, still?” She twirled to look around the clinic. “Then where is he?”

“Not here,” Togami said shortly. “And if you think I’m about to let you near him, you’re greatly mistaken.”

Jill shrugged, her eyes darting around the room like she couldn’t quite hold them steady to one place. “I remember, baby – keep my distance till he gives the order otherwise.”

“If you remember, then why are you lurking around here trying to find him?” Togami demanded.

“I wasn’t!” Jill tilted her head with a frown. “Well, I was – but I was really looking for you.”

Togami stared at her in disbelief. Did she even bother to listen when he spoke? “I told you –”

“Stay out of your way, I know,” Jill said, whirling a hand in a wild dismissive wave. “But baby, things have changed. I went back into the library after you left, and – well, you’re gonna want to see it.”

Togami crossed his arms. “Why? Have you attacked someone else?”

“Man, you always jump straight to blaming the serial killer!” Jill shook her head. “No way, it wasn’t me this time.”

Togami froze. “Wait – are you saying that there really was another attack?”

Jill produced another pair of her wretched scissors, twirling it in flashes of agitated silver. “Baby, I don’t know what it was that happened in there. That’s why I came down here looking for another pair of eyes – you’ve gotta see it for yourself.”

Togami glared at her for a moment, taking in the details that he hadn’t quite processed during his
first burst of rage – the twitchiness, the darting eyes, the inability to stay still for more than half a second together. What could shake a hardened serial killer like that, after the countless corpses and blood-soaked murder scenes she’d seen?

He’d wondered if something else had been happening elsewhere in the school. Maybe this was it. And if so, he didn’t think he dared ignore it.

“Fine,” he said at last. “Show me what you found.”
Chapter 138

Chapter Summary

Togami investigates the library to look for the source of Genocide Jill's alarm.

At Togami’s command, Jill bounded past him to leave the clinic. Togami hurried after her, eyes narrowing in concern – but she didn’t show any interest in heading left towards the dorms, where Naegi and Ogami should still be. She turned right and made a beeline for the stairs, flying towards the second floor.

Togami had to put on much more speed than he’d expected to keep her in sight – and it didn’t even look like the genocider was exerting herself overly much as she stayed easily ahead of him. Fukawa had never struck him as especially athletic – so how exactly was her alter ego managing it? And more to the point, what else could Genocide Jill do if she decided to put her mind to it? The strength and speed she’d demonstrated already could give her the makings of a formidable fighter – maybe even one that could give the Ultimate Martial Artist pause.

But at least for now, Jill didn’t seem inclined to use her speed for anything other than rushing to the library. She skidded to a halt in front of the doors, then looked back over her shoulder until he reached her side.

“Well?” Togami said, making an effort to keep his voice even so as not to betray that their speed had left him slightly out of breath. “What am I meant to look at?”

She jerked her head in the direction of the closed doors. “Should be pretty obvious to anyone as eagle-eyed as my White Knight!”

Such a confident declaration left him with little recourse but to go see for himself. Togami scowled, forcing himself to take another step towards the library. His feet protested the movement, heavy and unwilling at the prospect of returning to the room where he’d found Naegi bleeding and broken. He didn’t want to go back in there, to search through the broken furniture where Naegi had lain or the reddish-brown streaks where his blood had dried. It was all too easy to imagine that he might have been forced to return to this room not to look into whatever Jill had found, but to investigate for another class trial.

But that wasn’t why he was here, he had to keep reminding himself of that. Naegi was still alive, in spite of the horrors Jill had inflicted on him, and the room beyond these doors was nothing more than a grisly reminder of what he’d survived.

Togami took a deep breath, bracing himself for the sight, and then pulled open the library door in a smooth, unfaltering motion. If he had to endure this room again, at least he wouldn’t show any of the weakness it inspired to any observers.

But to his shock, the room wasn’t quite as bad as he remembered. His memory had painted the library red with blood, the furniture in ruins and shredded paper littering the floor – but the reality didn’t quite seem to match up. The floor was mostly clear, with only a few scattered piles of papers or books, and the only place he could see broken furniture was a single pile of splintered wood near the door. Most of the bookcases remained intact, if scarred by scissor marks, standing in tidy rows
that screened the area where Naegi had been injured from view.

But they shouldn’t have done any such thing. Togami frowned, looking around the room again and trying to match it against his memory. His recollection of the state of the room when he’d found Naegi probably wasn’t entirely reliable – but he did know with complete certainty that he’d been able to see the boy the moment he’d stepped across the threshold. There hadn’t been any bookcases in the way.

He rounded on Jill, sending her his darkest scowl. “If you’ve dragged me up here to see some rearranged furniture –”

“Not that,” Jill interrupted, tossing her braids impatiently. “Behind the bookcases.”

Togami turned to look at the bookcases she’d meant – the ones that stood in front of the very spot he wanted least to revisit. But he’d come this far. Turning back now would make him look like a fool.

The air itself seemed to thicken around him as he walked towards the bookcases, until he could almost feel the weight of it in his lungs with every breath he drew. The metallic tang of blood coated his tongue as he approached, so sharp that he couldn’t tell if it was merely a trick of his memory or if the smell still lingered in the room around him. He swallowed against it as he reached the line of bookcases, trying to flush the foul taste out of his mouth.

He could feel the pressure of Jill’s eyes on his back, understood the necessity of finishing the task he’d set out to do – but nevertheless, Togami found himself standing still at the corner of the bookcases. One more step was all it would take to bring him back to the scene where his worst nightmare had turned into a reality – and he couldn’t bring himself to take it. No matter how he told himself that he was prepared to face this, his feet rebelled at the command, locking in place as though heavy chains bound him to the floor.

Togami’s hands trembled at his sides as he curled his fingers into tight, frustrated fists. It was just a place, nothing more than a corner of the library, and it had no business to possess the power to affect him this badly. He needed to go there, to turn this corner and see whatever it was that had Jill so alarmed – that ought to have been enough for him to summon the self-control to do it.

What had Naegi done to him? A few short weeks ago, the thought of being this overcome by something as insignificant as an emotion would have been laughable – and now, here he stood, unable to walk forward and look at a scene that he’d already visited, just because of the feelings that overwhelmed him at the mere thought. Naegi had torn apart everything that Togami had believed himself to be, leaving him broken and bleeding from wounds to the parts of his soul he’d thought most invulnerable.

But – no. Togami frowned, stopping that train of thought as it ran through his head. No, Naegi wasn’t the one tearing him apart – it was his injury that had caused that, not anything the boy himself had done. Naegi would be distraught if he thought that Togami considered him responsible for this – and Togami couldn’t bear the thought of heaping emotional pain on top of the physical suffering Naegi had already endured.

It was that thought, the idea of keeping further pain away from the boy unconscious in his bed, that finally gave Togami the strength to drag himself out of his paralysis. He could get past this – he had to, if he truly intended to find something useful in his investigation of Monokuma’s disappearance. And if Naegi could endure the attack that had happened around this corner, surely Togami could manage to look at the aftermath.
With that in mind, Togami took that final step around the bookcase corner before he could lose his nerve.

The scene he found was every bit as gruesome as he’d feared, with the bloodstained pieces of the collapsed bookcase, the smudged outlines of where Naegi had fallen, and the half-formed message Jill had begun to scrawl across the floor. But as horrifying as all those things were, none of that was what first caught his eye.

No, the first thing that Togami saw when he turned the corner was Monokuma, standing frozen in the middle of the scene.
Togami investigated the frozen Monokuma in the library.

Togami stopped short at the sight of Monokuma standing in the middle of the screened off section of the library, amidst the bloodstained wreckage where Naegi had nearly died. He’d thought that nothing could make this scene more painful to revisit – but Monokuma’s presence took it to an entirely new level of horrifying.

Was this what the mastermind had been planning, when they stopped responding to the students’ calls? Had Monokuma been lurking back here the whole time, waiting to unleash some new monstrosity? Maybe it had all been nothing more than a trick, and Monokuma was about to spew forth his usual barrage of mockery. Togami hastily did his best to lock his features into an icy mask, bracing himself for the knives the mastermind could drive into the vulnerabilities he’d revealed in the past few hours.

But nothing happened, no matter how long he waited for the verbal assault to begin. Togami frowned. He’d never seen Monokuma stay silent for so long – usually if he had nothing to say, he just kept himself out of sight.

In fact, now that he thought about it, he’d never seen Monokuma stay still for so long, either. Whatever technology the mastermind used to operate the bear, it was obviously very high quality, with realistic movements. Monokuma had always reacted physically to what was going on around him, gesturing and twisting and walking through the school so easily that the students could almost forget that he was nothing more than a conduit for an actual human being to speak with them.

But now, all that had stopped, and Monokuma stood as motionless as the stuffed bear that he really was. Even the red light that usually blazed fire-bright in his eye had gone out, leaving nothing but dull glass to meet Togami’s narrowed gaze. The air had the same unsettling emptiness that it held in the presence of a corpse – the feeling of an absence where a presence had so recently been.

Togami took a step backwards, then another, finding himself strangely unwilling to turn his back on the frozen bear. When he’d passed the corner of the bookcase again, he turned his head, just enough so that he could keep both the screened off area of the library and the rest of the floor in his line of sight. Jill hadn’t left while he’d investigated, but she hadn’t come much closer, either. She still stood at the library doorway, spinning a pair of scissors with nervous energy.

“What happened here?” Togami demanded, his eyes following the flashes of silver in Jill’s hands. “What did you do?”

“Huh?” Jill frowned. “I told you, baby, it wasn’t me. I might stretch a point or two on the adorableness factor if I had to – but no way is a stuffed animal ever gonna get me going!”

“So you found him like this?” Togami asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow at her. “You expect me to believe in that kind of coincidence?”

“Aw, come on, White Knight, you know hide and seek isn’t my game!” Jill threw back her head
and laughed. “If I ever kill something in this place, even a stuffed animal, I’ll sing it loud and proud! No point in an artist hiding her masterpieces, right?”

Togami frowned, looking over what he could see of Monokuma’s frozen form. He had to admit that he couldn’t spot any of the telltale scissor marks slashed into the bear that he would have expected if Jill had been the one to cause this. As far as he could tell, the bear was perfectly intact – he’d simply stopped.

“Well, if it wasn’t you, then what was it?” Togami asked.

Jill shrugged. “No idea. I just turned the corner and there he was.”

“And what were you doing back in the first place?” Togami demanded, pinning her with his glare. “Haven’t you done enough damage?”

“No such thing!” Jill said brightly. “But I thought, hey, why not try my hand at something else for once?” She waved a hand at the rest of the library, encompassing the straightened bookcases, the cleared floor, and the piles of furniture.

“So you were – what, cleaning up?” Togami stared at her in disbelief. “You think that some soap and water are all it will take to erase what you’ve done?”

Jill’s wide smile flickered out, just for a moment, like a candle spluttering in a sudden wind – but in the span of a blink, her expression was back, brighter than it had been before. “No way, baby, I just had to take the chance to show off my homemaking skills! I might be a modern career-driven gal, but that’s no reason to let the housework pile up!”

Togami grimaced. He doubted he’d get much more out of her on that point even if he pushed the issue – and in any case, it hardly mattered why she’d decided to return to the library. “And you just found him like this? Did anything happen to trigger it?”

“First things I moved were the bookcases, and if he’d been lurking around then, I would’ve noticed. I didn’t hear anything while I went at the rest of the room, either – but it’s not like I was really listening. I was expecting it to be empty when I got back there with the mop.”

“What mop?” Togami’s gaze darted around the room until he spotted a mop and full bucket of soapy water in the shadow of the bookcases. That certainly hadn’t been in the library before. “Where did you get that?”

“From the girls’ bathroom down the hall,” Jill said, shrugging. “I was just going to get some paper towels, but turns out there’s a storage closet chock full of cleaning supplies in there. I figured I could use this to get that half-finished work out of my portfolio!”

Togami frowned. “So what you’re telling me is that you left the room.”

Jill tilted her head. “Sure did. Does it matter?”

“Does it matter that you were gone during the time that a deactivated Monokuma appeared?” Togami asked incredulously. “If you need that clarified for you, then there’s no use telling you anything at all.” He shook his head. “How long were you gone?”

Jill frowned, tapping her scissors against her palm to an uneven beat that only she could follow. “Can’t say for sure, baby, sorry. But it took a while to fill the bucket in that tiny sink. Maybe fifteen minutes altogether?”
“And how long did you wait after that before you came to find help?”

“Believe me, White Knight, you were the first thing I went for,” Jill said. “I don’t really get what you’re all trying to do here, but I know a game-changer when I see one. I put the mop down and ran.”

Which had to be when he heard her going down the stairs. Togami tried to put the timeline together in his head, wishing vainly that he’d thought to check the time at least once since he’d left his dorm room. Fifteen minutes was enough time for Monokuma to appear in the screened corner of the library while Jill was gone – but would that have been before or after he and Ogami had discovered that the mastermind was no longer answering their calls?

Whatever had happened, Togami didn’t think it could be a coincidence – and it definitely couldn’t be ignored. The mastermind had gone silent at the same time that Monokuma was frozen and unmoving – those two things had to be connected. He had to look into it further.

He turned to Jill. “Stay here, and keep a close eye on the scene. I want to know if anything changes while I’m gone.”

“Huh? You’re tired of playing detective already?” Jill asked, frowning.

“I don’t intend to play. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” Togami headed for the door. “With my toolkit.”
Chapter Summary

Togami retrieves his toolkit from his dorm room.

Togami left the library and made for the stairs as quickly as he could. He would have preferred some other option than leaving Jill alone to keep watch on the strange scene – but he certainly wasn’t about to send her down to his dorm room to fetch the toolkit for him, not with Naegi still recovering in his bed. He might have been forced into working with Jill again, but he had no intention of letting her near the boy she’d injured.

At least he was fairly confident that she’d stay put and watch the frozen Monokuma as he’d told her, provided he didn’t take too long to return. Jill seemed as willing to listen to him as she’d ever been, even though she had to have realized by now that she had no chance with him romantically. Togami might not be able to follow the strange tangle of thoughts that twisted through genocider’s head to make her want to follow his orders, but he was more than willing to take advantage of it.

Togami hurried across the first floor, slowing only once as he passed the clinic, just to make sure that no one had returned there. Finding it as empty as he’d left it, he didn’t pause again until he reached his dorm room.

Entering the room, he found Ogami rising to her feet to face the door, placing herself at the ready between Naegi and whoever had entered. Togami had to admit, that did raise the girl a little in his estimation – she certainly seemed to be taking her promise to look after Naegi seriously. Only when Ogami realized who had entered the room did she let the tension coiled through the lines of her body relax.

“Have you discovered anything?” she asked. “Do you know why Monokuma is ignoring us?”

Togami turned towards her – and frowned, a thought striking him. Had she known about this already? Something had pried Ogami out of her room at just the right moment to offer Naegi medical treatment – could it have been some secret knowledge of the mastermind’s absence that had spurred her to act?

But no – the timeline didn’t work for that to be what had happened. Jill hadn’t found the frozen Monokuma in the library until after the rest of them had left – and even if she couldn’t be trusted to report accurately, Togami had been in that room himself. He might have been focused on Naegi’s wounds, but he knew he couldn’t possibly have missed the sight of Monokuma standing in the middle of that bloody scene. Whatever had happened to Monokuma must have been after Ogami had arrived to help Naegi – meaning that her reasons for deciding to help were still what she’d claimed them to be.

“Yes,” Togami said, before the pause could drag on too long. “Monokuma is currently in the library, deactivated and unresponsive.”


“I’m still finding out,” Togami said, crossing the room towards his desk. “That’s why I had to
come back.” He bent down to open the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out his toolkit.

Ogami’s eyes widened. “You intend to use that – on Monokuma? Have you forgotten what happened to Hina and Enoshima?”

Junko Enoshima… Togami hadn’t spared much thought for the loud, pink-haired girl and the idiocy that had gotten her impaled by Monokuma’s spears, but he hadn’t forgotten her. And he certainly hadn’t forgotten the rule she’d broken – no violence is permitted against the school’s headmaster Monokuma.

“I’m well aware of what Monokuma did to them,” Togami said. “But the rule specifically prohibits violence – it doesn’t mention any other type of contact.”

“Using those tools to dismantle him sounds violent to me,” Ogami said grimly.

Togami looked down at the toolkit in his hand, a frown crossing his face as he remembered the two girls who’d been killed as punishments for rule-breaking. Enoshima had known she was violating a rule, but she obviously hadn’t known how far Monokuma was prepared to go in retaliation. But Asahina – while she’d known just how cruel Monokuma could be, she’d tried to use technicalities to avoid a punishment. Taking the door off its hinges would have been a fairly clever way to get around breaking the locked door rule – except that Monokuma had planned ahead for it. He’d used a technicality of his own to alter the door hinges, ensuring that any attempt to tamper with them would break the door as much as assaulting it outright.

But the fact that Monokuma had gone so far to make sure that the hinges couldn’t be used to get around the locked door rule – didn’t that mean that someone could avoid punishment on a technicality, provided they could find one the mastermind hadn’t thought of? If not, they could easily have chosen to execute Asahina just for trying to break the locked door rule, instead of going through a dramatic reveal of just why her plan had failed. Togami wasn’t sure why these rules seemed to matter so much to the mastermind – but apparently they did. And that meant that he might just be able to figure out a way around one of the mastermind’s rules – if he was smart enough to do it.

“Possibly,” Togami said at last. “But if there’s a way to do it, then we can’t ignore the opportunity. This could be the chance we’ve been waiting for.”

“Oh it could be a trap the mastermind is deliberately setting for us,” Ogami countered. “Please – don’t do anything reckless. Don’t let Naegi wake up to discover you’ve been killed.”

The unexpected sound of Naegi’s name drew Togami’s gaze down to the bed beside him, where he’d been trying not to look. Naegi lay there, too pale against the white sheets, his chest rising and falling in a slow but steady rhythm. Togami found his throat unexpectedly constricted, like it was holding back a sound too painful to bear.

He had to look away from the bed, swallowing several times before he could manage to answer Ogami’s question. “I have no intention of acting carelessly.”

She nodded. “Good.”

“Then does that mean he’ll wake up soon?” Togami hadn’t known he was going to say the words until they were out of his mouth, sounding thin and unsteady in the quiet room.

Ogami hesitated, and an icy hand clutched at Togami’s heart. Was it such a complicated answer that she couldn’t say it immediately? What wasn’t she telling him?
“He’s no worse,” Ogami said at last. “It’s just that I was hoping to see some change for the better by now. The sooner he regains consciousness, the better it will be for him.”

It made sense, of course. Naegi needed to wake up. And since there was nothing Togami could do to make that happen faster, the logical response should be to return to the library, where he could do something. There was nothing to be gained by staying here and counting the breaths until Naegi regained consciousness. He should leave.

Togami took a step towards Naegi, his fingers reaching out to hover just above the sleeping boy’s hair, not quite daring to touch the injured boy. He heard Ogami asking something, but the words couldn’t reach him as he traced the air above the curve of Naegi’s cheek. He just barely registered that the sound of retreating footsteps and the tactful closing of the door meant that the room was empty now, leaving him alone with the unconscious boy.

With the pressure of any observers lifted from him, Togami sank to one knee at the side of the bed, his head bent close to Naegi’s. “You have to wake up,” he whispered, so softly that the words could only reach Naegi’s ears. “You aren’t allowed to go, do you hear me?”

He leaned forward just enough to brush his lips against Naegi’s forehead, ghosting over pale skin so faintly that he could barely feel it. “You have to stay.”
Chapter 141

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to leave Naegi’s side and return to his investigation.

Togami knew he couldn’t stay at Naegi’s side for long, no matter how hard it was to turn away. Every second that he wasn’t investigating Monokuma’s disappearance added to the risk that the opportunity might slip away – and the only thing worse than never having the chance to get out of this nightmare would be having the chance and missing it. He couldn’t let this pass them by, just because it hurt to leave Naegi now - not when this could be their only shot. He knew that the time would come when he would regret it if he did.

And more than that, it would hurt Naegi to wake up and find he’d been the reason the opportunity had been missed. *I’d rather fight for something good than give up because we might lose it* – the biting words Naegi had thrown at him yesterday echoed through Togami’s head once more. Naegi had accused him of choosing to give up rather than fight, of being unwilling to take the necessary risks to find a way out of Monokuma’s prison – and he’d had a point. Togami knew just how close he’d come to walking a path towards surrender, accepting defeat without trying to find another way.

But he’d turned aside from that road. He would find a way out of here. He wouldn’t let the mastermind win. And when Naegi woke up – because he would, he had to – then Togami would prove how wrong the other boy’s view of him had been. Naegi would understand that Togami was strong, capable, someone he could be proud to stand beside – and he’d never have the nerve to be disappointed in him again.

But for that to happen, Togami knew he had to go.

He stood before he could let himself think about what he was doing, like jumping into a deep pool of icy water. The chill hit him like a full-body blow as he stepped away from Naegi, a hollow emptiness aching along his skin where Naegi’s body would fit so perfectly in his arms. He tried to ease the need for pressure by crossing his arms together, holding them tight against his body – but that did nothing to ward off this kind of cold.

Togami started to cross the room towards the door when he realized that his hands were empty. Thinking back, he remembered the toolkit falling from his hands when he’d knelt at Naegi’s side. Holding onto it hadn’t seemed important in that moment.

Glancing at the floor, Togami found the toolkit where it had fallen beside the bed. The impact of hitting the floor must have unfastened the cheap clasp, popping it open to let the tools spill free. Togami rolled his eyes, quickly gathering the tools to return them to their places. The toolkits were woefully simplistic, the sort of thing that might be found in a miscellaneous heap of general supplies in a common drugstore. With all the other sophisticated things Monokuma had provided throughout the school, it was a little surprising that the tools would be so shoddy – or then again, maybe it wasn’t. After all, if they’d had high-quality tools, they might have been able to make more headway with the plated windows or the sealed doors. But with these – well, Togami had had a hard enough time getting the air vent lid unscrewed.
The air vent.

The knife.

Togami felt the blood drain away from his face as he realized that he’d left Naegi helpless and unconscious in a room that contained a highly dangerous weapon. And not only that, but he’d left the means to access the weapon right there in his desk drawer where anyone could take it! How could he not have thought about this before he left?

In a swift movement, Togami pulled his desk chair away from the side of the bed and over to the wall, stepping on top to reach the vent. Unscrewing the front still took a considerable effort, but in a few moments he was able to pull the grating away – to see the huge knife gleaming exactly where he’d left it.

Togami’s shoulders slumped with relief. It hadn’t been taken. Not that he specifically suspected Ogami of plotting its theft, not anymore – he would never have left her alone with Naegi if he thought her likely to be a threat. But with strange events going on in the school, there was no such thing as being too careful.

He reached for the knife, planning to stash it in a pocket where he could keep track of it – and paused. It might make him more comfortable to have the knife on his person at all times, but that didn’t necessarily mean it was the best decision. The point was to make sure it was unusable – and if he was wandering around with the knife on him, that might well be a bigger risk than leaving it hidden.

And at this point, the air vent was probably one of the most inaccessible hiding places in the school. Anyone who wanted to open it would need a screwdriver to get that front grating off – and Togami had the last toolkit in the school in his possession. He and Naegi were the only male students left, and Naegi had given his toolkit away to Asahina. The screwdriver that had turned up during the investigation had presumably gone the way of all the other trial evidence, disposed of by Monokuma so that the next murderer could start from a clean slate.

In that case – Togami hated to think it, but that knife might well be safer here in his dorm room than in his pocket, even though that left it alarmingly close to where Naegi was sleeping in his bed. As long as he had the screwdriver with him, no one else should be able to take it.

Togami replaced the air vent grating, quickly tightening the screws to hold it in place – all except the final one. As an added precaution, he didn’t quite tighten the screw in the bottom right corner all the way. Instead, he left a few turns too loose, turned so that the flat line across the top crossed the screw vertically, while all the others were horizontal. It wouldn’t stop anyone from tampering with the air vent – but at least it would be an easy way to tell if someone had tried.

He slid the chair back over to where it had been at the side of the bed, carefully keeping his gaze away from the boy lying there. He didn’t dare let himself look at Naegi again, not when he’d already spent so much longer here than he’d intended. If he found himself faced with the stark reality of Naegi’s wounds again, he knew it would take him far too long to pry himself away. So he turned for the door and headed out into the hallway without another glance down.

Ogami stood out there leaning against the wall opposite his door, making no pretense of doing anything other than waiting for him to emerge. Togami gave her a single sharp nod to acknowledge that she’d had the sense not to wander off and delay him further. She met his eyes and returned the nod in a move deeper and more deliberate than the one he’d given her, before walking past him through the door.
“Wait.”

Ogami paused, looking back over her shoulder at him.

Togami took a deep breath. “This could be a lengthy investigation on my end. I don’t know how often I’ll be able to check back. So if – when Naegi wakes up, tell him –” Togami frowned, his mind going blank for a moment. While there were a thousand things he would have liked to say to Naegi, none of them ought to come from someone else’s mouth. “Tell him I’ll see him soon. And to take better care of himself.”

Before she could comment, Togami turned and headed back down the hall. It was time to return to the library.
Chapter 142

Chapter Summary

Togami returns to the library to reassess the situation.

Togami hurried back towards the second floor, doing his best to make up for the time he’d lost in the dorms. He knew he shouldn’t have let himself get sidetracked for so long – but he hadn’t realized just how difficult it would be to return to the room where Naegi was. Under the circumstances, he supposed that he’d managed to get in and out as quickly as he could have expected.

As he opened the door to the library again, he braced himself to face the worst. Any number of things might have happened in his absence – Monokuma could have reactivated himself, the mastermind could have returned, or Jill could have gotten bored and done something destructive. The possibilities were endless.

But it seemed like for once, matters were falling out in his favor. The library looked just the way it had been when he’d left it, down to every pile of ruined books and shattered furniture. Even Jill was in the same place, leaning against the wall at the corner of the row of bookcases where she could see both areas of the room. She’d looked bored when he opened the door, toying idly with the ends of her long braids, but at the sound of his footsteps, she snapped to attention, her mouth twisting into her usual wide grin.

“There you are, White Knight! What kept you?” she bounded over to his side, only to have to spin in place and return the way she’d come when he didn’t pause his strides towards the screened-off space.

“I was busy,” Togami said shortly, not at all inclined to give a known murderer unnecessary information.

But apparently she didn’t need it. “Stopped by to check on sleeping beauty, huh? So did true love’s kiss work its magic?”

True love – those words from her lips stopped Togami in his tracks, prickling along his skin like jabbing needles. He’d only come to realize how deeply he felt for Naegi a single day ago, and with the ensuing fight, the knowledge of his own emotions still lay raw and unhealed in his heart. What right did she have to talk about love, when he hadn’t even said the word aloud yet? How dare she mock his feelings when he still didn’t know if Naegi felt the same?

“That is none of your business,” Togami snapped.

“Guess that means it didn’t work.” Jill shook her head, undaunted by his anger. “But come on, no way he’d leave a catch like you behind. I bet any time now –”

“Shut up,” Togami cut her off, voice low and harsh. “Or if you can’t manage to keep your mouth shut for two seconds together, say something useful and tell me what happened while I was gone.”

“That’s all you want?” Jill tilted her head. “Come on, baby, ask me for something fun next time!
What’s the point of having me follow your orders if all I get to report is that nothing happened?”

Togami turned to glare directly at her, searching her face for any sign of deception. “Nothing happened at all? You’re sure?”

“Could’ve been Saturday night for how boring it was in here,” Jill confirmed. “Gotta say, baby, you’ve given me some tall orders before, but sticking around here to watch a whole lot of nothing? That’s the toughest one yet!”

Togami tuned out her blather, continuing on towards the area where the frozen Monokuma had been. If nothing had happened while he was retrieving the toolkit, that had to mean that the mastermind was still out of touch. If they’d returned, surely dealing with the deactivated Monokuma would be a top priority, to prevent the students from getting their hands on it. That meant the opportunity hadn’t passed, not quite yet. He could still learn something valuable.

The tang of blood still hung in the air as Togami rounded the bookcase corner – but it seemed less oppressive now than it had the first time he’d returned here to investigate. The air around him was only empty space, not a physical force choking him with the memory of what had happened in this place. Was it that he knew what he’d find now that he’d faced it once already, giving the scene less power over him? Or was it that he had a goal now, a purpose that could give him a way to progress beyond the horror of this place?

Whatever the reason, when Togami turned the corner, he found himself able to avert his eyes from the wreckage still scattered across the floor with little more than a shudder. The bloodstained reminder of the past no longer held his focus, and he could look instead at the new path ahead.

Monokuma still stood frozen in the middle of the area, just as Jill had claimed. Togami scanned the area carefully, this time paying special attention to the floor, walls, and ceiling nearby – but he didn’t see any obvious evidence of a trap. Of course, that was no guarantee that it was safe, since he knew of several dangerous traps that could only be detected by closer examination – but thus far, the mastermind hadn’t shown much inclination to use such things. Their preference seemed to be for the flamboyant threats, with enormous guns and heavily locked doors promising dire consequences if they were ignored.

Still, there was no point in taking chances. Togami pulled a book from the nearest shelf and lobbed it forward, holding his breath as he watched its progress. The book hit the ground at a wide angle, spinning fast along the floor until it skidded to a stop at Monokuma’s feet.

Nothing else happened.

Togami exhaled slowly, considering what that meant. It ought to have been a good sign that the book had made it to the stuffed bear without encountering a rain of bullets or a blast of flames – but the tension coiling through his stomach didn’t abate in the slightest. If anything, the lack of any obvious reaction made things worse.

“And here I thought you were all about respecting the written word!” Jill said, bouncing up to stand too close to Togami’s shoulder. “Let me know if we’re gonna do a book burning next!”

Togami turned to face her again, narrowing his eyes as he considered the girl. “Tell me – when you found this thing originally, did you get close enough to touch it?”

“Aw, are you jealous?” Jill laughed. “Don’t worry, baby, I didn’t get any closer than this. I only want to get my hands on you!”
Togami curled his lip at that horrifying suggestion. “Don’t even think about trying it.”

“Ooh, trying to order around my fantasies now, too?” Jill asked brightly. “Tell me, baby, how are you gonna know if I just can’t control myself?” She laughed. “But gotta say, that wasn’t the order I thought you were gonna give.”

“What are you talking about?” Togami asked suspiciously.

“No need to pretend, I get it,” Jill said. “My noble White Knight just can’t bring himself to order such a fragile, demure maiden to throw herself into danger, right?” She cackled with wild amusement at her own jokes. “Mm, those big bold demands of yours sure do give a girl the tingles—but time’s a-wasting, so I say we skip the foreplay and get right to the main event!”

Before Togami could demand an explanation for this barrage of absurdity, Jill sprang—not towards him, but across the room in the direction of Monokuma.

Togami froze as Jill landed at the bear’s side, letting all her weight fall on the floorboards around him. It was true that he’d been about to order her to approach Monokuma first, to check for any traps that might only be triggered by a human presence. It had seemed only fair that she be the one to take that risk first, considering how close she’d come to committing murder in this very spot.

But she hadn’t made him demand it. She’d offered.

Jill seemed completely unaware of the confusion she’d caused as she circled Monokuma, waving her hands through the air around him. When she’d made two full circuits, she stopped short at the bear’s side, one hand snaking out to land on top of him. Togami stared in disbelief at the sight of one remorseless killer patting another on the head.

Finally, she looked back over at him with a careless shrug. “Doesn’t seem like he’s gonna bite anytime soon.”

“Apparently not,” Togami agreed, giving the ceiling one last glance—but it still remained unnervingly free from weaponry. As far as he could tell, there were no dangers in approaching the deactivated Monokuma—and after Jill had done so, he couldn’t very well avoid it.

Taking a deep breath, Togami strode across the floor, not stopping until he’d joined Jill at Monokuma’s side.
Chapter Summary

Togami begins his investigation of Monokuma.

Togami frowned as he knelt down beside the deactivated Monokuma, giving it a thorough visual inspection. While he'd been close to Monokuma before, he hadn't really gotten the chance to look at the bear. In the brief periods that Monokuma appeared to address the students in person, Togami’s focus had always been on what he’d been saying. Monokuma’s words were too dangerous to ignore, especially given his fondness for loopholes and tricks. Any examination of the technology used to communicate those words had been a secondary consideration. But now, with Monokuma finally silent, Togami could switch his attention to the bear itself.

Monokuma might be oversized for the stuffed toy that he appeared to be, but he wasn't actually all that large. His presence might expand to fill whatever room he was in, but in reality he was no more than two and a half feet tall – which was a remarkably small amount of space to hold whatever technology was used to operate him. Togami knew a good bit about the current state of technology and what various types of electronics were capable of – and he could tell that the bear in front of him had to be an incredibly advanced device.

And that wasn’t the only unusual thing to jump out in Togami’s initial assessment. For all that Monokuma liked to brag about his glossy fur and well-crafted physique – well, repulsive as the claims were, Togami had to admit that he seemed to have a point. The bear’s fur shone with the silkiness of fine cloth, prized as much for its feel on skin as for its beauty – the kind that he wouldn’t have disdained on one of his possessions. He couldn’t see the stitches holding it together, even when he looked where he knew they had to be, which was a mark of very skilled craftsmanship.

So taking into account the materials, the technology, and the level of work that would have been required to put this creation together, Togami could only conclude that building Monokuma must have been a considerable investment on the part of the mastermind. It wasn’t just a piece of technology – it had been almost lovingly crafted to appear to be an expensive stuffed toy, when it would have been much cheaper and easier to let the robotic components show. If this was what the mastermind had chosen to create to speak to the students, that meant they didn’t just value the function of what Monokuma could do – they put a very high price on the illusion he represented. And that made it all the more bizarre that Monokuma should be standing here unattended and inactive.

When Togami felt confident that he’d learned everything he could from a purely visual inspection, he knew it was time to move on to the obvious next step. With every one of his nerves alert and prickling with adrenaline, he reached out to press a hand flush against Monokuma’s back.

And however much effort the mastermind had put into the elaborate ruse that Monokuma was nothing more than a magically operated stuffed toy, touch was where the illusion fell apart. Togami could feel only the thinnest layer of fluff beneath his hand, nowhere near enough to mask the cold curve of metal and the twisting coils of wires. He’d known that such things had to be there, of course – but the fact that they were so flimsily hidden from a tactile investigation
suggested that the mastermind had never intended that any of the students get the chance to try.

Slowly, Togami ran his hands over Monokuma, not letting a single inch of the bear go unexplored. He kept his touches as light as he could, making sure to do no more than test to see what was there. If by some chance there was a button or switch anywhere on the bear that could reactivate him, Togami definitely didn’t want to press it by accident. And aside from potential dangers like that, there were also more obvious threats to avoid, like the wickedly curved claws he knew Monokuma had hidden in his paws. If those sprang out unexpectedly while his hand was in the wrong place, he wouldn’t be surprised to find he’d lost a finger.

He exercised equal caution as he circled around to examine Monokuma’s face, since it was all too easy to envision that grinning mouth snapping forward to bite his exploring fingers. Still, with the versatility Monokuma’s expressions had always displayed, Togami couldn’t justify ignoring this part of the bear. He traced the length of Monokuma’s mouth and muzzle, noting that this section was almost entirely composed of joints and connections rather than solid metal. The red lightning bolt on the black half of Monokuma’s face was actually a clouded crystal panel, embedded neatly into the jointed metal so tightly that he couldn’t find more than a hairline showing where it had been attached. And the other…

The other eye could be unscrewed.

Togami ran his finger over it several times, just to make sure that he really had felt what he thought he had – and yes, his touch confirmed it every time. The round black button of an eye that sat on the white half of Monokuma’s face had a thin groove through the center, just the right size for a screwdriver to fit. And around the bottom of the eye, he could feel the hint of a seam.

So that was it, then – an avenue that he could pursue to learn more about the real workings of the mastermind’s contraption. The reason he’d gone back for his toolkit, the purpose of this entire investigation. This was what he’d wanted to find – and it meant that it was time for him to make the decision he’d been avoiding.

“What’s wrong, White Knight?” Jill asked, bending sideways to peer over his shoulder from a twisted angle. “I thought you wanted those tools so you could play engineer! What’s stopping you?”

Togami rolled his eyes and was about to send a vicious slew of sarcasm her way in return for that failure to note the obvious – but then he paused. Jill hadn’t appeared on the scene until the middle of the second trial, well after everyone else had understood Monokuma’s game. She’d seemed to pick up the situation fairly quickly – but she hadn’t been around to see Enoshima’s attack on Monokuma or its bloody aftermath. And if no one had thought to mention it to her…

“Have you read the school rules in your e-handbook?” Togami asked.

“Huh?” Jill blinked, pulling her handbook out of her skirt pocket to frown at it. “There are rules in this thing?”

“Yes,” Togami said, scowling up at her. “As you would have known if you’d bothered to examine it. And the fifth rule is the one with some bearing on this situation.”

Jill scrolled through the handbook sections until she apparently reached the rules. “Violence against headmaster Monokuma is strictly prohibited?” She laughed. “Man, lucky break for me that I didn’t go at him with my scissors, huh?”

“It’s a fatal offense,” Togami said, even less amused by her sense of humor than he usually was.
“Guess that rules out using the hammer to bust him open like a melon!” Jill said.

“That option was never on the table,” Togami said. “Something like that would obviously count as violence – and the mastermind has proven just how little patience they have with rule-breaking.” He looked back at Monokuma’s shiny black eye. “The question is whether any other kind of disassembly would count as breaking a rule.”

“Does it matter?” Jill asked, putting one hand on her hip. “I mean, he can’t complain you broke one of his rules if he’s in pieces on the floor, right?”

“Maybe not, but it wouldn’t stop the mastermind from using one of their other weapons to deliver punishments,” Togami said. “Monokuma is only the mastermind’s proxy, not the mastermind themselves.”

“Huh, really?” Jill frowned. “I did think it was kinda weird that a robot was the one holding us hostage.”

“Well, it wasn’t – at least, not on its own,” Togami said. “But it’s possible that it does contain some clues about the people who are behind it.”

“Got it.” Jill nodded. “So what are you gonna do?”

That was the question, wasn’t it – the one he still couldn’t answer. He’d come here prepared to investigate, knowing that Naegi would have wanted him to find any answers he could – but he’d never been willing to take things to the point of actual rule-breaking. He remembered the fear on Ogami’s face as she’d reminded him of the potential consequences of getting caught – and of what it would do to Naegi if this happened while he was unconscious. Whether or not Naegi returned his love, Togami knew the soft-hearted boy would be devastated to think he might have been the impetus to send someone he cared about to a senseless death.

But on the other hand – would it end in death? Togami thought about the rule again, considering the exact wording Jill had just read. *Violence against headmaster Monokuma is strictly prohibited.* Ogami had said that she thought disassembling the bear sounded violent – but was that really the case? After all, a screw could be both opened and closed without the use of force. That wasn’t violence – that was its intended purpose. Of course, he hadn’t forgotten the way Monokuma had modified the dorm room door hinges to prevent exactly this kind of loophole – but didn’t that just mean that the loophole was valid? And now that he knew how the mastermind had gotten around the loophole once, he could be on the watch for it to happen again. As long as he didn’t actually *break* anything… he was fairly sure the loophole should hold.

Togami reached for his toolkit and pulled out the screwdriver. “I’m going to investigate.”
Naegi begins to wake up.

Naegi’s arm felt strange – that was the first thought to intrude into his flickering consciousness. There was an aching weight to his left forearm that shouldn’t have been there, making it heavy and uncomfortable. It wasn’t painful, not exactly, but there was an edge to the sensations that carried the promise of pain in the future.

And as the ache in his arm settled firmly and unavoidably in his awareness, other things began to make themselves known as well. The skin on his face and shoulders stung as the air currents moved across it, a thousand tiny nerves each objecting separately. His back and shoulders ached with their own series of dark bruises. And the back of his head throbbed with a dull pain that grew worse the more he tried to clear his thoughts.

All of it piled together, injury on injury, pain on pain, until it was almost too much to bear. It would be easy to let himself drift back down into the soft, comfortable darkness and let the pain wait for another moment. After all, what reason did he really have to bear such a thing? Why should he force himself to endure something difficult, when giving in would be so easy?

You have to wake up.

The words trickled into Naegi’s mind, small and shaking and almost too soft to hear... but words spoke with that voice would always reach him.

You aren’t allowed to go, do you hear me?

That voice. Togami’s voice. Naegi wanted to go towards it, to curl up and rest in the warmth and safety it promised... but he was so tired. He’d been tired for so long, he could hardly remember ever being anything else. Maybe he’d finally gotten to the point when he’d gotten too tired even for this.

You have to stay.

The words echoed through his mind, striking a chord of memory that he couldn’t quite place. He’d heard words like that before... and he knew that he shouldn’t have forgotten hearing them. Those words had mattered once.

... Stay... Promise you’ll stay... Stay with me...

Broken whispers surrounded him, half-heard and half-remembered, sparking a new source of strength in him. Pain shuddered through his body, dragging him back – but he resisted it this time. He didn’t want to sink back into the darkness, not when someone had wanted so desperately for him to stay.

But it wasn’t enough, not quite. The more Naegi fought the blackness of oblivion, the sharper the sensations of pain became. Breaths became an ordeal to draw into an aching chest. Thoughts retreated from remaining in a throbbing head. And the pressure in his arm grew, heavier and
deeper, until he found that it was pain after all, pain so sharp and deep he hadn’t recognized it. That pain pulsed through him, ringing through his veins with every beat of his heart, loud enough to drown out the whispers murmuring through his memory.

And then something brushed his forehead, soft and feather-light, with a gentleness as far from pain as any sensation could be.

Images rose around Naegi in a swirl of vibrant color, pushing the darkness away with their brilliance. He couldn’t grasp them as they flooded past in a powerful rush, too overwhelming for his battered consciousness to comprehend, but he could feel their presence shielding him from the shadows. Laughter without the tinge of desperation, smiles free from sadness, bright voices and soft words, they all rose up around him like the oncoming tide, and they carried him beyond the point where he’d had the strength to go alone.

... Fujisaki blushing shyly as Ishimaru fixed the tie on the male uniform he wore ... 

... Celeste smiling sweetly as she laid a hand of cards down in front of Kuwata and Hagakure ...

... Maizono laughing beside a pool as Asahina tried to tug her into the water...

Color and life and light shone all around him, filling his ears and eyes and heart with images he’d never seen and words he’d never heard. He saw a thousand glimpses of a life he hadn’t lived, a life he wished he could have had.

The pain clutched at him, trying to force him back into darkness – but not even the screaming of his arm could stand against this.

You have to stay...

Togami’s voice rang in his ears, full of emotions that went far deeper than what they’d shared till now. He heard affection… trust… and something more, something that couldn’t be built from the handful of days they’d known each other. He heard need and vulnerability, protection and safety, so many things too tangled together to pick apart any one aspect.

Stay with me.

How could he make any other choice?

And with a final burst that used the last of the strength he’d been gifted, Naegi drew a deep, shuddering breath – and opened his eyes.
Naegi begins to recover from his injuries.

The world tilted around Naegi as he found himself suddenly thrust from a half-dreamed tidal wave of images into a world that seemed stark and empty and cold by contrast. The sharp, solid colors bled out across the bright visions and the deafening silence drowned out the cheerful sounds, overwhelming the dreams until this harsh reality was all that remained.

And as the dreams evaporated, the pain came rushing back to fill the void they left in his awareness. His head throbbed, his chest and back ached, and his arm – his arm – Naegi’s breath hissed through his gritted teeth as he tried not to cry out. His arm hurt, worse than any pain that he could remember feeling. This wasn’t some tiny cut or scrape that could be put to rights with a bandage and some rest – this burrowed deep into his flesh, sending screams of agony through places he hadn’t known could feel pain. He clenched his fingers in a desperate attempt to stave off the pain.

“Don’t do that!”

A warm weight pressed down on Naegi’s left hand, forcing his fingers to relax out of a fist. Naegi tried to turn to see what had happened – but he found that his body seemed heavier than it had ever been, as though weights on his limbs resisted his every move. He tried to turn only his head, but even that small effort sent stars bursting behind his eyes.

But then someone leaned forward into his limited line of vision. Ogami, Naegi realized. Sakura Ogami was standing beside him, one hand holding his painful arm steady.

“Try to lie still,” she said, frowning down at him with concern. “I know that you must be in a great deal of pain, but moving will only make your injuries worse.”

Injuries? She couldn’t still mean the puncture from the poisoned needle, or the blow to the head he’d gotten days ago in the hidden room, could she? Or… Naegi could vaguely recall hitting his head when he’d woken up in the morning, but he wasn’t sure how Ogami could have known about that.

He opened his mouth to try to ask – but the words rasped across his throat like sandpaper, turning into hacking coughs. He felt each cough shudder through every nerve of his body, multiplying the pain he already felt, until his throat finally eased.

“You’re probably dehydrated,” Ogami said, once he’d stopped coughing. “If you’re able, you should drink something while you’re awake.” She studied him for a moment. “I would like to help you sit up.”

Sitting up sounded like a great idea – laying flat on his back, unable to see anything but the ceiling, was already making Naegi uncomfortable. He’d never particularly minded relaxing in bed before, but that was when he had the ability to move if he chose.
Ogami slid a slow, careful arm behind Naegi’s shoulders, and in spite of himself Naegi’s breath hissed out in shock at the rawness of movement against his skin. He closed his eyes and tried not to gasp again as she lifted him just enough to shift the pillow behind him. When she moved her arm away to settle him back in place, Naegi found himself propped up in a half-sitting, half-reclining position. He blinked his eyes open again just in time to see Ogami holding out a glass of water with a straw pointed towards him.

“Here,” she said, moving it close enough that he could drink from the straw without trying to hold the glass on his own. “Try to drink as much of it as you can.”

It was a little disconcerting to try to drink from a cup someone else was holding, but as soon as Naegi took the first sip, he forgot his discomfort with the concept. Cool water flooded into his mouth, a fresh, clean taste that washed away the sour tang that had coated his tongue and throat, and he found himself craving more like he’d spent hours in the heat. He hadn’t even realized he’d been so thirsty, not until the water smoothed away the rough dryness of his mouth and throat.

Before he knew it, he’d emptied the glass. Ogami looked pleased as she set it aside, before turning back to peer at Naegi again. “Are you feeling a little better?”

Mindful of what had happened the last time he’d tried to speak, Naegi took a fortifying breath before opening his mouth again. “Yes,” he said, keeping his voice soft and low. It wasn’t entirely accurate, since his arm still hurt, though not as badly as when he’d tried to move it, and his entire body felt like a mess of aches and pains – but the water had helped. He didn’t think he was going to start coughing again, at least.

And that answer must have been right, because it earned him a small smile of relief from Ogami. “Good. You had us all very worried, you know.”

All? Naegi’s gaze automatically flickered out across the rest of the room, looking to see if any of the other students might be nearby. He didn’t see anyone else in the room – but as he glanced around, he did see a thick red carpet rolled across the floor, a delicate flower vase on the table, and a music stand with a violin propped up beside it. None of those things had ever been in the bland, empty dorm room he’d been given – but he still recognized them.

This was Togami’s room. He’d been sleeping in Togami’s bed. Yes, he’d done that before, but never by himself, with the other boy nowhere in sight. How had he ended up back here? And more than how – why? His memory might be fuzzy and unreliable about recent events, but he remembered the shock and fury of their fights with bitter clarity. Togami had been too angry to speak to Naegi without attacking – why would he have let Naegi into his room when Naegi had a perfectly good bed of his own right across the hall?

Or did he? Something bad had obviously occurred, even if Naegi couldn’t quite remember it at the moment. What could it have been?

He looked back at Ogami, steeling himself to try to speak again. “What happened…?”

Her eyes widened. “You don’t remember?”

“No…”

“I see.” Ogami’s eyebrows knit together as she examined him even more closely than before. “Well, there was –” She hesitated. “There was an incident in the library, and you were quite badly injured. Genocide Jill stabbed you through the arm, and then a bookcase fell on top of you both.”
Jill… and her scissors… and a bookcase? Silver flashed before Naegi’s eyes, and his stomach lurched with the sudden, dizzying sensation that he was falling backward. Wild laughter echoed unsteadily in his ears, and red eyes shone bright with barely-suppressed emotions.

“Is she… okay?” Naegi asked, not quite able to sort through the scraps of confusing memories on his own.

A small, sad smile crossed Ogami’s face for a moment before her expression melted back into concern. “Jill is fine. Unfortunately, you are not. You lost a great deal of blood, and I suspect you may have hit your head when you collapsed.”

Had he? He supposed that would explain a lot – the exhaustion, and the headache, and the dehydration. It didn’t tell him why he was in Togami’s room, though.

“I don’t know how severe that head injury was,” Ogami continued, frowning. “And your memory loss is worrying. I’m going to try to determine if you have a concussion.” She raised a hand with one finger extended. “Please try to follow my finger with your eyes.”

Naegi obediently kept his gaze trained on her finger as she traced slow patterns through the air. His aching head made it a little difficult to maintain concentration, and he would have liked to close his eyes and rest, just for a moment – but he didn’t want to make Ogami any more worried than she already was. He persevered through to the end, when she finally dropped her hand back to her side.

“You’re able to track with your vision,” she said. “And your pupils seem normal. Those are both good signs. Do you feel nauseous or dizzy at all?”

“Dizzy… not nauseous,” Naegi answered.

She considered him for a moment. “Does your head feel fuzzy? Are you able to remember other things?”

He’d remembered those fights with Togami all too well, even if he wished he hadn’t. “Yes…”

She didn’t look convinced. “Do you remember your name?”

He smiled shakily. “Makoto Naegi.”

She nodded slowly. “What’s the name of this school?”

“Hope’s Peak Academy.”

A little bit of the tension around her eyes eased. “And the year?”

“2012.”

Ogami went still. “What?”

Hadn’t she heard him? Naegi tried to raise his voice a little. “2010.”

She gave him a long, dubious look. “That wasn’t what you said the first time I asked.” She sighed, shaking her head. “You aren’t showing the physical signs of a concussion, but you seem disoriented. It might be a side effect of the blood loss instead of the head wound, but I don’t know enough to tell the difference.”

“Is that… bad…?” Naegi asked.
Ogami met his eyes, and her expression softened. “You needn’t worry about it. Just try to rest.”

“But…”

A sad smile touched her lips. “I see he knew you wouldn’t want to rest properly. Maybe you’ll listen to your boyfriend if you won’t to me.”

Naegi went cold, the word *boyfriend* knocking the breath out of him like a punch to the gut. She had to be referring to Togami – but the other boy had never actually been his boyfriend, not really. And whatever he’d been once, he certainly wasn’t any longer, after the fights they’d had.

“Togami left a message in case you woke up before he could return,” Ogami said, apparently not noticing Naegi’s distress. “He said to take better care of yourself, and he’ll be back to see you soon.”
Chapter 146

Chapter Summary

Ogami tells Naegi what happened while he was unconscious.

Naegi stared at Ogami in bewilderment, not sure what to think of the message that she said Togami had left for him.

_He said to take better care of yourself, and he’ll be back to see you soon._

The words didn’t sound like the boy who’d snarled angry words at him on the fifth floor hall, or the one who’d stormed out of his bedroom in seething fury. No, those were the words of the boy who’d slept in his arms, who’d helped him walk back from the trial grounds, who’d looked into his eyes with a smile that had meant something. They were the words of the boy Naegi missed, with a desperation that rivaled the physical pain throughout his body. And with the iciness in Togami’s manner towards him over the past couple days, he hadn’t known if he’d ever see that boy again.

“He… said that?” Naegi asked softly.

Ogami nodded. “He didn’t want to leave, but – well, something came up that he had to investigate.”

Investigate? A chill of fear slithered down Naegi’s spine, with a sharpness that cut through all the other pains clamoring for his attention. What kind of investigation could have sprung up to demand Togami’s attention so suddenly, compelling the paranoid boy to leave two people alone in his bedroom?

Naegi knew Togami still insisted on hanging onto his suspicions of Ogami even after everything she’d said and done to prove herself, considering her a potential danger to the lives of everyone else in the school. If he’d given her free rein of his room without any supervision – then that had to mean whatever he was investigating was an even greater threat. And when it came to life-or-death investigations here in Hope’s Peak…

He’d been unconscious. If there had been an announcement, he wouldn’t have heard it. And while Ogami had mentioned both Togami and Jill, she hadn’t said a word about Kirigiri. If there really was an important investigation going on, Naegi would have expected Kirigiri to be right in the middle of it – unless there was something preventing her. Something that must have happened when she’d gone off by herself to search an unspecified area of the school, in defiance of Monokuma’s obvious wishes.

“What?” Naegi asked, his voice croaking out from a throat that had suddenly gone too tight. “What happened?”

“What?” Ogami frowned at him for a moment before understanding dawned on her face. “Ah – no, that isn’t it. I apologize for the unfortunate word choice. It isn’t one of Monokuma’s official investigations. No one is dead.”

Naegi closed his eyes for a moment, the tension in his throat easing to let him exhale a long, slow
breath of relief. Every time he’d discovered one of the other students dead, it had been terrible – but he didn’t know how he would have coped with the nightmare of learning that one of his friends had died while he slept. And if it had been Kirigiri, when he’d helped her begin her search…

But it hadn’t been. No one was dead, Ogami had said so. Naegi couldn’t believe that anyone who had endured so many of Monokuma’s trials would be able to lie about something as important as who was still alive.

But if she hadn’t been talking about a murder investigation – what had she meant?

“Then… what is it?” Naegi asked. “What… is Togami investigating?”

Ogami sighed. “I didn’t want to worry you, since none of us fully understand what is happening yet. But it seems that something has happened to Monokuma.”

“What?” Of all the things he’d thought she might have said, that hadn’t even been a possibility. Monokuma’s presence had been woven through the air of the school from the moment he’d appeared, both worryingly absent and unnervingly everywhere. What could have happened to him?

“He stopped responding to any attempt to contact him,” Ogami went on. “And he turned up in the library, apparently deactivated. Togami felt that he had to try to determine what might have caused such a thing.”

Naegi blinked, trying to process what she was telling him. If this was true, it would definitely explain why Togami had left. This was the first time Monokuma had shown any kind of weakness – if they could find out what had happened, maybe it would be something they could use. Anything that could make Monokuma go silent, even for a little while, could be a really important clue. Maybe this was the start of something good.

Or maybe it was the opposite. All of Kirigiri’s revelations from the previous night flashed through Naegi’s memory, everything that she’d told him about her meeting with Mukuro Ikusaba. Kirigiri had thought it was possible that Ikusaba was the one who controlled Monokuma, not the mastermind – and if that was true, it put an entirely different spin on Monokuma’s silence.

Could the mastermind have discovered Ikusaba’s betrayal? Kirigiri had been so careful to keep their conversation away from the security cameras, but what if Ikusaba hadn’t been equally cautious? The mastermind might have had ways to keep tabs on her that she hadn’t known about. They could have known about the plan she and Kirigiri had concocted all along. After all, could it really be a coincidence that something strange had happened to Monokuma so soon after Ikusaba had offered to change her loyalties?

And it wasn’t just the situation with Monokuma – Kirigiri had disappeared into the hidden places of the school, where even Naegi’s new handbook function hadn’t been able to track her. Naegi had already been worried about the fact that she hadn’t returned yet – but now, combined with the other events that had happened while he slept, her absence seemed downright ominous.

And none of the others knew about it. Kirigiri hadn’t told anyone other than Naegi about her contact with Ikusaba or her plan to search the school. But if Togami and Jill were investigating Monokuma’s disappearance – they didn’t have all the facts they’d need to understand what they might find.

“I need… to talk to Togami,” Naegi said, trying to swallow back the fear rising through him. “Right away.”
Ogami laid a steadying hand on his shoulder. “Please try to calm down. I understand that you’re concerned, but he gave me his word he wouldn’t take unnecessary risks. He’ll return as soon as he can.”

“It’s not that,” Naegi insisted. “There’s… something he should know.”

She frowned. “What?”

Naegi hesitated. Kirigiri had given him permission to share her secrets with Togami – but not with any of the others. And – his eyes flickered towards the security camera – he didn’t know exactly what was going on behind the scenes, not for sure. If he said the wrong thing and gave away just what Kirigiri knew, he could turn a merely bad situation into a deadly one.

“Something important.” Naegi knew even as he said the words that they sounded small and inadequate. “Please… just tell him that.”

But Ogami shook her head slowly. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. I promised that I would protect you on his behalf. Leaving you here alone would break that promise.”

“Not long,” Naegi protested. “Just a few minutes.”

“During which time you would be alone and unguarded.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Naegi…” Ogami sighed. “You have no idea how severe your injuries were, do you?”

“What?” Naegi blinked at this sudden shift in the conversation. What did his injuries have to do with anything? “You said… it was just my arm.”

“Yes,” Ogami said. “But a stab wound piercing directly through your entire forearm is no minor injury, even apart from the collapsing bookcase. You lost a great deal of blood, both during the injury and when we had to remove the scissors to free you from the wreckage – and there was a very real risk that it might have been too much.” She met his eyes, her expression grim and somber. “Naegi, you nearly died.”
Chapter 147

Chapter Summary

Naegi tries to understand the full implications of his injuries.

Naegi stared at Ogami in confusion, waiting for her to explain that she’d exaggerated, that she hadn’t meant the words the way they’d sounded. But she just looked back at him, her face serious and sad.

*You nearly died.* The words rattled around in his head like a puzzle piece that he couldn’t quite figure out how to place. He’d heard it from Togami several times before, both after he’d been attacked in the hidden room and after he’d been poisoned by Fukawa’s stray needle – but as unpleasant as those experiences had been, he’d still walked away from both of them, exhausted but intact. He’d known that there had been a possibility that things could have played out differently, but since it hadn’t happened, he hadn’t felt any need to dwell on the might-have-beens.

But now, so weakened by blood loss that he couldn’t even sit up on his own, it felt different. *You nearly died.* Ogami’s words were so straightforward, so removed from the barely-contained fear and anger simmering through Togami’s voice when he said the same thing, that they cut through any veil of distance Naegi might have put between himself and what had really happened.

The library came back to him, full of scissor-scored furniture and shredded books. Fukawa’s books. He heard Jill ranting about them, laughing and snarling in turn. The echoes of his worry for her surged back through him, and he saw the barricaded doors, the gunfire, the trip ticket he’d used to reach her. He remembered being locked inside, and her unhappiness about being trapped. Her grief, her frustration… her anger. He’d gotten himself locked in the library with a serial killer, and he’d made her angry.

“Did… did Jill try to kill me?” Naegi asked, the words barely a breath above a whisper.

Ogami hesitated, frowning as she looked away from him. It was a difficult question, Naegi realized, with a sudden rush of guilt. How could he ask her to think something so awful about one of the other students? Even if he wanted to know, he shouldn’t have asked her to tell him.

“I’m sorry,” Naegi said. “That… wasn’t fair.”

The words startled her out of her thoughts, her gaze jumping back to him. “No – you do have a right to know. I don’t know what her intention was when she stabbed you, but – I do know for certain that she did not want your death. After you lost consciousness, she left to find help, rather than finish what she’d begun. She came to my room and demanded that I save your life.”

Naegi blinked. “She… what?”

“I have some knowledge of first aid –”

“No… that’s not it,” Naegi said. “How did she leave? Monokuma locked the library door.” His eyes widened. “She didn’t break it down, did she?”

“I don’t believe so,” Ogami said, frowning. “The door appeared intact when I arrived. Why would
Monokuma have locked you in?"

“Well…” The thought of everything that he’d have to tell her in order to explain the trip tickets made Naegi’s head ache even more in sheer exhaustion. “It’s a long story.”

Ogami nodded in understanding. “Very well, I’m sure Jill could provide me with further details if necessary. I didn’t spend a great deal of time questioning her once I realized why she wanted my assistance.”

“Oh.” It occurred to Naegi, rather belatedly, that if Ogami was the one who’d helped him, the only one who had even the least amount of medical abilities – then it was probably thanks to her that he was still alive right now. “Thank you.”

Ogami stared at him, something in her expression shifting towards darkness. Naegi could see an echo of the shadow that had consumed her when they’d last spoken rising in her eyes. “You don’t owe me any thanks. How could I have done anything else?” She shook her head, her eyes losing focus as she looked through him to something else entirely. “You’re the last truly good person left in this school.”

Naegi’s eyes went wide. “But… that’s not true!”

Why would she say something so obviously false? He supposed that he could see why she would believe so much of what was “truly good” had disappeared from the school, after Asahina’s horrible death – but what about the rest of them? Didn’t she see what they’d done?

“You, Togami, Kirigiri, and Jill… all of you are good people,” Naegi said, as fiercely as he was able with the weight of exhaustion hanging on him. “Togami took care of me… every time I got hurt, even when we were fighting. Kirigiri has worked so hard to keep us all alive… and to try to find a way to escape. Jill said she wouldn’t kill anyone… even though it would be easier for her than anyone else. And you… you defied the mastermind for us!”

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“Which was only necessary because I’d betrayed you in the first place,” Ogami said. “As for the others – the way you see them speaks more for you than for them.” She sighed, the sound heavy with a sorrow she’d only delayed, not dealt with. “I didn’t help you out of whatever innocent generosity you are imagining. I simply didn’t want to be responsible for another good person dying because of me. I couldn’t bear the thought of watching my own grief reflected back to me in someone else.”

Ogami’s smile was a grim thing, holding no glimmer of happiness in its depths. “I wanted to protect Hina, and I failed. The mastermind took her from me – and if she can be so easily destroyed, for an act she did in kindness and friendship, then what hope is left for me without her?” She held Naegi’s gaze. “And what hope is there for Togami without you?”

Naegi stared at the girl in horror, praying that he’d misunderstood what she was trying to say. He knew that Asahina’s death had been a painful blow for her – but it couldn’t really have caused her to give up on all hope, could it? Wasn’t the mastermind’s unexpected murder of Asahina all the more reason to fight on in her memory, rather than an excuse to give in to their plan?

And as for Ogami’s claim that Togami would react that way if Naegi had died – that was ridiculous. Togami had a thousand reasons to keep moving forward, from his position as the heir of the Togami Corporation that he’d fought so hard to win to his own sense of self-worth, founded in hard work and a refusal to give in or settle for less than he believed he deserved. And while Naegi
knew Togami had very strong feelings towards him – in the end, they’d only known each other a few weeks. If he had died, then yes, he did believe Togami would have grieved for him – but it couldn’t possibly cause the spiral into despair that Ogami had implied.

Those thoughts circled around and around through Naegi’s aching skull until Ogami frowned down at him, narrowing her eyes in scrutinizing concern and said, “I apologize. I should not have encouraged you to speak for so long, or on such difficult topics. I simply wished for you to understand why I will not leave you alone, even for the brief time it would take to find Togami and ask him to speak with you.”

Naegi wrenched his mind away from the confusing tangle of thoughts, remembering why he’d begun the discussion in the first place. “Even if this could make a difference?”

Ogami gave him a long, sad look. “Nothing we do here will be able to make a difference. You’ll be happier once you resign yourself to that reality.” She shook her head. “I’m certain Togami will return to check on you again soon. Until he does, the only thing I will allow you to do is rest.”

Naegi would have liked to say that if Ogami wasn’t going to help him, he’d go find Togami himself – but he could tell without even trying to leave the bed that such an option wasn’t in the cards. Like it or not, he was stuck here. If Ogami wouldn’t leave to bring Togami back to hear his warnings, then there was nothing Naegi could do but wait, and give in to the exhaustion weighing down his body. He let his eyes drift closed, just for a moment while he tried to think about whether there was anything else he could do. But he’d been tired for such a long time... maybe Ogami was right, and rest was the only thing left for him to do.
Chapter 148

Chapter Summary

Togami considers his disassembly of Monokuma.

Only when a dull ache began throbbing through his forehead too persistently to ignore did Togami start to realize just how long he’d been sitting on the library floor, bent over piles of disassembled electronics. He closed his eyes for a moment, and a spasm of pain seized across his face as the tense muscles there finally had the chance to relax.

Togami leaned back from the pieces of the Monokuma he’d been laboring over, rolling his shoulders until they clicked from tension. He’d spent long stretches of time concentrating on work before – but it had usually been mental work, no more physically taxing than turning pages or squinting at a computer screen. If he’d needed something to be taken apart, there had always been a minion around to do it for him.

But now, delegation wasn’t an option. The only person around that he could have ordered to take apart Monokuma was Genocide Jill – and even if she did seem willing to listen when he told her what to do, that only went so far. He didn’t believe for a moment that the genocider possessed the skills or the patience necessary to take apart the delicate robot without destroying some critical piece. It had been tricky enough for him to manage, especially since he’d had to take extra care to avoid violating the rules by even accidentally breaking something – and he didn’t even want to think about what might have happened if Jill had been the one to encounter the bomb.

He opened his eyes again, looking over at the corner of the room where he’d placed the bomb, wanting to keep it well out of the way. He’d suspected that Monokuma might have some kind of weapon built into him, after the first version of the bear they’d met had exploded when Owada had attacked it, and so he’d been on the alert for danger as he’d unfastened screws and disconnected wires.

But even if he hadn’t been watching for it, he could easily have identified the bomb, with its almost cartoonish shape and its bright red motion sensor. Fortunately, the motion sensor had been deactivated, probably at the same time that Monokuma himself had gone still, and Togami had been able to disconnect the bomb from the rest of the robot without too much difficulty. The ease of removing it did make sense, once he thought about it – after all, if the mastermind had ever needed to perform any repairs on their robot, they would presumably have wanted to get the explosive components out of the way first. It didn’t seem likely to go off unless someone deliberately turned the motion sensor back on – but there was no point in taking needless risks.

Unfortunately, useless as it was, the bomb was the most interesting thing he’d uncovered in his search so far. Togami had gone into this investigation all too aware of the possible dangers, and so he’d chosen to move slowly. For moment he spent untangling wires or detaching joints, he devoted more than twice that amount of time to tracing the connections between the different parts, making sure that he understood every move before he made it. He knew just how thin a line he was treading, disassembling the mastermind’s prized piece of technology, and he wanted to take every possible precaution to stay on the right side of the school regulations. If he didn’t… well, the fate of the school’s two rule-breakers was always present in the back of his consciousness, reminding
him of what he had to avoid.

But knowing how critical caution was in this situation did nothing to temper his frustration at the slow pace of his investigation. He still had no idea why the mastermind had disappeared in the first place, which meant that he also didn’t have any way to tell if they might return. The mastermind could come back at any moment, discover what Togami was doing, and put a stop to his investigation before he could uncover any more secrets. There was still so much to the robot that he hadn’t even touched yet, a whole intricate mess of its inner workings, and he knew there had to be something of more value than an explosive in there, if he could only find it.

But when he tried to look back down at the pieces of Monokuma in front of him, his vision blurred and wavered, refusing to focus on the electronics or his tools. He’d been sitting here too long without a break, that was the problem. He should have known better than to press on to the point of causing himself physical pain – that would only make his work ineffective, just as bad as not doing it at all.

Togami forced himself to his feet, his knees groaning in protest at the change in position, and tried to stretch his tense muscles. He ached all through his arms and legs, along his spine, through his skull. How long had he been sitting there?

And then he heard noise shuffling off to one side, and his head darted towards it, in spite of the sharp jolt the sudden movement sent down his neck. Jill knelt on the floor a little way off from him, bucket of water beside her and a sponge in her hand. The moment his gaze fell on her, she looked up, a bright grin bursting across her face.

“Hey there, White Knight! Done playing handyman yet?”

“No.” Togami looked her over, eyeing the reddened edges of the sponge. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Couldn’t let you be the only one doing manual labor, baby!” Jill said. “If you’re on board, I had to get in on the fun!”

That didn’t explain much of anything. Togami was about to demand that she provide him with an explanation that actually made sense – when he realized just where she was. Jill knelt with her bucket of soapy water just to the side of the wreckage of the bookcase where Naegi had fallen – the place where she’d started to write her signature word bloodlust in Naegi’s blood. But looking at the floor now, it was impossible to tell that it had ever said anything of the sort. Jill had washed away all remnants of the word, leaving the floor clean and unmarred.

Togami couldn’t help but feel a small rush of relief at the sight of the unmarked floor, ridiculous as that was. It wasn’t as though cleaning the floor would erase what had happened to Naegi, or remove Jill’s culpability in the matter. But still… he was glad that the genocider’s signature had been washed away from the place Naegi had nearly died.

“At least you haven’t been wasting your time here,” he said, not letting any of his relief seep into his chilly tone. He had no intention of letting her feel like he was praising her for cleaning up a mess that had been her fault in the first place.

“No way, baby,” Jill said, bouncing up to her feet. “I could watch you work for hours!”

Hours? Had it been that long? Togami narrowed his eyes. “And just how many hours has it been?”

Jill laughed. “Do I look like a math girl to you? I’ll have you know that I’m a brilliant up-and-
coming artist – nothing but avant-garde sculptures from me!”

Her babbling made Togami’s lip curl. “So you don’t even know what time it is?”

“Oh, that?” Jill shrugged. “Past nine, probably. It was getting close when I left to find a new sponge.”

Nine? Togami frowned. It was that late? He couldn’t quite believe that he’d spent so long working on disassembling Monokuma – but his stomach chose that moment to inform him that yes, it really had been that long. Between the time and the energy he’d spent taking apart the robot, he was starving.

And if it was this late, that meant nighttime rules would go into effect soon. The cafeteria would be closed, and if they needed sleep, they would have to return to a dorm room to do so in safety. Granted, he didn’t know how much of that would still matter with Monokuma out of commission – but there was no point in taking chances over something so easily dealt with.

And it wasn’t just about him. He knew that one floor below, Sakura Ogami sat at Naegi’s side, watching over him while he recovered. She’d vowed not to leave Naegi’s side, and Togami believed she would keep her word – which meant that she wouldn’t be able to leave the room. If she was going to maintain her vigil, someone really ought to check on her, to make sure she had everything she would need to remain there through the night.

Togami looked around at the little corner of the library, with the scattered electronics and the pieces of wreckage. He didn’t like the idea of leaving with a task half-done – but there was no value in forcing himself to carry on in a state where his work would be ineffective. He looked over at Jill.

“Stay here and make sure nothing happens to any of these materials.” He turned and headed for the door.

“Sure thing, baby!” Jill called after him. “Give Makyutie a get-well-soon kiss from me!”

Togami didn’t even dignify that with a response, letting the library door slam shut behind him as he left.
Chapter 149

Chapter Summary

Togami returns to the dorms to rest up for his continued investigation - and more importantly, to check on Naegi.

Togami didn’t allow himself to waste more than a few precious minutes hurrying down to the kitchen and finding a quick meal. It might have saved him time if he’d simply sent Jill downstairs to fetch something instead of leaving to get it himself – but he wasn’t about to trust her to handle his food. No matter how much time he lost this way, it had to be better than the risk of finding himself drugged or poisoned.

As he quickly tried to eat enough of a meal to see him through the night, Togami glanced up at the clock on the cafeteria wall. Just as Jill had said, it was a few minutes after nine o’clock now. He hadn’t checked the time much throughout the afternoon, but he knew that it must have been hours since he’d retrieved his toolkit and begun disassembling Monokuma.

Hours since he’d last seen Naegi.

Would the passing time have been kind to the injured boy? Had he begun to recover? Or had he taken a turn for the worse? There was no way to know without going there in person, and the ignorance burned like fire through Togami’s veins. He wished futilely that there could have been some mechanism for Ogami to contact him if there was any change in Naegi’s condition – but the only way for her to tell him anything would be to leave Naegi’s side and come to speak with him in person. And the only thing that could justify that would be… if there was no hope left.

Togami shoved away from the cafeteria table, food turning to ash in his mouth. The thought of forcing himself to take even one more bite nauseated him, his stomach twisting with anxiety. He couldn’t sit here another minute, not when he still didn’t know what had happened to Naegi while he was gone. He stuffed a few granola bars in his pocket in case he felt differently later, after the dining hall was forbidden, and strode out of the cafeteria towards the dorms.

When he pulled open his dorm room door and entered, he could have been walking into the exact scene that he’d left behind several hours ago. Naegi slept in his bed, with only a touch more color in his pale cheeks than the white sheets surrounding him, while Ogami sat vigilant at his side.

Togami’s heart sank at the sight. He’d hoped that maybe, just maybe things might have gotten better for once in this godforsaken pit of a school – that he’d return to find Naegi awake and alert and smiling to greet him when he walked through the door. It had been a foolish hope, unlikely and so painfully naïve – but he’d wanted it to be true too badly to resist.

And now he could see that it wasn’t. Naegi hadn’t changed at all, lying in the exact same position –

No. Not the same position. When Togami had last seen the boy, he’d been lying down in his back, with only his head and injured arm slightly raised on pillows. But now – even though Naegi was still unconscious, he’d been moved so that he slept sitting up, his back propped against a pillow and the headboard.
Hope flooded through Togami again, twisting through his stomach until he thought he might be sick. He wanted to run closer, to drop down at Naegi’s side and check his pulse and breathing and every sign of life to see if there had been some minor improvement – but his feet stayed locked in place in front of the door. He couldn’t do it – he couldn’t move forward to try to confirm his hopes, not when he might have them painfully destroyed for the second time in as many moments. He had to know if something had changed, if maybe Naegi was all right – but he couldn’t bring himself to look.

“You’ve returned.”

Ogami’s voice intruded into the whirl of thoughts repeating itself through Togami’s mind, breaking his focus and drawing his eyes away from Naegi’s sleeping form. Ogami had risen to her feet when Togami had entered, and for some reason she seemed to feel it was appropriate to give him a small smile.

“What happened?” Togami demanded, one hand twitching in an aborted gesture towards the bed where Naegi lay. “He’s moved. Why did you move him?”

Her smile brightened – and god, he couldn’t take the burst of hope searing through him at the realization of just what she might mean by it. His breath shuddered in his lungs, and he would have sworn that he could feel every pounding beat of his heart as he waited for her to explain herself.

“Because he woke up,” Ogami said, and the words seemed to burrow their way into Togami’s veins to pulse through him, as life-giving as his own blood. “He woke up, and he was fine.”

Togami’s skin tingled with frantic energy, a fierce need to scream, to run, to do something – but the most he could manage was to take a single ragged breath, screamingly loud in his own ears.

“He’s sleeping again now,” Ogami went on, “but this is a true sleep, not unconsciousness. I’ve woken him every hour or so since he first woke to confirm his condition. He did hit his head, but I saw no evidence of the worst possibilities that we discussed.”

Which meant no comas, or permanent brain damage, or lingering on as a shell of the boy he was. Naegi had woken up, and he was still himself, still the kind, frustrating, optimistic, incomprehensible, perfect boy that Togami had come to love with everything in him. Whatever effects of these injuries might linger on, even if they were serious, even if they were life-altering – they didn’t matter. They wouldn’t make Naegi less than he was.

Ogami was staring at him now, he realized distantly. It was almost like she was expecting something from him. A response? That had to be it. He hadn’t said anything to answer her. It seemed to take an eternity for him to remember how to control his mouth, to pry his lips apart and force his frozen tongue to move.

“Good,” he said at last, the word sounding far away, like someone else had spoken it. “That’s… good.”

That response seemed to be satisfactory. Ogami nodded and smiled at him again. “He’s asked after you ever time he wakes up. I explained why you couldn’t be with him, and passed on your message. He was pleased to hear it – and I think it was the only thing that convinced him to settle down and rest as he should.”

His message? Togami cast his mind back, trying to recall what he’d said. He’d promised to return, hadn’t he? And he’d told Naegi to take care of himself. The words had been flimsy and pathetic, a feeble substitute for everything he’d really wanted to say – but Naegi had liked hearing them.
They’d given him a moment of happiness when he’d woken to find himself injured and in pain. Togami clenched his fists at the thought, trying to hold back the surge of unidentifiable emotion rising through him.

“Does he need anything?” Togami asked, in a vain attempt to use some clearly-defined task to keep the tide of emotions at bay. “More medical supplies? Or something from his room?”

Ogami paused, frowning for a moment. “We have all the medical supplies that he would require…but I think he is still more dehydrated than he should be. I have tried to make him drink water, but I would feel better if he had something more nourishing as well.”

“There are cans of broth in the kitchen,” Togami said, remembering that he’d looked right at them a few minutes ago.

“That would be ideal,” Ogami said. “Could you bring him some?”

That sparked Togami’s memory, reminding him just why he’d come here in the first place. “Not me. You should go.” He took a deep breath, trying to gather himself enough to appear calm, together, and in control. “It seems that my investigation of Monokuma will continue into nighttime. You should take this chance to resupply yourself with whatever you need to stay here until morning.”

She nodded slowly. “I see – because the cafeteria is closed after ten o’clock. I should probably take the opportunity to stock up on some water for him as well, since I won’t be able to get him fresh water during the night.”

“You’ll need to fill containers from the taps,” Togami told her. “The only place I’ve seen bottled water is in that stupid capsule machine in the school store, and even that seems to be entirely random in what it dispenses.”

“Very well,” Ogami said. “I believe I saw several thermoses in the supply room that should suffice.” She started to move towards the door – then stopped. “I did say that I have been waking Naegi periodically, to ensure that he is still well and not showing any signs of confusion.”

“Yes – and?” Togami sent her an impatient glare.

“And it’s been about an hour since the last time I woke him,” Ogami said. “I see no reason why you shouldn’t wake him in my place.”

And with that, she walked out of the room, leaving Togami alone with the sleeping boy.
Chapter 150

Chapter Summary

Togami finally has the opportunity to wake Naegi up... if he can only muster the nerve to do it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Togami moved towards the bed where Naegi lay sleeping, his feet carrying him forward as if under someone else’s control. He couldn’t look away from the unconscious boy’s face, searching for some hint about whether Ogami’s assessment of Naegi’s condition had been right. What was the difference between a peaceful, healing sleep and a worrying state of unconsciousness? She’d admitted that her training was hardly extensive – could she have misjudged?

Reaching the side of the bed, Togami sank into the chair, watching the slow rise and fall of Naegi’s chest. Was the breathing any steadier now than it had been before? He thought that perhaps it was. He could see the shadows shift across Naegi’s face with every breath he took, the subtle play of darkness on his skin an indication that he hadn’t yet fallen still. His face seemed softer now than the last time Togami had been here, features relaxed into an ease bordering on peaceful. Could that be the expression of someone unable to shake off the grip of unconsciousness?

Togami reached out, intending to brush his hand across Naegi’s forehead and smooth away the stray strands of hair that had tangled there – but instead, his hand stopped, falling onto the pillow beside Naegi’s head. If Naegi really was merely asleep, then a touch would wake him. That was all it would take to know the truth, to be sure that this was real.

And Togami couldn’t bring himself to do it. He closed his eyes, gritting his teeth at this ridiculous show of weakness. It was better to know the truth, no matter how horrible it might be – he’d always believed that. Without accepting and understanding a harsh reality, there was no way to move past it to reorder the world to something more acceptable. He’d never let himself linger in denial, caught in a limbo of painful, useless hope. He’d always chosen to know.

Until now. Togami’s hand curled into a fist, clenching the cloth of Naegi’s pillow tight between his fingers. While he’d had to cope with bad situations before, he’d always approached them with full confidence that he would eventually be able to twist them in his own favor and emerge triumphant. But with this – if Ogami was wrong, if Naegi really was damaged in one of the ways that mattered – that wasn’t something in his power to repair. If that was what he was going to find – if that was the reality that he would have to live in – then how could he bring himself to face it?

No. He was better than this, Togami knew it – better than the urge to sit bent over his lover’s body, too scared to dare a touch. Ogami had said that Naegi was fine, that she’d spoken to him, that she’d been waking him repeatedly during the past few hours. He had no reason to disbelieve her, not when a lie could be so easily disproved. Worry over possible alternate scenarios was pointless, and he would not allow it to control his actions a moment longer. He would lift his hand, just as soon as he mustered the necessary resolve, and brush Naegi’s hair from his eyes.

His eyes.
Which were open.

Togami jerked back, his spine hitting the chair with a sharp jolt. Naegi was awake. He was awake. It wasn’t some what-if daydream or a far-off possibility – it was here, and now, and happening.

He couldn’t look away as Naegi blinked at him a few times in sleep-muddled disorientation, drinking in the subtle shadings of green and brown that blended into his hazel irises, the inky black contractions of his pupils, the gentle curve of his lashes. Togami had thought he might never see those eyes open again.

And then something behind those eyes went sharp and focused, until Naegi wasn’t just awake – he was looking at him. A bright moment of recognition crossed the other boy’s painfully open face, tangled up with a joy that made Togami’s heart clench in his chest. Naegi still knew him – and the sight of him sitting at the bedside had made Naegi happy. The world seemed like an immeasurably better place than it had been not ten minutes ago.

But then the happiness drained away from Naegi’s face, forced out as confusion and distress rose in its place. “What are you… doing here? What… happened?”

The question felt like Naegi had doused him with a pitcher of ice water. Togami stiffened, stomach twisting as he realized exactly what it meant that Naegi still knew him. The most recent memories of him Naegi would have had to be their fights, full of bitter accusations and ending with Togami storming away in anger. Of course Naegi would find it an unpleasant shock to wake with Togami sitting beside him. The joy had been nothing more than a moment of confusion.

“This is my room, in case it escaped your notice,” Togami said, forcing his voice to remain even. If Naegi was unhappy with his proximity, then he refused to allow his tone to betray that all he wanted was to gather the injured boy into his arms and never let go. “My presence shouldn’t come as a surprise.”

“But…” Naegi’s gaze unaccountably flickered across his face, then down to his arms and chest. “Are you okay?”

“You are asking if I am okay?” Togami couldn’t help but laugh at that, short and sharp. “Didn’t Ogami bother to inform you what happened?”

“Yes, but…” Naegi looked down from Togami’s face again. “Were you hurt, too?”

Togami frowned at the bizarre question, a hint of worry whispering in the back of his head that maybe Ogami really had been wrong about Naegi being in his right mind. Why would Naegi think that he’d been hurt? And what did he keep looking at? Togami followed Naegi’s gaze down to his own chest –

And he saw the dried bloodstains stark against his white shirt.

His perspective seemed to twist, jolting him around in his own head until he saw himself as he must look to Naegi. His usually crisp formal outfit hadn’t held up well under the strenuous activities he’d been doing today, the shirt and slacks wrinkled and stained. He knew he had grease under his fingernails, and he could feel an itchy streak of oil drying along one cheek. His hair had to be a disaster, damp with sweat and almost as unkempt as Naegi’s own.

And then there was the blood, dark and gruesome and too obvious to ignore. It soaked the edges of his sleeves, crawled up his arms, smeared its way down his chest and onto his knees, like a visible brand proclaiming everywhere he’d touched Naegi. The heartache he’d experienced in the last few
hours could be read off of him in the pattern of the bloodstains – where he’d knelt at Naegi’s side, or braced his arm so Ogami could remove the scissors, or helped move him from the clinic. It was all there, every drop a reminder of another piece of that nightmare.

And Naegi had looked at all of that – and thought it was Togami’s own blood?

“You utter idiot.”

“Um… what?” Naegi blinked up at him, and the incomprehension in his eyes made Togami want to scream.

“Do you even bother to use your eyes, or do you just keep them around for decoration?” Togami glared at the boy in front of him, unable to believe that he still didn’t get it. “This is your blood.”

“Mine?” Naegi bit his lip as his gaze traced the pattern of the bloodstains again, as though he couldn’t get his head around the concept.

“Yes, yours,” Togami snarled. “Who else could possibly be stupid enough to get himself sliced up by a serial killer? How many people in this place make it a daily habit to risk their lives on a moment’s whim? Of course I’m not injured – you’re the only one here who’s been found in a pool of his own blood!”

Naegi’s breath caught, and he looked like he might have gone white if he hadn’t already been pale from blood loss. “I – I didn’t –”

“Didn’t what, think? Because that’s obvious enough!” Togami could hear the tremble entering his voice, feel sharp pricklings behind his eyes, but they weren’t enough to hold back the flood of all the grief and anger he’d been trying to deny. “You nearly got yourself killed, do you even understand that? If Jill hadn’t stopped – if Ogami hadn’t helped – if anything had gone just a little differently, you wouldn’t be here now. You’d be gone, and I –”

He snapped his jaw shut on those final words – but it was too late. Naegi had heard his meaning as clearly as if he’d spoken it aloud.

“I’m sorry,” Naegi said, looking up at him with wide, miserable eyes. Even though his voice was soft, the words seemed to expand to fill the entire room. “I never meant to hurt you – not when I care about you this much. I don’t want to make you sad, and…” He took a deep breath, his gaze never leaving Togami’s. “And I don’t want to fight anymore. But… I don’t know what you want me to do.”

The words wrapped themselves around Togami, warming him as thoroughly as an embrace. Naegi still cared about him. He hadn’t been repulsed to find Togami beside him when he awoke, and he didn’t want to keep fighting. He was alive… and he still wanted Togami in his life.

Togami couldn’t help but reach out a slow hand towards Naegi, his fingers finally trailing the boy’s pale forehead to brush away the wild locks of hair. Naegi closed his eyes at the touch, a soft smile trembling across his lips. Togami let his hand slide gently downwards along the side of Naegi’s cheek, and Naegi turned his head to lean into it, pressing his lips to the edge of Togami’s palm.

Togami’s breath seemed to stop in his throat at the sensation of Naegi’s lips against his skin, warming him in a way that had nothing to do with temperature. He’d thought he would never feel that again, and he couldn’t stop the incredulous smile from spreading across his face at just how wrong he’d been.
“I don’t want to fight either,” Togami said, leaning closer. “All I want is for you to stay just like this. Stay alive… and stay with me.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, I didn't actually set out for this to happen in a milestone chapter... but I'm glad it worked out that way. It's a nice way to celebrate 150 chapters and nearly seven months of my life. I really do want to thank all of you who are following along with this story. It's fun to put the story together, but knowing you're enjoying it with me really makes it a delight. Thank you for reading, and I hope you keep sticking with me!
Chapter 151

Chapter Summary

While Naegi would prefer to enjoy his reunion with Togami, he knows some things are too important to ignore.

Naegi let himself sink back into the soft comfort of the bed, the warmth of Togami’s hand on his cheek lulling him into a moment of peace. Something had been missing from his world, an emptiness twisting through his life and making everything he did less than it should be – but that was over now. It had ended the moment Togami had let his hand brush over Naegi’s skin, gentle in a way that Naegi had feared he’d lost forever.

But that wasn’t the case. Not only did Togami refuse to remove his hand, he let his fingers drift along Naegi’s temple, almost petting the stray locks of hair that he could reach. The sensation soothed away the worries that never really stopped gnawing at Naegi’s mind, giving him a brief respite from the horrors of life at Hope’s Peak. This touch promised safety, and peace, and everything good and beautiful that was in such short supply here. He thought he might be content to lie here in this quiet, protected room and let himself fall asleep to the feeling of Togami stroking his hair.

But he couldn’t do that – not yet, anyway. He couldn’t let himself lie back and relax when everyone else was trying so hard to defy the mastermind’s game, not when there was something he could do to help. If something horrible happened to one of the others because he decided to sleep instead of contributing… how would he be able to live under the weight of the guilt he knew he’d feel?

So Naegi forced his eyes open again, fighting off the clinging tendrils of sleep trying to tug him into their depths. His eyelids shouldn’t be so heavy, not when he’d already slept most of the afternoon, but apparently all the blood loss had taken quite a toll on him. Or maybe it wasn’t just today’s injuries – maybe everything that had happened to him so far had just built up to the point when he couldn’t ignore it any longer. He didn’t like being stuck in bed when everyone else could use his help, but he knew any attempt to protest it would meet with Togami’s utter scorn.

He looked over at the other boy, still sitting in the chair Ogami had been occupying at the side of the bed – and blinked at the expression on Togami’s face. There was so much relief written stark across the heir’s proud features, all the usual lines of stiffness and tension relaxing into softness as he looked down at Naegi. He looked like someone had unexpectedly lifted a thousand pounds of weight from his shoulders, leaving him free and light and able to breathe easily. Naegi had known how hard his injuries must have hit the other boy, but there was something different about seeing it so plainly.

He couldn’t keep doing this to Togami – not if he really cared about the other boy as much as he claimed. It wasn’t fair of him to enjoy all the comfort and security that Togami’s presence gave him, and then not at least try to offer the same in return. Guilt burned at the back of Naegi’s throat, sharp and sour. With all the fears the other boy had endured with each of Naegi’s injuries, Naegi had to wonder how many of the emotions he’d caused in the other boy had been rooted in pain and unhappiness. Had he ever made Togami feel safe?
Well, he might not be able to fix the mistakes he’d made in the past, but at least he could do things differently from now on. He might not be able to do much to try to protect Togami while he was stuck here recovering in bed, but he would do everything that he could. And he would start by making sure Togami knew all the dangerous secrets that Naegi did.

“Togami,” Naegi said softly, taking a moment to smile at the familiar shape of the name on his tongue. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Togami’s fingers went still against Naegi’s temple, and a touch of wariness entered his eyes as he frowned at Naegi. “There are things we do need to discuss, but this isn’t the time to begin. You have no business exerting yourself for an extended serious conversation, and I’m going to need to return to my investigation upstairs as soon as Ogami gets back.”

“That’s why we need to talk now,” Naegi insisted. “This isn’t about you and me. There are things you have to know if you’re investigating the mastermind.”

That final word sent a shock of electricity through the other boy, jolting him to attention and crackling like fire through his eyes. And while Naegi felt a twinge of regret at the loss of the affectionate smile, he appreciated this look of fierce intensity even more. He’d hated the thought that Togami might have had his resolve to escape weakened by his affections – but looking like this, sharp and alert like a cat poised to leap, Naegi could tell he remained as strong and confident as he’d ever been.

“What have you found out?” Togami demanded, his hand dropping from Naegi’s cheek down to his shoulder so that they could have an unobstructed view of each other’s faces. “Jill and Ogami didn’t mention anything of the kind.”

“They don’t know,” Naegi said. “I found out about this late last night – after you left.”

A frown darkened Togami’s face. “You mean when you were alone with Kirigiri.”

Naegi didn’t flinch from the obvious displeasure in Togami’s voice as he spoke the other girl’s name. Even if Togami insisted on disliking Kirigiri, Naegi wasn’t going to cut her out of his life – especially not now, when she’d disappeared in the middle of a dangerous investigation. The more Naegi heard about what had happened after he’d collapsed, the more reason he had to fear that something had gone horribly wrong – and that Kirigiri might be caught in the middle of it.

“That’s right,” Naegi said, deciding that his best bet for avoiding another argument about whether Kirigiri had evil intentions was to stay as calm as possible. “Before we went back to the dorms, she told me some of what she’s found in her investigation.”

“And?” Togami prompted, narrowing his eyes in suspicion. “Does this have anything to do with where she’s been hiding all day?”

“Yes, I think so,” Naegi said, his worry about the girl returning full force as he realized that she’d been gone nearly a full twenty-four hours. “She wanted to follow up on a lead – but nothing she said sounded like she expected it to take this long.”

“What exactly did she say?” Togami asked, his fingers stiff on Naegi’s shoulder like he wanted to grip it but was restraining himself.

Naegi opened his mouth to answer – and then frowned, glancing over to the security camera in the corner of the room. Yes, Ogami had told him that it seemed like something had happened to Monokuma, and that they’d all come to the conclusion they weren’t being watched any longer –
but that was because they didn’t know about Ikusaba. Just because Monokuma wasn’t active right now, did that really mean the mastermind had stopped paying attention?

His memory flashed back to the way Kirigiri had acted in the bathhouse when she’d told him about her meeting with Ikusaba. In the only room free from the mastermind’s cameras, they should have been safe from any eavesdropping – but Kirigiri had still been careful to speak softly and to hide the important parts of her communication behind the guise of bandaging the cut on his cheek. She’d never done anything like that the other times they’d needed to have private conversations – every other time, she’d apparently considered the bathhouse’s lack of cameras to be secure enough. But now, something about her meeting with Ikusaba had changed Kirigiri’s mind.

And with the possibility of what might have happened in spite of all her precautions, Naegi thought that maybe he ought to consider a little discretion himself. He would have preferred to try to do it in a way that would look subtle… but stuck immobile in bed, he’d just have to work with what he could manage. And if anyone really was watching, at least they wouldn’t actually overhear him, even if they knew he was telling secrets.

“Can you come closer, please?” Naegi asked. “I think it’s safer if I don’t say this out loud.”
Chapter 152

Chapter Summary

Naegi tells Togami about Kirigiri’s interaction with Ikusaba.

For a moment, Naegi thought Togami might refuse his request to come closer, the faint hint of a puzzled frown lining his face. Naegi could see a thousand calculating thoughts ticking away behind the other boy’s narrowed blue eyes as his gaze moved from Naegi to the camera and back again, and he tried to think of what kind of explanation he might be able to offer in response to the inevitable questions.

But instead of refusing to act in a way that made no sense with the information he possessed or demanding an explanation before giving in, Togami just nodded. He rose from the chair and circled around until he was on the opposite side of the bed from Naegi’s injured arm. With movements slow enough that Naegi barely felt the shift, Togami sank down onto the bed, his body pressing warm and solid against Naegi’s side. Only when he leaned in to bring his ear close enough to hear the faintest whisper, positioning himself to block the camera’s view of whatever words Naegi’s lips might form, did Naegi start speaking again.

“There really is a sixteenth person in the school. Her name is Mukuro Ikusaba, and she’s been working with the mastermind.”

Togami must have braced himself to try not to react to whatever he might hear, but this close, Naegi could see the infinitesimal widening of his eyes and hear the brief moment when his breath caught in his throat. So that must mean that whatever Togami might have found so far in his investigation, it hadn’t made him suspect Ikusaba’s existence. He hadn’t seemed to take Ogami very seriously when she had first suggested the possibility of a sixteenth student when they’d confronted her over being a spy – the concept had probably slipped his mind entirely.

Togami’s gaze flickered in the direction of the security camera, and Naegi could see the moment when realization dawned in his eyes. With his highly cautious approach to both the cameras and the other students, of course Togami’s mind would have jumped immediately to the potential risk Ikusaba could present. He didn’t know the specifics of the situation, but he understood the need for secrecy.

Naegi could feel the moment when Togami’s attention left the security camera to refocus on him, even though the other boy didn’t do anything obvious to indicate it had happened. Naegi couldn’t have pinpointed exactly what it was that gave it away, whether it was the angle of his head or the rhythm of his breath – but he knew he had Togami’s attention before the other boy even parted his lips to speak.

“How?” was the only word Togami uttered in response to Naegi’s revelation, his tone flat and inflectionless.

An eavesdropper wouldn’t have been able to deduce much about the conversation from that single word, but it barely took Naegi a second to grasp what Togami had meant. Not “how was there another person,” since Naegi could hardly be expected to know something like that, and not “how did Naegi know about this,” since he’d already explained that Kirigiri had told him. No, this “how”
had to translate to the first question that would be likely to occur to Togami in the face of this information – “how did Kirigiri know about it?” Togami didn’t like to take anything on face value, and Naegi knew he’d take issue with the information if it were nothing more than Kirigiri’s unsubstantiated conclusions.

“She isn’t just guessing about it,” Naegi said. “Kirigiri knows Ikusaba’s here because they’ve met. Kirigiri went to check out the headmaster’s office right after the last trial, and Ikusaba found her there. She talked to Kirigiri in person, not using Monokuma or through a broadcast. There’s no way Kirigiri could have made a mistake about something like that.”

Togami’s only movement in response was a slight thinning of his lips as he processed the new information. Naegi suspected the other boy would have argued if any of the circumstances had been different – but he could hardly doubt the existence of a sixteenth student when Kirigiri had actually seen her. And that meant that if Togami couldn’t find a hole in one piece of this new information, he’d attack it from another angle, switching to what he would consider the next most critical question. He would want to know why.

Naegi answered it before Togami could even open his mouth to ask. “She approached Kirigiri because she wants to work with us against the mastermind. She offered to help us escape.”

Whatever mental fortifications Togami had tried to use to prevent a visible reaction, they weren’t able to hold against a statement like that. He jerked away and twisted around so that he could look Naegi in the face, gaze scanning him with burning intent. Naegi blinked, not quite sure what he ought to do in response to this nonverbal interrogation. What exactly was Togami looking for? He couldn’t suspect Naegi of lying, and since Togami had been the one to stop Naegi from continuing to explain, he could hardly believe that Naegi was leaving something out. What else was there?

If Togami had been searching for answers in Naegi’s expression, he apparently didn’t find them. Instead of moving back so that Naegi could continue speaking in secrecy, he shifted around on the bed until he could bend down and press his cheek to Naegi’s temple, his lips close to Naegi’s ear. In spite of the tense situation, a shiver snaked down Naegi’s neck at the feel of his hair shifting beneath the other boy’s breath.

“Don’t tell me you believed her.”

Togami’s words might have been soft enough that only Naegi could hear them, but that didn’t make them any less harsh.

“That’s the most obvious ploy I’ve ever heard. A mysterious sixteenth student appears out of nowhere the same day that the mastermind finishes using planted data to manipulate us? A five-year-old could spot the trap in that. Please, please don’t tell me you trusted her.”

Naegi frowned as Togami moved away again, repositioning himself so that he could hear Naegi’s response. He supposed that he might be a little more trusting than the average person, and definitely a lot more than someone as suspicious as Togami – but that didn’t mean he was stupid.

“Of course I knew it could be a trap,” Naegi said, as soon as he could answer Togami without being overheard. “Kirigiri did, too. We talked about it. But we both thought that even if it was risky to try to work with Ikusaba, we couldn’t just ignore her.”

Togami’s eyes had gone very dark at this, but he didn’t move away. He just raised a hand in a peremptory gesture, motioning for Naegi to keep talking.

“Ikusaba offered to open up one of the locked areas of the school so that Kirigiri could look for
something to use against the mastermind,” Naegi went on. “She thought she could do it without the mastermind noticing.”

Togami’s frown deepened at that. “When?”

“Last night.” As he finally admitted it aloud, Naegi couldn’t keep the fear out of his tone. “And I don’t think anyone’s seen Kirigiri since.”
Chapter 153

Chapter Summary

Togami puts a different spin on the facts Naegi has shared with him.

Naegi wished he knew what Togami was thinking about the information that Kirigiri had apparently disappeared while working on an investigation with Mukuro Ikusaba – but he couldn’t manage to read the other boy’s expression at all. Togami might not be quite as good as Kirigiri at keeping his face emotionless, but he definitely had the ability to do it when he wanted – and he was choosing to do so now. Whether he wanted to hide his thoughts from the cameras or from Naegi, his face stayed frozen and blank as he considered Naegi’s words.

Was he angry that Naegi had been involved in yet another risky plan with Kirigiri? Naegi wouldn’t really blame him if that was the case – now that Kirigiri had disappeared, Naegi was feeling a little angry with himself. Maybe if he’d tried to convince Kirigiri to wait and think of a safer option instead of going along with her plan so easily, she wouldn’t be missing right now. Of course, considering how Kirigiri usually reacted to being questioned, she probably would have ignored him and gone ahead with her own plan without his help, rather than letting him dissuade her – but he still could have tried.

But if Togami had been angry about that, would he really have been able to hide it so well? Naegi wasn’t sure. His anger had seemed to overcome his guardedness in the past – but then again, that had been rooted in his fear for Naegi’s safety. Togami didn’t feel anywhere near so strongly about Kirigiri’s wellbeing. They were barely even friends – Togami could hardly manage to be civil to the girl even at his best, and Kirigiri never wasted time on anything that didn’t help her investigation. It all made Naegi a little disappointed to watch – he couldn’t help feeling like Togami and Kirigiri were similar enough to be really good friends, if only they’d let themselves try.

And even if Togami insisted on refusing to give Kirigiri a chance – he still had to be concerned about her, didn’t he? After all, they were all trying to fight the mastermind together. Her investigation could only have helped everyone if she’d been successful – and if something bad had happened to her, that would just make things worse for the rest of them.

But try as he might, Naegi couldn’t see a hint of that on the other boy’s face when Togami finally glanced back and Naegi and asked, “Where?”

Naegi blinked, trying to drag his mind back to the conversation so he could follow Togami’s train of thought. Where…? Oh – he had to be asking where Kirigiri had gone.

“I don’t know,” Naegi admitted, not quite able to swallow the frustrated sigh that accompanied the words. “She didn’t tell me. I don’t even think she knew exactly what parts of the school Ikusaba was planning to open.”

Togami narrowed his eyes, moving again so that he could reply. “So you’re claiming that this Ikusaba really did let Kirigiri investigate some of the school’s secrets – at roughly the same time that Monokuma went silent. Are you saying you think Kirigiri had something to do with that?”
“Maybe,” Naegi said, once Togami had moved so he could safely hear Naegi’s answer. “But I think it probably had more to do with Ikusaba. From what Kirigiri said, it sounded like she’s probably the one who’s been operating Monokuma.”

That caused Togami’s eyes to widen again, as Naegi had known it would. It was one thing to know theoretically that there had to be an actual human being on the other side of Monokuma – but putting a real name to the vague concept of Monokuma’s operator made something different. And now, Monokuma had gone silent at exactly the same time his operator had betrayed the mastermind.

Naegi wasn’t at all surprised when Togami shifted around again so that he could ask Naegi questions. Of course he would want more answers about the possibility that something had happened to both girls involved in this strike against the mastermind.

“Are you suggesting that there’s also a seventeenth person in the school?”

Naegi blinked. “What?”

He didn’t need to see Togami to know the other boy was rolling his eyes in impatience. “You’ve told me that this Ikusaba showed up and offered to let Kirigiri snoop around locked parts of the school. Now Kirigiri is missing and Monokuma, who is supposedly operated by Ikusaba, has been deactivated. You’re obviously worried that something happened to them during this frankly stupid plan of theirs – but if everything you’ve said is true, the most likely way something might have happened would be if the mastermind had another agent here in the school.”

Naegi caught his breath, his eyes shooting over to the security camera as if he’d be able to look through it to see an observer on the other side. He’d known that even if something had happened to Ikusaba, there was probably still someone watching them with the intent of keeping them in this game – but it hadn’t occurred to him that such a person might actually be inside the school. But now that Togami pointed it out, it did make sense. Kirigiri hadn’t just been worried about the security cameras when she’d told him about Ikusaba – her precautions had been focused on evading other kinds of eavesdropping.

But if Kirigiri had thought there was a chance there was a seventeenth person in the school in addition to Ikusaba – why wouldn’t she have told him?

No, that was a silly question. Even when she wanted his help, Kirigiri only ever shared the bare minimum of information necessary for him to do what she needed. It wasn’t how Naegi would have chosen to act, but he supposed that he could understand why she would behave that way – the more people who knew a critical fact, the greater the risk it might get back to the mastermind. And in this case, Kirigiri had been the one planning to take the greatest risk, so it was only fair that she should be allowed to decide what level of danger she was willing to bear. Naegi got it, he really did – but understanding didn’t get rid of the twinge of hurt at the realization that his friend hadn’t trusted him.

Naegi would have liked to say some of what he’d been thinking to Togami, to share his thoughts with someone who really did trust him without reservation – but the other boy hadn’t moved so that Naegi could speak to him safely. Naegi frowned, trying to think how to phrase it so that it wouldn’t mean anything to anyone who overheard.

“If you think that’s true –”

“I don’t.”
Naegi nearly cracked his head into Togami’s as he jerked around to stare at the other boy in confusion. What was that supposed to mean? If Togami didn’t believe the theory he’d just suggested, then why had he said it in the first place?

“Don’t do that,” Togami snapped, his voice sharp with annoyance as he reached out to tug Naegi back into place. “You’ll hurt your arm.”

“It’s fine,” Naegi said, shaking his head to dismiss his concerns. “But –”

“Well, it won’t be if you keep jarring it,” Togami cut him off. He shifted around again until he could wrap an arm around Naegi’s shoulders, keeping the smaller boy settled firmly in place against his side. “There. Much better.”

It was better for more than just keeping still, Naegi realized as Togami bent his head to speak again.

“I see you haven’t worked it out yet,” Togami murmured into Naegi’s ear. “I told you – the presence of a seventeenth person would only make sense if everything you’ve said is true. But you’re missing an obvious possibility. This girl Ikusaba showed up claiming that she wants to betray the mastermind – but it sounds like all you have on that is her word. How do you know that Mukuro Ikusaba herself isn’t the mastermind?”
Naegi froze as all the implications of Togami’s question crashed through his mind. What if Mukuro Ikusaba was the mastermind? It hadn’t even occurred to him before this. Even if he’d wondered if different pieces of what Ikusaba had said might have been untrue, he’d assumed that the foundation of her claims had to be based on reality. But why should it be? Why couldn’t everything Ikusaba had said to Kirigiri be a lie?

He didn’t even have to wonder about why the mastermind might have wanted to tell a lie like that – the answer was obvious, given what had happened afterward. Out of all the students, Kirigiri had always been the one most determined to search for an answer to their imprisonment here – and the one who had managed to find the most success. She’d uncovered the hidden room, she’d found Alter Ego, and then, right before Ikusaba had approached her, Kirigiri had even gotten into the headmaster’s office. The lie, if that’s what it was, would have been carefully crafted to distract Kirigiri from her other leads and lure her away from the rest of the students. Once she’d gone into the hidden areas of the school, the mastermind would have her at their mercy.

But – was it really all a lie? Naegi wrenched his mind away from his fears of what might have happened to Kirigiri if she’d really been caught in the mastermind’s clutches. There was no point in dwelling on such a terrible scenario, not when he didn’t know for sure if that was the case. Togami had asked a very good question, one that Naegi should have thought of himself – but that was all that he’d done. There was no solid reason to believe one version of events over the other, not yet.

Naegi only had to tilt his head a little to one side for Togami to notice, immediately bending the few inches necessary for Naegi to be able to speak into his ear.

“You’re right – Ikusaba could be the mastermind,” Naegi admitted. “I don’t have any proof that she isn’t – but I don’t have proof that she is, either. She only showed herself to Kirigiri, not me, and Kirigiri wasn’t even supposed to tell me about it.”

She’d said that she wanted a failsafe in case something went wrong, Naegi remembered. She wanted him to know about Ikusaba and her investigation so that someone could pick up where she’d left off – in case she couldn’t. She’d known going in that this was a dangerous risk to take.

But had she realized just how big of a risk it was? It hadn’t occurred to Naegi that Ikusaba might have been the mastermind herself – but Togami had spotted the possibility almost instantly. Kirigiri had had nearly a full day to mull over Ikusaba’s claims before she’d decided to accept the other girl’s offer – could she really have failed to consider the idea that she’d met the mastermind in the flesh, rather than a traitorous subordinate?

“I don’t know what Kirigiri really thought about it,” Naegi said, his voice faltering a little as the realization sunk in. “She… didn’t tell me.”

Would she still have gone, if she’d thought she could be walking straight into the mastermind’s trap? He knew Kirigiri was determined to uncover the mastermind’s secrets – but he wouldn’t have
expected her to go quite that far. She’d always struck him as more cautious, preferring to take calculated risks rather than throwing all caution to the wind on one big gamble.

But then again, Kirigiri kept herself so guarded and private that he couldn’t really say for sure just what she would or wouldn’t do. Maybe he didn’t know her as well as he thought he did.

As Naegi fell silent under the weight of those thoughts, Togami moved away again so that he could reply. “Then what exactly did she tell you? She must have said something more than just mentioning this girl’s existence. Tell me everything about Ikusaba – what she looked like, why she claimed to want to betray the mastermind, how she found Kirigiri. I want to know everything she said.”

Everything she’d said…? Naegi cast his mind back to that conversation as Togami shifted to hear him. He’d been more focused on the plan than on the details about Ikusaba, but he was pretty sure he remembered them all.

“Well, Kirigiri never actually saw Ikusaba’s face,” Naegi said. “She had a mask and a coat on to hide what she looked like. And I guess she can move pretty quietly, because she snuck up on Kirigiri while she was searching the headmaster’s office. Kirigiri said she never heard a thing. That’s probably because of her soldier training, though.”

Togami frowned sharply at that last part. “What?”

“Well, Kirigiri never actually saw Ikusaba’s face,” Naegi said. “She had a mask and a coat on to hide what she looked like. And I guess she can move pretty quietly, because she snuck up on Kirigiri while she was searching the headmaster’s office. Kirigiri said she never heard a thing. That’s probably because of her soldier training, though.”

Togami frowned sharply at that last part. “What?”

“That’s how Ikusaba said she got involved with the mastermind in the first place,” Naegi explained. “She said she used to be part of a mercenary soldier group called Fenrir, but –”

Togami went very still, his arms tightening around Naegi’s shoulders. Naegi frowned, wondering if the other boy wanted to say something – but when Togami made no move to shift position, Naegi supposed he ought to finish his explanation first.

“Well, she isn’t part of Fenrir anymore, because it turned into this other group called Ultimate Despair,“ Naegi went on. “They’re the ones working with the mastermind. But Ikusaba said that she was only working with Fenrir because she was kidnapped and brainwashed –” He decided to ignore Togami’s snort of disbelief at that idea. “– and that it started wearing off while she was on her own in the school.”

Togami definitely had something to say about that, since he began moving to reply safely the second Naegi finished his sentence. “That’s an easy claim to make, with no proof to back it up. The Togami family is quite familiar with Fenrir, and I don’t believe that a real member of that group would abandon her loyalties so quickly.”

“Kirigiri sounded pretty convinced Ikusaba was telling the truth about that part, though,” Naegi said, as soon as he could. “She said Ikusaba showed her a wolf tattoo that only members of Fenrir have.”

“Really?” Togami said, startled. “Now that’s interesting. The tattoo is much less well-known, even on the level of people who are aware of Fenrir’s existence.” Naegi could feel the other boy’s mouth shift to a frown against his ear. “But if this Ikusaba really was a part of Fenrir, then that story about breaking free from her brainwashing has to be nonsense. The training of an elite professional mercenary group wouldn’t be so easy to defy. No, either Ikusaba is the mastermind herself, or she’s working directly on their orders. Nothing else would make sense.”

Naegi bit his lip, but didn’t say anything in response. He’d thought it had sounded fairly believable when Kirigiri had told him about it – of course someone who had been kidnapped and forced to be
a soldier would want to escape at the first opportunity. But now, he had to admit that Togami’s points made sense, too. He had no way to judge which was more likely to be true, that was the problem. All he had was the story that Kirigiri had told him – the story that he wanted so badly to take at face value, because if he didn’t… if it had been a lie… then what did that mean for Kirigiri?

Togami must have noticed some change in his expression that Naegi didn’t realize he’d consciously made, because the way he held Naegi to his side shifted marginally into something less steadying and more protective. “What’s wrong?” Togami asked, concern softening his voice. “You shouldn’t have talked so much –”

“That’s not it,” Naegi cut him off, the words simple enough that he didn’t need to disguise them. “I’m fine.”

“Then what –” Togami stopped short, a long pause stretching out between them. “You’re upset,” he said at last. “About Kirigiri.”

“Of course I am,” Naegi said, a little puzzled that he’d even had to wonder.

Togami took a deep breath, feathering through a few strands of Naegi’s hair as he exhaled. He raised his free hand to settle on Naegi’s good elbow with a strange, almost awkward sort of hesitance that Naegi had never expected to see from the confident heir.

“Naegi… if this was a trap concocted by the mastermind themselves, then you couldn’t have done anything to stop it,” Togami said, his words slow and uneven, almost as though he wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to say. “Kirigiri was a smart girl, and capable of making her own decisions. Her choices were not your fault.”

“What do you –” Naegi’s voice dried up in his throat as he realized just what Togami had said.

Was a smart girl. Past tense.

Naegi twisted around to look Togami in the eye, paying no attention to the jolt of pain through his injured arm as he searched desperately for some indication that he’d misunderstood – but what he found sent a chill of horror through his veins.

“You think she’s dead.”
Naegi is horrified to realize Togami’s assessment of the situation.

Naegi waited for Togami to deny it, to explain that he’d just misunderstood, to insist that he really did believe Kirigiri was okay after all – but the other boy didn’t say a word to contradict him. Togami had never been the type to offer empty reassurances, and he didn’t say things that he didn’t mean.

“She isn’t dead.” If Togami wasn’t willing to say it, then Naegi would. “She can’t be. There hasn’t been an announcement.”

Naegi knew there was an obvious hole in that argument – he’d heard it even as the words left his mouth. The announcement only played at the moment a body was discovered, not at the time of death. And since Kirigiri had gone into an area where no one would be able to follow, it was entirely possible they would never be able to trigger a body discovery announcement for her.

Something prickled hot and sharp behind Naegi’s eyes, and he felt a trail of dampness slide down his cheek. Togami went rigid, his gaze freezing on Naegi’s cheek as his lips pressed tight together in a thin white line.

Naegi grimaced, trying to force himself back into calm – but all he could think about was the way he’d agreed to help Kirigiri with this plan that had put her in so much danger. He remembered the way she’d looked just before walking out of the bathhouse, calm and determined and just a little bit sad. He could have tried to talk her out of it – but instead, he’d made it easier for her to walk into the mastermind’s trap.

And not just Kirigiri, either. He’d carried Alter Ego down to the hidden room, and then he’d just walked away and left the laptop sitting out for the mastermind to find so easily. He’d handed Asahina the tools she needed to break the rule about locked doors, and instead of cautioning her, he’d urged her to be brave. Had anything he’d done ever helped anyone?

“Don’t.”

Naegi looked up as the single word rasped out of Togami’s mouth, brittle and unsteady like he’d had to force it past his lips. The other boy’s eyes were locked on Naegi’s face, and he’d clenched one hand into a fist so tight his knuckles had gone pale.

Suddenly self-conscious, Naegi dropped his gaze from the other boy. What right did he have to waste time crying, as if he were the only one here who was suffering? It was just selfish to indulge himself in tears – especially in front of someone else. He’d hurt Togami too much already – he ought to be trying to make up for that, not making him feel worse. Naegi reached up with his good hand to try to wipe the tears from his cheek.

Togami caught his wrist before he could. “If you don’t stay still, you’re going to start bleeding again.”
The words might have been bitingly cold, but that hardly mattered as Togami settled Naegi back against his chest, ensuring both of Naegi’s arms would lie straight and even beside him. Naegi couldn’t help but let himself lean into the other boy, taking some comfort from the solid wall of warmth at his back. Naegi could feel Togami shift behind him for a moment, groping for something on the desk beside him. Before he could ask what the other boy was doing, Togami had pressed a small spare cloth bandage against Naegi’s cheek.

“You can’t cry,” Togami murmured into Naegi’s ear, brushing the cloth in slow, gentle lines across his cheek. “Not now.”

Naegi nodded, gulping back a sniffle. Of course Togami wouldn’t want to see him cry. “Sorry – I didn’t mean to. I should have waited till you’d left.”

The cloth stilled on Naegi’s cheek for a moment. “Don’t be stupid,” Togami said at last, his tone holding none of the sting that should have accompanied the words. “If you insist on this kind of outburst, obviously someone has to keep an eye on you.” He began stroking Naegi’s cheek with the cloth again, even though Naegi would have thought his face was dry by now. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

Naegi frowned, a little confused. If that hadn’t been what Togami had meant, then what was it?

“I don’t want you to be sorry,” Togami continued, almost as if he’d known the question without Naegi needing to ask it. “I want you to be strong. If this is all some kind of trick – if the mastermind is still watching us after all – then you can’t let them see you cry. It’s as good as admitting they’ve won.”

“I don’t care about that,” Naegi said, trying to give a single-shoulder shrug. What did it matter what the mastermind thought of him?

“You should.” Togami had never sounded more serious. “Attitude is a powerful weapon – one that can cut both ways. Act confident when it matters, and you’ll teach yourself to be confident. Act weak, and you’ll hobble yourself. I know you’re a strong person, Naegi – don’t let the mastermind make you forget it.”

That was what Togami thought of him? Naegi blinked, taken aback by the unexpected compliment. He’d never thought of himself as particularly strong – especially not here, where all his decisions seemed to go so badly for his friends. All he’d ever done was try to keep going and do what had to be done. And it wasn’t even as though he was the best at doing that – not compared to Kirigiri. She never let anything deter her from her search for answers – not even the chance she might be killed.

Naegi took a deep breath, turning his head a little so that he could meet Togami’s eyes. He needed to see the other boy properly as he asked, “Do you really think she’s dead?”

Togami’s eyes went dark at the question, but he didn’t flinch or look away. “Will it make you feel better to hear it?”

Naegi had to think about that question for a moment. Did he actually want to hear Togami spell out all his fears? Would it do anything other than hurt him to dwell so much on the worst case scenario?

Slowly, he shook his head. “No. You don’t have to say it.”

Togami breathed a sigh of relief. “Good.”

“Because I don’t think she’s dead.” Naegi did his best to fill his words with more confidence than
he truly possessed, just like Togami had encouraged him to try. “I think she’s too smart to fall for any of the mastermind’s traps. And I won’t believe otherwise until I see—” He couldn’t quite bring himself to finish the sentence.

Togami nodded slowly. “Waiting for evidence is a solid plan.” He glanced down at the cloth he’d used to wipe away Naegi’s tears. “I hope you’ll try not to dwell on alternatives in the meantime?”

Naegi heard the real question the other boy was asking. “I’ll try,” he said, trying to dredge up some semblance of a smile. “No more tears.”

“Good.” Togami tucked the cloth away in his pocket, then raised his hand again to thread through the back of Naegi’s hair. He barely put any pressure into the touch, carefully avoiding anything that might jar an injury, and Naegi could almost imagine it was a gentle breeze ruffling through his hair. He leaned into the comforting motion, pressing closer until his head settled into the crook of Togami’s shoulder.

He could almost forget that anything was wrong, wrapped safe and warm in Togami’s arms. Just for one brief moment, he didn’t have to think about deaths or plans or betrayals or any of the other horrible things that haunted his every breath in the mastermind’s awful game. He could close his eyes and pretend that all this had been nothing more than a bad dream, that Hope’s Peak was a real school instead of a nightmarish prison, and they were just ordinary students who’d found one another in the course of a normal, happy school life.

His dream from the night before flashed back through his mind – images of Hope’s Peak as it should have been, with no plates covering the windows, full of light and laughter, where his biggest problem had been being late to class. A place where all his friends got along and cared about one another, and would never even consider the possibility of murder. A world where he could let himself spend a moment with Togami without the hint of fear that the next time they parted might be the last.

“You were in a dream I had,” Naegi murmured, before he’d even realized he meant to say it.

“Was I?” Togami’s hand went still and tense in Naegi’s hair. “What kind of dream?”

In another conversation, said another way, the words could have been teasing, the opening gambit for an exchange of lighthearted flirtations. But here at Hope’s Peak, fear always won out over joy. Naegi couldn’t help but feel a little sad that Togami’s first assumption had been some kind of nightmare.

“Nothing bad,” Naegi reassured him. “It was a good dream.” A faint smile crossed his face. “We were just attending Hope’s Peak like normal students. I overslept, and you came to wake me up. You kissed me good morning, we walked to class together, and… it was just a regular day, like that happened all the time. Like we didn’t have to wonder about it. It was… nice.”

Togami paused for a long moment before clearing his throat. “Your dreams sound ridiculously boring.”

“Maybe a little,” Naegi admitted. “But… I would have liked the chance to have something like that.”

Togami didn’t answer, his hand still unmoving against the back of Naegi’s head.

Naegi bit his lip, a slow worry creeping over him that maybe he’d misstepped somehow. Maybe it was too soon into their reconciliation to talk about dreams of a world where they’d been in some
kind of long-term relationship. Or maybe Togami just didn’t think it sounded as appealing as Naegi did. Maybe he thought it sounded sentimental and silly, not like anything he wanted to have in his own life. After all, it wasn’t like they’d ever had the chance to find out what they might have wanted in a normal relationship. Bringing up that dream at all had probably just been a huge mistake, he really should have known better –

“You do have it.”

Naegi blinked. “What?”

“Dream about a different school if you must – but don’t bother dreaming about a relationship like that,” Togami said, his voice so low Naegi could barely hear it. “You don’t need to dream – you already have it.”
Chapter 156

Chapter Summary

Naegi is happy that he and Togami are finally on the same page.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The soft warmth curling its way through Naegi didn’t come from the blankets on the bed, or even from the way Togami’s arms wrapped gently around him. No, this was something new, something internal, frothing bright and brilliant from his chest. He’d never felt anything like it, so light that if it hadn’t been for his injuries he thought he might have floated right up to the ceiling.

It couldn’t be right to feel like this, could it? Not when they were still trapped in Hope’s Peak, in the middle of a deadly game that had destroyed so many of their friends. Not when Kirigiri had disappeared and the mastermind could be enacting some kind of terrible new plan. Did he really have the right to let all those awful things fade into the background so that this sheer happiness could bubble through him?

Or… maybe that was the wrong way to think about it. Maybe that was what the mastermind wanted – to have the despair of their game seep into every aspect of the students’ consciousness until no one could remember how to be happy any longer. If he stopped letting himself feel joy, it would be as good as saying that the mastermind had stolen that emotion from him. He couldn’t let them have that kind of victory. He wouldn’t.

And besides, it would be unforgivably cruel to reject the affection that Togami was offering him. Naegi knew that he’d hurt the other boy, even though he’d never meant to do so. If the proud heir had decided that he was no longer willing to be so open with a person who had caused him pain, then much as Naegi would have hated it, he would have understood.

But Togami hadn’t chosen to do that. He’d been caring and protective, so much more than what Naegi’s injuries had made necessary. He’d held Naegi in his arms, stroked his hair, wiped away his tears… always gentle, with all the care he would use to touch a fragile treasure. And the words he’d said…

Naegi hadn’t meant for his description of his dream to prompt any kind of declaration. He’d just wanted to let Togami share the fantasy that things could have been different – that there could have been a happy ending not just for the two of them, but for everyone. He knew the other boy didn’t think much of ignoring reality, though, so the most he’d expected in response to his rambling about a happy long-term relationship was a tolerant smile.

And he’d gotten so much more. Naegi hadn’t talked about the first heady rush of romance or a whirlwind fling based on infatuation and hormones – he’d painted a picture of two people committed to one another, letting their lives tangle together in quiet moments of happiness. He’d described a relationship meant to last. And… you already have it. That’s what Togami had given him in return.

Even thinking about the words brought a small, almost disbelieving smile to Naegi’s lips. Here in
Hope’s Peak, everything was so divorced from the real world, to the point where he hardly knew what some things meant. He’d known already that Togami cared quite a bit for him, enough to convince him to abandon his plan to win the killing game – but since he himself had never seriously considered murder, it had been difficult to figure out what that had meant. But these words… these, Naegi had understood.

And he couldn’t let them pass by without letting Togami know how deeply they’d touched him. He would have liked to be able to turn and hold the other boy, to pour his joy into a kiss, to press him down to the bed… but he didn’t have the strength to attempt it. He would just have to try to use words of his own to explain how very happy Togami had made him.

“Thank you,” Naegi said, and he hoped his voice sounded more assured to Togami than to his own ears. “That’s… what I wanted us to be. What I believed we could be. I kept hoping that you felt the same way… and it means so much to finally know you do.”

“You didn’t –” Togami paused for a moment, until Naegi felt the shifting muscles as the taller boy shook his head. “Well, you can stop dreaming about it. The reality is what matters.”

“I guess so.” Naegi hesitated as another question occurred to him. It might not be the right time to ask it… but he wasn’t sure he’d get another chance. And he did want to know. “Then… does that mean you want to be my boyfriend?”

“What?” Togami sounded genuinely startled by the question.

Naegi winced, wondering if he should take it back or try to claim he’d been joking. Maybe it was too soon for a question like that, even with Togami’s declaration of his feelings. It wasn’t like he needed to put a label on what they shared, not now that he understood it better. And if Togami didn’t want to –

“I hadn’t thought about that,” Togami said slowly. “I’ve never let anyone call me their boyfriend – and I’ve certainly never said it myself. But… if it’s important to you, then… you can call me whatever you like.”

Naegi felt a smile spread across his face, bright and beaming. No matter how reluctant Togami’s actual words might have sounded, Naegi knew the other boy would never have agreed if he hadn’t genuinely wanted to. Togami would have had no problem saying a simple, direct no if that was how he really felt, or ignoring the question if he’d truly been ambivalent. But he hadn’t done so. He must have wanted their relationship to have a real, understandable status, just like Naegi did.

And it seemed like it made him just as happy. Togami bent down again to press his lips to Naegi’s temple, and Naegi could feel the undeniable curve of a smile against his skin. He tilted his head up as much as he was able, letting the other boy’s mouth brush down the line of his cheek. He couldn’t quite turn far enough for more… but Togami raised a hand to steady Naegi’s chin and leaned forward to close the rest of the distance between their lips.

Naegi couldn’t return the kiss the way he would have liked, with all the affection and happiness and need overflowing through him – but that didn’t seem to bother the other boy. Togami pressed careful, lingering kisses along Naegi’s mouth, warm and encouraging, but with none of the quickly escalating heat that had marked their first kisses. There was something new in these kisses, something Naegi wanted to curl up and bask in for days, and he didn’t think it could be entirely the result of his injuries.

Too soon, Togami pulled away, letting his hand drop down to curl up against Naegi’s chest, moving up and down with every breath. And much as Naegi might have wished the kiss hadn’t
ended so quickly, he had to admit it had left him slightly out of breath. Togami frowned a little as he noticed the change.

“I should let you rest,” he said, stiffening as though he was preparing to disentangle himself from Naegi. “This was… too much exertion so soon after you woke up.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Naegi insisted. “I’m glad we talked. I’ll rest much better because of it.”

“Hm.” Togami sounded a little more dubious, so Naegi did his best to straighten up and look as improved as he could. “Well, anything else should wait until you’re feeling better – unless there’s something else vital that you think I need to know immediately.”

Naegi frowned, trying to think back through everything that had happened in the days since he and Togami had separated. He’d explained about Ikusaba and Kirigiri’s disappearance – that was the most important thing. “I think that’s all. Is there anything you want to tell me?”

Togami tensed behind Naegi, so slightly that Naegi probably wouldn’t have noticed it if he hadn’t been wrapped in the other boy’s arms. Naegi blinked, puzzled — he hadn’t actually expected there to be anything else.

“It can wait until you’ve recovered,” Togami said at last. “I think there is a longer conversation we need to have.”

Oh – so it wasn’t something about Hope’s Peak and the killing game. Naegi relaxed a little. He knew they still had some difficult conversations to have about their relationship — but however hard those might be, he felt fairly confident the two of them could navigate those conversations better now. If Togami had intended to end things, he would never have made the declarations he had, or agreed to call Naegi his boyfriend. Whatever else they needed to talk about, they would be able to work through it after everything had calmed down.

“All right,” Naegi said. “If you don’t want to tell me now, I don’t mind waiting. I’m sure there’ll be a better time.”

But strangely enough, Togami frowned slightly, as though he wasn’t entirely happy with the easy agreement. “Naegi…”

Ding dong bing bong.

Naegi started at the unexpected sound of the nighttime bell. And as the television screens flickered to life to show Monokuma’s all-too-familiar face, the dorm room doorbell rang.

Chapter End Notes

I'm afraid I need to make a change to my usual update schedule. I'm moving at the end of June, so until then, the time I can spend on this story will be a little more limited. This week, I'll only be posting every other day - so that's today (Sunday), Tuesday, and Thursday. I'll see how that works out in terms of timing, and I'll post an update on future scheduling with the chapter on Thursday.
Naegi and Togami decide what to do as nighttime begins.

Naegi stared up at Monokuma’s image on the television screen in shock. Why had the bear appeared to give his usual nighttime announcement after refusing to interact with the students for most of the day? How could he even be there on the screen when Togami had spent the last several hours taking him apart in the library?

Before he could ask, Togami shifted behind him, edging himself slowly off the bed. The other boy seemed much more concerned with making sure he could stand without moving any of Naegi’s injuries than with the fact that Monokuma had just reappeared. Naegi might have thought about asking anyway - but his arm twinged a little as the bed moved beneath him, just enough to remind him that there was a reason Togami was being so careful. The pain might have receded until it lurked just out of reach, but it would be all too easy to bring it rushing back. Naegi wasn’t sure he could stand enduring that again - and he definitely didn’t want Togami to think he’d been the cause of it. He closed his eyes and did his best to look like he barely noticed the movements, at least until Togami had managed to untangle himself from their embrace.

When Naegi opened his eyes again, the television screen had gone dark, the announcement ending just as it usually did. Togami still paid it no attention, crossing the room towards the door without so much as glancing up at the screen. He braced a hand against the door frame and opened the door a crack, tensing as though he was prepared to slam it shut again at a moment’s notice.

But after a moment, he relaxed a hair, swinging the door further open to allow Ogami to enter the room, carrying a large crate filled with a variety of thermoses, cans, bottles, and other rattling supplies. She hardly seemed to notice the weight, even though it had to be considerable with everything she’d loaded into it, balancing the crate with one arm as she immediately turned to look up at the television screen.

“Was that Monokuma I heard?” she asked, staring up at the black screen like she expected the bear to come bounding out of it to attack them all. Ridiculous as the idea sounded when put into words, if it had actually happened, Naegi wouldn’t have been at all surprised.

“Obviously,” Togami said, peering at the crate Ogami was holding. “What did you do, clean out the nurse’s office?”

“What?” Ogami blinked, taken aback by the change of subject. “Oh - yes, I went back there after I finished in the cafeteria. But —” Her gaze went back to the television. “Is he back? I couldn’t see a screen from the hallway - but that voice is impossible to mistake.”

“Yes, it was definitely him,” Naegi said. “And he looked just the same as always.”

“Of course he did,” Togami said, his lip curling. “The nighttime announcements are obviously prerecorded and set to play at specific times, just like the morning ones.”

“Are they?” Ogami asked, startled. “Did you discover that during your investigation of
“Monokuma?”

“No… it’s because the announcements are always exactly the same, isn’t it?” Naegi said slowly, the connection coming together in his head. “I guess that makes sense — otherwise it would be pretty hard for him to time it perfectly every day.”

“Exactly,” Togami said, giving Naegi a brief nod of approval. “The body discovery announcement also has to be a recording, but the trigger couldn’t be automated - someone has to play it whenever the minimum number of people have found a corpse. The only live messages we’ve seen have been the ones that summoned us to assemblies.”

“Then you believe Monokuma is still missing?” Ogami gave the television screen another worried glance.

“For now, at least.” Togami scowled in the direction of the door. “Which means I should return to my investigation.” He glanced at Ogami. “I assume you’ve found everything you need for the rest of the night?”

“I believe so.” Ogami set the box on the table across from the bed. “I brought back some soups and juices and filled every thermos I could find with water. And while I had the opportunity, I rechecked the clinic for other useful supplies. I intended to search for painkillers, but I didn’t have time to inspect every bottle. In the end, I simply brought everything to sort through here.”

Togami frowned. “If you do find painkillers, be cautious with the dosage. The only reason the mastermind would have made them available would be as potential murder weapons.”

Ogami’s eyes widened. “Understood. I have no intention of asking Naegi to consume anything that I’m not confident about.”

“Good.” Togami looked back in Naegi’s direction, something in his gaze softening as he met Naegi’s eyes. “And what about you? Is there anything else you’d like before I leave?”

Stay with me.

The words hung heavy on Naegi’s tongue, pressing against his lips in a desperate wish to be said. The thought of watching the other boy walk out the door now, knowing that the mastermind seemed to have a plot brewing… it sent cold shudders down Naegi’s spine. Wasn’t it bad enough that he’d already had to watch Kirigiri walk off to disappear into the hidden areas of the school, caught in the middle of the mastermind’s trap? Did he really have to sit back and let Togami do the same thing? Faced with the reality of the moment, the plea not to go burned in his throat.

But… he knew he couldn’t say it. He couldn’t ask something like that of Togami — not when there was a chance that the other boy would actually give in to his request. It hadn’t been all that long ago that Togami had been so upset at Naegi’s poisoning that he’d considered staying trapped in Hope’s Peak for the rest of his life. He seemed to have shaken off the fear and rediscovered his determination… but Naegi didn’t want to encourage him to regress. No matter how much he wanted the other boy at his side, Naegi knew he couldn’t ask Togami to stay.

“Just be careful,” Naegi said at last. “And stay safe.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “I think that would be more appropriate advice for you to keep in mind for yourself.” He crossed his arms. “Drink as much as you can to recover from the blood loss, and get some rest. I expect noticeable improvements when I return.”

Naegi had to smile at that — Togami couldn’t help but give orders even when trying to be kind.
“I’ll do my best.”

“Good.” Togami hesitated for a moment, his gaze flickering in Ogami’s direction — but then the faint uncertainty morphed into a deep scowl as he strode back across the room. When he reached the bed, he bent to place a firm kiss on Naegi’s forehead for the briefest of moments, before jerking away with two high spots of red flushing on his cheeks. He spun and headed back towards the door, pausing only to glower at Ogami. “Take care of him.”

She gave him a deep nod in return, and for a moment Naegi almost had the impression of an ancient samurai swearing fealty. “To the best of my abilities.”

And without another backward glance, Togami swept out of the room and into the hall. Naegi craned his head to watch even after the other boy had left his line of sight, not giving up until the door swung closed with a click audible even from across the room. Naegi sighed and settled back into the bed, trying not to let himself wish too hard that Togami hadn’t gone.
Chapter 158

Chapter Summary

Togami thinks about everything he’s learned from Naegi as he returns to his investigation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Walking out of that dorm room was one of the most difficult things Togami had ever forced himself to do. Naegi had looked so much better than he could have expected when he’d come back down to check — but he still wasn’t well, not by any means. He’d looked fragile lying in Togami’s bed, every cut and scratch showing starkly against his too-pale skin and his eyes lined with aching red — and Togami knew all too well just how easy it could be to destroy something already half-broken. He’d had to learn to defend anything he truly valued, and those instincts screamed to stay at Naegi’s side and keep him safe from outside dangers.

But staying with Naegi now would give him nothing more than an illusion of safety — that was what Togami had to remind himself as he walked down the hall towards the stairs back to the second floor. Now that he’d been able to confirm with his own eyes that Naegi really had survived, avoiding the worst potential consequences of Jill’s attack, he could do little more than offer comfort to the injured boy. If he wanted to help in any meaningful way, his best option was to continue his investigation of Monokuma’s disappearance.

And if what Naegi had told him about Mukuro Ikusaba was true, this investigation could be more critical than he’d realized. When Ogami had tried to claim that some mysterious sixteenth student had been lurking around the school from day one, he’d dismissed the idea as the nonsensical ramblings of a traitor — but he couldn’t ignore Kirigiri so easily, not when she’d actually met the sixteenth student herself. As obnoxious as he might find the girl on a personal level, he had to admit that she was no fool. Even with a mask involved, she would have been able to tell immediately if she’d been speaking with either the hulking Sakura Ogami or the half-crazed Genocide Jill. Whatever else might be happening, the reality of a sixteenth person’s presence in the school was undeniable.

But as for the rest of it… Togami didn’t know how much of it to believe. The story of a brainwashed girl breaking free of her forced loyalties sounded far too perfect to be true, though he supposed he could see why Naegi might be more susceptible to believing it, with his ridiculously optimistic faith in human nature. But Kirigiri had always struck him as far more pragmatic. She should have spotted the holes in Ikusaba’s story immediately — and instead she’d decided to throw her life into her new acquaintance’s hands.

Had Ikusaba simply been extraordinarily convincing? Togami had met plenty of charmers during his fight to become his family’s heir, people so skilled in the art of persuasion that they could make a listener ignore their flawed logic. It seemed unlikely that Ikusaba could have managed such a feat from behind a face-concealing mask… but since he hadn’t heard the story in person, he couldn’t really judge how good Ikusaba might have been able to make it sound. Or maybe it hadn’t been an issue of persuasive skill. After all, Togami knew he’d only gotten a third-hand account of the
conversation, and Naegi had focused on summarizing the major points rather than recreating the interaction. Any details and nuances that might have filled in the gaps of logic would have been lost along the way. The story that Kirigiri had heard might have been a better one than the tale that had eventually reached Togami.

Or maybe she’d been more clever than he was giving her credit for. Maybe she hadn’t been fooled by Ikusaba’s story at all. If Kirigiri had seen through whatever lies Ikusaba had told her, it was just barely possible that she might have willingly decided to go along with them in the hopes of learning more. That would have been a risky plan — she would have had to walk a very fine line of appearing to fall into the mastermind’s trap while still retaining enough control of the situation to get something useful from it. Kirigiri had always seemed to prefer caution — it was difficult to envision her choosing to put herself in that much danger. But then again, if she’d given herself away to the mastermind by avoiding the trap entirely, she might have ended up in just as much trouble.

But in the end, it hardly mattered why Kirigiri had decided to go along with Ikusaba’s claims. She had done it, that was the important point — and Monokuma had gone silent less than a day afterward. Togami couldn’t conceive of any way those two events happening so close together could be a coincidence. Kirigiri might have been the one to deactivate Monokuma, through some unexpected act of sabotage — but if she’d done so, why hadn’t she returned afterward? And if this story had been meant to trap Kirigiri, Togami doubted Ikusaba would have let her anywhere near something she could actually damage.

No, to his mind, the far more likely possibility was that this trap had worked exactly as the mastermind had intended. And if that was the case, then Monokuma’s lack of response had to be because Ikusaba was busy dealing with Kirigiri — and that didn’t bode well for the interfering girl. Togami couldn’t be sure exactly what she’d done to drive the mastermind to target her, but with all her snooping, it wasn’t exactly a surprise that she’d finally gone a step too far. And now that they’d actually set a trap specifically aimed at her… well, Togami couldn’t envision any scenario where she emerged unscathed, no matter how much Naegi might insist otherwise.

Despite his best efforts not to dwell on it, Togami found his mind drawn inexorably back to that awful moment when Naegi had started to realize exactly what this might mean for his friend. He’d cried for her, in a way that he hadn’t for his own injuries — and Togami had felt every tear burn through his heart like drops of acid. Naegi had no business crying about anything, not when he ought to be devoting all his energy to healing. After all, it wasn’t as though he’d wasted tears on any of the other dead students —

Had he? Togami frowned, thinking back to the aftermath of the other trials. He didn’t recall seeing Naegi cry then… but it wasn’t as though he’d paid much attention to Naegi early on. And after the third trial, they’d spent so much time separated that it would have been all too easy for Naegi to hide his tears if he’d wanted to.

And that was utterly unacceptable. The only thing worse than the thought of Naegi crying in front of him was the idea that Naegi might hide himself away to grieve alone, with only the mastermind’s cameras to witness his unhappiness. At least Togami could be fairly confident that he’d put a stop to that nonsense. Naegi had even managed to smile one more time just before Togami had left, open and kind and caring — a smile that Togami had feared he’d never see directed at himself again.

The memory filled his chest with a fierce heat, expanding outward until he could hardly contain it, taking almost all his effort to stop himself from grinning in the middle of the empty stairwell like a madman. And try as he might, Togami couldn’t force the hint of a smile off his face entirely, not
when Naegi could still look at him that way. Not when Naegi had asked to be his boyfriend.

The thought of naming their relationship wouldn’t have occurred to Togami unprompted — but as soon as Naegi had said the word, it had felt right. Of course that was what the two of them were to one another, the way they fit into each other’s lives. The label imposed some order on the confusion Naegi had thrown into his world, explaining everything about how it needed to realign.

Or… nearly everything. Even in his injured state, Naegi had been sharp enough to catch that Togami had still been holding something back — but at least he’d agreed not to press the issue until a later date. That would give Togami some breathing room to figure out just what he wanted to tell the other boy — and to decide whether he wanted to confess his love.

He’d almost said it, during those moments of dizzy euphoria when he’d realized that not only was Naegi still alive, he still cared about Togami as much as before. The words had been there, poised on his lips as he looked down at the wonderfully alive boy in front of him, and he’d just barely managed to swallow them back.

Because that had been the key point — Naegi cared as much as before. Togami still couldn’t judge how much that might be… and the last time he’d come close to admitting the depth of his feelings, Naegi hadn’t responded well. How could he tell Naegi he loved him if he suspected Naegi didn’t feel the same way?

He couldn’t. Of course he couldn’t. He might be willing to bare his emotions when he knew Naegi matched them, but being told that he was the only one who felt that deep a vulnerability would be too much humiliation to endure.

But even knowing that, Togami wasn’t sure how long he could prevent himself from saying it. The words had so nearly slipped out a few moments ago, just because Naegi had innocently asked him a question. He wasn’t sure how long he could last without betraying himself, but it couldn’t possibly be long enough. Surely it would be better to tell Naegi on his own terms than to have the truth ripped unwillingly from his heart.

Togami gave his head a sharp shake as he approached the library doors again. He couldn’t let himself dwell on those questions much longer, not while he was investigating Monokuma. He couldn’t afford even the slightest distraction while disassembling the bear if he wanted to avoid breaking the rule about harming the headmaster — and nothing was more thoroughly distracting than his feelings for Naegi. He took a deep breath, resolving to put them out of his mind as soon as he stepped through the open library doors —

And then he paused, frowning. Hadn’t he closed those doors when he left?

Chapter End Notes

I think that this week’s schedule worked pretty well, so I’ll tentatively say that next week will be the same. There will definitely be a new chapter on Sunday.
Chapter 159

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to determine what happened in the library while he was gone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Togami froze in place just a step beyond the library threshold, casting his mind back to when he’d left the room more than an hour ago. He remembered storming out as Jill insisted on chattering about Naegi — and he remembered the door slamming shut behind him. The Hope’s Peak architects had clearly decided that such a school’s library deserved fairly large and imposing doors, so much that swinging them open was no small task. The only way this door could have gotten open after he’d closed it was if someone had deliberately done so.

He looked around the areas of the room that he could see from the entrance, searching for something out of place — but with the rampant destruction torn across the room, he could hardly tell if anything had changed. It wasn’t as though he’d paid much attention to which bookcase had fallen where, or how many books had been shredded. The library was as much a mess as he’d left it, that was the most that he could judge. But even with all the chaos, there was one obvious thing missing.

Ever since Genocide Jill had made herself known to the rest of the students, Togami had hardly been able to enter the same room without seeing her spring towards him out of nowhere. Fukawa had been more inclined to creep behind him, not quite out of his line of sight — but Jill only bothered to hide her stalking if he specifically demanded that she leave him alone. And since he hadn’t done so before leaving the library… Jill should have rushed out to greet him the moment he returned.

A sense of foreboding inched its way down the back of Togami’s neck. He hadn’t thought much of it when he’d left Jill here alone, with the half-disassembled Monokuma in pieces around her — but that had been before Naegi had told him there might be a sixteenth person in the school to contend with. He didn’t doubt that the genocider could take care of herself under normal circumstances — but whatever lies Ikusaba might have told, her role in Fenrir seemed rooted in truth. How would Jill fare if pitted against a highly skilled mercenary, one she hadn’t known to expect?

His eyes darted across the room to the corner where he’d ordered Jill to wait, screened from view by the row of bookcases. It would be an ideal place to set an ambush — especially since he’d have to return there eventually if he wanted to resume his investigation into the frozen Monokuma.

But on the other hand, if he couldn’t see into that corner — anyone there wouldn’t be able to see him, either. Slowly, placing each foot so that his steps made next to no sound, Togami circled around the far side of the room, keeping well out of the line of sight of the corner until he could approach the row of bookcases from the opposite side. He pressed himself flat against the edge of the outermost bookcase, held his breath, and peered around to the hidden area.

It stood as empty and untouched as he’d left it.
Togami let out his breath in an exasperated huff, stepping away from the bookcase with a scowl. Naegi’s information must have shaken him more than he’d realized, to get him jumping at shadows that way. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt such instinctive alarm at an empty room — especially not when he’d entered a room to discover that his murderous stalker wasn’t present.

After all, he doubted she’d stay away for long. She never did, no matter how much he might wish she would. And she’d obviously still been in the middle of trying to remove the blood from the floor — she’d even left the bucket of soapy water right in the middle of the floor. Togami glared down at the tripping hazard, trying not to think about the source of the dark red stains on the sponge floating in the dingy water as he moved the bucket out of his way. He’d have to remember to tell Jill exactly what he thought of people who left their filth sitting around for others to deal with when she got back from wherever she’d wandered off to.

But in the meantime, he certainly had no intention of sitting around and waiting for her to turn up again. He couldn’t regret the hour he’d spent with Naegi, not when it had eased the soul-crushing fear that had been gripping him since he’d found Naegi bleeding out on the library floor — but he couldn’t afford to lose any more time, either. Every moment that passed was another opportunity for the mastermind to enact the next step of whatever plan they’d begun.

With as much care as he could muster, Togami picked his way through the pieces of electronic equipment he’d left covering the floor, returning to his seat beside the half-gutted bear. He’d put a great deal of effort into making certain that he could reassemble Monokuma without breaking anything, and he wasn’t about to waste all that work by carelessly stepping on some critical piece.

Once he’d settled himself in front of the frozen bear again, Togami scanned the electronics around him, checking to make sure everything seemed to be where he’d left it. He might not have paid much attention to the ruin of the rest of the room — but he’d placed these items with the full awareness that any error could cost him his life. He knew exactly where he’d left everything, from the large bomb down to the smallest screw.

And as far as he could tell, none of it had been disturbed. Everything seemed to be just where it had been when he’d walked out of the room, even the way the wires had coiled around themselves. That reassured him a little. Whatever idiocy Jill might be up to, at least she hadn’t been stupid enough to fiddle with the pieces of Monokuma — or worse, with the motion sensor on the bomb. He wouldn’t have been surprised to come back to find that she’d splattered herself across the library walls — but the bomb was as inert as he’d left it. It looked like he could continue his investigation from where he’d left off without a hitch.

But this time, he wouldn’t just be searching blindly for anything that seemed useful. Naegi’s information had given him that much direction, at least. Whatever had happened between Kirigiri and Ikusaba, it had to be related to why Monokuma had stopped moving. And if he could find some evidence of that connection, it would shed some light on just what was happening behind the locked doors of Hope’s Peak.

There had to be answers here, he was sure of it — and he would find them. With that goal in mind, Togami picked up his discarded tools, bent over the robot, and got back to work.

Chapter End Notes

Just a reminder that this week I’ll be posting only on Sunday, Tuesday, and Thursday.
Naegi tries to rest after Togami leaves.

Naegi lay still on Togami’s bed, wondering if he could try shifting around to find a position comfortable enough to let him fall back asleep. Every other time Ogami had woken him throughout the day, he’d had no difficulty nodding off again right afterward… but now, his mind couldn’t quite seem to reach the right state of rest without a thousand other thoughts intruding. His arm protested with threats of returning pain if he moved too much, but the aching muscles in his back and legs cramped from lying in one position too long if he stayed still. A twitchy fervor seemed to crackle down his spine, something that would normally make him toss and turn across the bed — but he knew better than to try it in his current state.

Naegi opened his eyes and frowned up at the blank expanse of the ceiling. Why did he have to get injured so badly now, when he could have been doing something useful to help his friends against the mastermind? Both Togami and Kirigiri had thrown themselves into danger, trying their hardest to find a chance to escape — and instead of going with one of them to help investigate and do what he could to keep them safe, he had to stay here and lie uselessly in bed, not even able to roll over onto his side. He let out a frustrated sigh.

The sound immediately drew Ogami’s attention away from where she’d been sorting through her box of medical supplies. “Are you well?” she asked, her gaze going to Naegi’s injured arm with a sharp frown. “Has anything gotten worse?”

“No, it’s nothing like that,” Naegi reassured her hastily. He knew she’d been doing her best to take care of him, even though she wasn’t really trained to give medical care, and he didn’t want her to feel like he didn’t appreciate that kindness. “I just can’t seem to fall back asleep, that’s all.”

This didn’t make Ogami look any less concerned. “It shouldn’t be difficult. You ought to require a great deal of rest to recover from the amount of blood you’ve lost.”

Naegi started to shrug, and then winced as a jolt of pain shuddered through his left arm from fingertips to shoulder.

“It’s still that bad?” Ogami glanced down at the bottles she’d brought back from the nurse’s office. “I haven’t looked through everything yet, but I did locate a bottle of painkillers. You might try taking one, to see if lessening the pain would help you rest.”

“I guess it could,” Naegi said. “I mean, what I’d really like is to move around, but I know I can’t do that.”

She paused, giving him a considering look. “Well… you shouldn’t get up, but a little more mobility might not be out of the question. If the painkillers are effective, I could rebind your arm into a sling.”

“Really?” Naegi brightened a little. It wouldn’t really let him get up and walk around, but putting his arm in a sling would at least let him shift position more easily.
“Provided you try to get some sleep afterward,” Ogami said. “I believe I saw some sleeping pills as well, but I would prefer to avoid those until you’ve completely recovered from any side effects of a head injury.” She picked up a small sealed bottle from the box and frowned at it for a moment, eyes flickering over the tiny text printed along the side of the bottle. Finally she nodded and unscrewed the top, tipping out a single pill and placing it carefully in Naegi’s hand. “Here, this should be more than enough. Togami was right, everything I’ve looked at from the clinic appears to be at triple the normal dosage.”

“It doesn’t look any bigger than a regular pill, though,” Naegi said, blinking down at the innocuous-looking pill in his hand. “I wouldn’t have known if you hadn’t said anything.”

“Well, it is convenient now,” Ogami said, reaching over to grab one of the many water-filled thermoses she’d brought. “The dosage might be strong, but this is nothing more than an over-the-counter painkiller. I would have given you multiple doses in any case.” She placed a straw in the thermos and held it out for Naegi, and he took a quick sip to swallow the pill.

“It should kick in shortly,” Ogami said. “Once it has, we’ll see about the question of a sling. But while we wait…” She frowned at him. “Do you feel up to drinking something a little more substantial?”

“You mean more than the soup?” Naegi asked, puzzled. Ogami had given him some plain broth she’d brought back from the kitchen before he’d tried to go back to sleep, but he’d barely been able to finish a fraction of the bowl. “I’m not that hungry, sorry.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” Ogami said patiently. “There are some vitamin supplements here — medical versions of the sports supplements I’m used to dealing with. And since you’ve lost so much blood, I thought you might benefit from a dose of extra iron.”

“Oh, I see.” Naegi nodded. “Sure, I could try to drink something like that.”

“Very well.” Ogami stood, picking up another bottle and a can of juice. “Iron can be difficult to digest even in the best cases, but mixing it with juice can help. That should thin down the dosage to a more manageable level, as well. Just give me a moment to mix it.”

She headed into the bathroom and set both bottles on the edge of the sink. Naegi watched as she poured out a little of the juice, then refilled the juice bottle with some of the liquid iron supplement. She gave it a few hard shakes, then left the bathroom to bring it over to Naegi, moving the straw to the juice bottle.

A little cautiously, Naegi tried a sip of it, rolling the juice across his tongue. It mostly tasted like fruit, but there was a metallic aftertaste biting through just before he swallowed. It wasn’t something he’d drink for fun… but if it could help him bounce back from the effects of blood loss faster, then he could put up with it.

Ogami nodded with satisfaction as he gulped down the last of the bottle of juice. “Good. Between the iron and the fluids, that should help. Of course, some people get sick from taking iron — but I didn’t give you very much. If you can stand to drink more, I’ll give you another partial dose of it each time I wake you through the night.”

“Sure, I can do that,” Naegi agreed.

“Excellent,” Ogami said with a smile. “Now, then. Let’s see about that sling.”
Chapter 161

Chapter Summary

Ogami makes a sling for Naegi’s injured arm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“There — I believe that should hold,” Ogami said, rechecking the last of the knots in the makeshift sling she’d constructed to hold Naegi’s injured arm.

Naegi blinked down at the sling, wrapped around his neck and cradling his arm to his chest. He wouldn’t have known where to begin if he’d been asked to make something like this, but Ogami had barely hesitated. As soon as she’d located a spare bedsheets on one of the shelves, she’d neatly torn it in half and folded it from an ungainly rectangle into a functional piece of medical equipment. For something made from a knotted piece of fabric, it seemed surprisingly sturdy, holding Naegi’s arm in place even if he shifted around. It definitely seemed like it would let him be a little more mobile, as long as he didn’t make any sudden movements or try to take the sling off.

He looked back up and gave Ogami a grateful smile. “Thank you! This is much better. You must have had a lot of practice making these.”

“I would hardly call it a lot of practice, but yes, I have made slings before,” Ogami said, shrugging off the praise. “Arm injuries were quite common in our dojo, though sprains were far more common than punctures. I hadn’t realized I remembered the motions so well — but it came back to me as easily as if I’d spent months practicing.”

“Well, I’m glad you remember how to do it,” Naegi said. “Now I don’t have to worry so much about jarring my arm if I move.”

Ogami frowned at him. “I did not do this so that you could move around. You wished to be more comfortable so that you could sleep. I gave my word that I would take care of you — I can’t allow you to worsen your injuries by doing something foolish.”

“I know,” Naegi said, sighing. “I probably couldn’t get very far even if I tried. But I just wish there was something I could do to help.”

“There is,” Ogami said. “You can take the time you need to recover properly. I doubt Togami would be able to focus on whatever he’s gone to investigate if he thought you might be throwing yourself back into danger.”

A worried frown creased Naegi’s face at the thought of Togami not paying attention as he messed around with the deactivated Monokuma. Surely the heir wouldn’t be that careless, would he? But… all it would take for disaster to strike was one wrong move, a moment’s inattention. Naegi couldn’t risk doing anything that would make him a distraction in such a precarious situation. Togami was trusting him to stay here and rest… and Naegi couldn’t forget that he’d already broken one promise he’d made to the other boy. As frustrating as it might feel to be unable to help, he had no other options.
“I understand,” Naegi said, letting himself sink back against the pillows with his arm steady against his chest. “I’ll try to rest as much as I can. But… even if I do fall asleep… will you wake me up if you see anyone else?”

“Oh, of course,” Ogami said, her expression becoming minutely more gentle. “But it may be some time before Togami is able to return.”

“Not just him,” Naegi said. “Kirigiri, too.”

“Kirigiri? But she…” Ogami trailed off with a frown. “You’re right, she hasn’t been around all day. I would have expected her to wish to check on you. She can’t be unaware of what happened.”

Naegi hesitated, wondering what he ought to say to Ogami in reply to that. He’d told Togami everything that Kirigiri had shared with him — but she’d given him permission to reveal that information. If she’d meant for him to tell all the remaining students about her meeting with Ikusaba and their resulting plan, she would have said so. But she hadn’t — and it was her secret, not his. She’d trusted him to guard this knowledge for her. He had to honor that.

At least, until the point when holding onto the information could put his other friends in danger. Kirigiri had called him her failsafe, her backup plan in case her partnership with Ikusaba went wrong. And if her disappearance meant anything, then something had gone very wrong indeed. If Kirigiri really had meant for him to have this information in case of an emergency, she had to have expected him to do something with it if he needed to. And with one of his friends possibly already caught in the mastermind’s trap, he had to do whatever he could to make sure the others didn’t end up in the same situation.

But as close as it was, Naegi didn’t think that things hadn’t reached that point yet. It had only been a day, after all — Kirigiri could still come back safely. With both her and Monokuma out of the picture, there was no proof of what exactly had happened, or where the danger might lie. And just in case Ikusaba genuinely was the ally that she’d presented herself to be, he couldn’t add to her danger by revealing her too soon.

“She had some other things she needed to do,” he told Ogami at last, figuring that it was better to be vague than to lie to his friend outright. “But she was supposed to come back and tell me about it when she was done.”

“I see,” Ogami said, though the frown didn’t quite vanish from her face. “It will probably be a shock for her to arrive and find you injured, but it might ease that if you woke to speak with her yourself. But even if she wished to speak with you, surely she would wait until a more reasonable hour.”

“Maybe,” Naegi said. “But please wake me up if she doesn’t.”

“Very well,” Ogami conceded. “Provided you rest now.”

“I’ll try,” Naegi said, forcing himself to close his eyes and settle back into the pillows.

He’d expected more of the same dull alertness that had kept him awake in the first place… but it seemed that the conversation had left him more tired than he’d realized. Only a few moments passed before he felt himself drifting down into the soft darkness of sleep, and true to his word, he didn’t fight as it took him.

Chapter End Notes
I'm getting into the critical time before my move, so I'm not sure how much time I'll have for writing in the coming week. There will definitely be a new chapter on Sunday, and based on what I can finish over the weekend, I'll have another schedule update by then.
Chapter 162

Chapter Summary

Togami finishes his investigation of Monokuma.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pieces of electronics covered the library floor in a sprawling circle, almost entirely unrecognizable as having once been part of Monokuma. Togami scowled down at them from his place in the center of the ring, surveying the robot he’d spent most of the night disassembling. He didn’t know what he’d expected to uncover by pulling the robot to pieces — but whatever clue to the mastermind’s game he’d been hoping for, he hadn’t found it.

Not that he’d been entirely unsuccessful, of course. He’d looked through enough of Monokuma’s inner workings to have a reasonable idea of how the bear operated. It worked pretty much as he’d suspected it had to — the robot received wireless signals that triggered its different movement patterns. A speaker transmitted the bear’s disgustingly cheerful voice, its position embedded in the back of the throat giving the illusion of genuine speech. He’d even managed to unearth the small processor that seemed to serve as the bear’s “brain,” though he hadn’t tried to unhook any part of that delicate piece of machinery. He might not be an engineer himself, but his knowledge of the Togami Corporation’s electronics division told him just how complicated and advanced the processor was.

In fact, if Togami was any judge, it looked a little too advanced. Before he’d started taking Monokuma apart, he would have sworn that a piece of technology like that was years away from production. Of course, it was always possible that some upstart competitor might have gotten an edge over the Togami Corporation somehow. That had happened before, annoying as it was to admit. But each time he’d learned of another company advancing beyond expectations, it had been a matter of plans, research, developments — not an actual completed device like this one.

And not only was the processor finished and functional, it had been integrated into a complex robotic creation. If he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes, he wouldn’t have believed it was possible. Whoever had made this must have been working for years — and in complete secrecy, since they’d avoided even a hint of a rumor about their advances. It really was a shame they’d chosen to waste their talents on a murderous game-playing lunatic — he would have hired an inventor this brilliant in a heartbeat.

Of course, the inventor could easily be just as unstable as the mastermind. The ability to craft a clean, clever design didn’t necessarily correspond to an equally well-ordered mind. He wouldn’t be at all surprised to learn the mastermind had a cackling mad scientist on their side.

Well, whether the inventor had intentionally been a part of the mastermind’s plan or not, they’d certainly managed to keep all trace of it out of their creation. Togami sighed, rubbing wearily at the crease between his eyes in an ineffective attempt at relieving his headache. He really should have stopped earlier, when he’d started to suspect that there might not be anything in the robot worth finding — but afterdevoting so many hours to the search, he’d rebelled against the idea that the time might have been wasted. He’d carried on in grim determination, fighting past tension and
stress and looming exhaustion, and all he had to show for it now were bleary eyes, an aching back, and a mess of too many robot pieces.

How long had he even been in the library working on this? Without a clock, Togami couldn’t be sure. He hadn’t heard the morning announcement yet, but judging by the dull ache behind his eyes, familiar from other times he’d had to pull all-nighters, he doubted it could be too much further away. He did his best to swallow back a yawn, wishing he’d thought to make himself a pot of coffee when he’d visited the kitchen earlier. After so many hours of painfully intense focus, he’d welcome any caffeine he could get, even if it came in the form of stale room-temperature coffee.

Heaviness dragged at his eyelids, and he had to fight to resist the urge to let them slip closed. He’d been awake too long, and it would be all too easy for a moment’s rest to turn into unplanned sleep — and the school regulations very clearly forbade sleeping outside the dormitories. He might have wondered about what exactly the definition of “dormitories” included — but no matter the specifics, he knew the library wouldn’t be part of it.

If exhaustion was starting to take its toll on him, then Togami knew he didn’t dare try to do anything more with the pieces of Monokuma. He knew he’d managed to take the bear apart without damaging any of its pieces, but mishandling one of the pieces he’d already disassembled would be just as dangerous as breaking it in the process. At this point, his safest option would be to leave the library and the scattered electronics until he’d forced himself into a properly alert state. Sleep would be the ideal method, if he had the time to spare, but if need be, he could make do with false energy from whatever caffeine he could find.

It really depended on what was going on outside of the library. Any number of things could have happened to change the situation without his being aware of it, especially now that he no longer had the option of sending Jill out to the rest of the school on his behalf. And the most likely possibility — the one that presented that greatest threat — was that the mastermind might have resurfaced while Togami was in the middle of taking Monokuma apart.

Initially, it might seem unlikely for the mastermind to ignore Togami’s investigation — but keeping silent would make perfect sense if they hoped to trick him into some punishable error. Such a thing wouldn’t be outside the realm of possibility. After all, it looked like the mastermind had already targeted Kirigiri, and Naegi had done them the favor of taking himself out of the picture. That left Togami as the last viable threat against them — and letting him break a rule would solve that problem for the mastermind quite neatly.

Of course, he’d known all along that a threat would hang over his head as long as he dared to touch Monokuma. The threat might be sharper now that he considered it in light of Kirigiri’s disappearance, but its fundamental nature hadn’t changed. He’d been careful not to damage anything he took apart, and he knew that given time, he could reassemble the bear into the same state it had been in when he’d found it.

And now that he considered it… would it be worth trying to reassemble the robot once he was more rested, in case he was called upon to prove that he hadn’t damaged it? Or… would it be better to leave it in pieces so as not to risk anything breaking further? There was an argument to be made for both options, and without more information, he wasn’t prepared to decide on either of them.

He would have to think it over while he looked into the situation outside of the library. Maybe he would learn something that would put things into a different perspective, or perhaps some rest would give him a new insight. Togami stood, stretching his aching muscles, and carefully picked his way through the electronics towards the main area of the library. He paused at the corner of the row of bookcases, taking one last look at the pieces of the robot to make sure all was as it should
be.

And flickering red lightning met his gaze.

Chapter End Notes

Here is my updated posting schedule, as promised. I should be able to finish this week with a Sunday/Tuesday/Thursday schedule. After that, I'll be taking a one week break to deal with my actual move. I'll probably follow up with one more three-chapter week before things are back to normal.
Chapter 163

Chapter Summary

Togami investigates the red light coming from Monokuma’s disassembled pieces.

Togami froze as low red light glimmered at him from across the room. He would recognize that shade of red anywhere, no matter how weak and pale it might be — the harsh red of fresh blood, the same shade that glared out at the students from Monokuma’s lightning bolt eye.

He barely let himself move enough to take a breath, scanning the electronics to pinpoint the source of the light. How could it be present anywhere in the library? Even if the mastermind had returned and wanted to speak through Monokuma again, they shouldn’t have been able to do so — not with the robot in pieces all over the floor. Togami knew he had disconnected the bear’s head from its power source, he could remember unhooking the connections before he’d tried to do anything further with the head. Without a link to some sort of battery, that eye should have been completely inert.

But the words should have were meaningless when fractured beams of red light scattered themselves in changing patterns across the library, appearing and disappearing over and over. Whatever vestiges of power that eye had managed to dredge up, it seemed to be running through them quickly. The light had to be close to burning out, from the way it kept flickering off and on, off and on in an almost hypnotic rhythm.

A regular rhythm.

Togami frowned sharply as that thought crossed his mind… but now that the possibility had occurred to him, he couldn’t help but see the changing light differently. It wasn’t flickering — it was marking something. And that put an entirely different slant on the situation.

His initial thought had been that Monokuma’s eye blazing back to life might indicate some kind of threat meant to trigger if an unauthorized person accessed the bear — and that could still be the case. But now, looking at the blinking red light, he had to wonder if it might be something else instead. The robot received its signals wirelessly, he knew that. Could the blinking light indicate some kind of transmission?

Ice flooded his veins as he turned, gaze shooting across the room to the place where he’d left the bomb. It still sat in the corner where he’d left it, motionless and undisturbed. He would have said it was completely inactive — but just a few moments ago, he would have said the same thing about Monokuma’s red eye.

But the bomb was motion-triggered, he’d been able to see that easily. Even if the motion sensor could be turned on wirelessly, it wouldn’t trigger on its own, not unless he touched it. And really, if the mastermind wanted the ability to trigger their bomb remotely, there would be no reason to involve the flashing light on the eye at all. Bombs might be dangerous, but they weren’t all that complicated, not compared to the rest of the mastermind’s technology. Someone with the resources to build a machine like Monokuma would certainly be able to add a remote trigger to a bomb that didn’t require an additional transmitter.
That realization wasn’t exactly reassuring, but it did relieve enough of the immediate tension for him to think the matter through clearly. He’d spent hours handling Monokuma’s parts, and nothing he’d done had caused that light to emit so much as a single blink. But now, at a moment when he was across the room, it had activated itself, in spite of being disconnected from any of the bear’s main sources of power. That meant that the light was related to something that someone else was doing — or rather, something that Monokuma’s operator was doing.

Could the mastermind be back? Was this an indication that they were trying to operate their robot and failing? But if so, why hadn’t the processor come to life? Maybe… whatever was causing the eye to blink had been meant to do something else.

Slowly, poised to bolt in the opposite direction if any of the electronics so much as blipped, Togami took a single, cautious step in the direction of the blinking red light. He held his breath for a long moment, scrutinizing the entire display of machinery parts as he counted out the passing of a full minute… but nothing happened. Every nerve screaming with tension, he tried a second step, and then a third, until he’d made his way back across the room to the place where he’d been working.

And there it was. Togami stared down at the pieces of Monokuma’s head — and the tiny device attached to the red lightning bolt eye. When he’d examined the head the first time, he’d thought the machinery attached to the eyes would do nothing more than operate the bear’s complex facial expressions — but the flickering red light behind the eye said otherwise.

What was it meant to do, then? It had to be there for a reason. Togami couldn’t imagine that the inventor who had designed the rest of this brilliantly efficient machine would include a purposeless blinking light. But… what could it do, when the only thing it was attached to was the back of Monokuma’s eye? No matter what angle he looked from, the only connection Togami could see was the one holding it to the lightning bolt. A connection that looked fairly loose, in fact…

Togami knelt beside the bear’s head, reaching for his screwdriver again. He knew he was operating on borrowed time, an alertness born of adrenaline and fear more than anything else — but regardless of its origins, it still gave him enough focus to unhook that single connection and pull the blinking device away from the rest of the machinery.

He held it cupped gingerly in one outstretched hand, prepared to fling it away if it did anything unexpected… but it didn’t stop or alter its slow pattern of pale blinks. Togami lifted it a little to regard it more closely, trying to spot some kind of indication about its purpose. But in its own way, this device seemed to be as cleverly constructed as the robot’s processor — it worked without giving away any clues about how exactly it did so.

For a moment, Togami felt a fierce, bitter stab of regret that Fujisaki had been killed. The brilliant Ultimate Programmer would almost certainly have been able to untangle the mysteries of this device. Even the shadow he’d left behind in the laptop might have had some idea, if the mastermind hadn’t taken the opportunity to destroy it. But now there was no one left who could even hazard a guess.

Or… was that right? There wasn’t anyone left who knew computers and electronics better than he did… but it was just barely possible that there was someone who might know the mastermind. Sakura Ogami had been the mastermind’s mole. She’d spoken to them on a level that no one else had. Of course, it was unlikely that the mastermind would have let any details slip about the specific workings of their equipment — but it had a better chance than anything else he could think to try.

Doing his best not to jar the device resting in his outstretched hand, Togami walked slowly around
the corner and out of the library. He kept a careful eye on it as he moved, watching for any change. Even the slightest alteration could be dangerous when it involved Monokuma.

And that close attention was why Togami noticed that as he approached the stairs, the slow blips of red light came very slightly faster.
Chapter 164

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to figure out what the mysterious blinking red light means.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Togami stopped in his tracks the moment he noticed the change in the light, all his senses alert for the slightest change in the hallway around him. He didn’t think there was anything out of the ordinary — but he couldn’t be certain, not now. Normally, he had perfect confidence in his ability to notice someone following him, but that only extended to normal pursuers. A Fenrir soldier might well possess the skills necessary to throw off his instincts.

But no matter how he checked, he couldn’t detect so much as a hint that anyone else might be in that hall, not even when he tried to peer ahead into the stairwell. But then again… would a person need to be physically present to alter whatever this device was doing? After all, it had started blinking of its own accord, without any outward prompting. Who was to say that it couldn’t change the same way?

Or… no, he couldn’t say that nothing had prompted the change, could he? Not when it had only happened after he’d removed the device from the rest of the robot and carried it out of the room. Had he triggered this somehow, in reaction to his investigation? But this reaction couldn’t be caused by having disconnected the device — after all, it had begun blinking before he’d removed it.

Could it be something else, then? Togami frowned, running through the possibilities in his head. He could think of several options… but the difficulty with all of them was that there would have been other instances when they should have occurred. And they hadn’t. Monokuma’s red eye had only flickered when the bear had pretended to be amusing, faking a wink or a leer — it had never done anything approaching this strange pattern of slow blinks.

Was the blinking some kind of error? Maybe the light was meant to shine steadily, without all this flickering. But… if that was the case, then why was it such a regular rhythm? Or perhaps it wasn’t that the flickering was disrupting the light… but rather that the steady shining came from the rate of the blinks increasing to the point of merging into a single red beam.

It was impossible to guess at the cause just from looking at the device, though. Togami glanced around the hallway one more time, then took a few more steps forward to the stairs. He kept a close watch on the device as he walked slowly down the first flight of stairs, counting the time between each blink under his breath. And by the time he’d reached the entrance to the first floor, the blinks had slowed back to their original rate.

But was it just a coincidence, or something more significant? Rather than exiting the stairs, Togami turned around and began climbing again — and sure enough, by the time he reached the second floor, the blinking light had sped up ever so slightly again. He kept going, climbing another flight to the third floor — and the speed of the flickering increased again before he’d even made it halfway.
By the time he reached the top of the final flight of stairs, the device seemed to have gone haywire in his hand, sending beams of red light skittering ahead of him onto the fifth floor. If Togami had had any doubt that the device was being changed by its proximity to something, he didn’t any longer. Whatever had caused this change — it had to be close.

With the device in his hand blazing like the lights of an approaching police car, Togami didn’t see the point in wasting time trying to mask his presence. He strode purposefully down the hall, red splashing on the walls around him like an ephemeral trail of blood. It only grew more intense as he passed the first two classrooms — but as soon as he turned left, towards the garden and the dojo, the flickering ever so slightly slowed again. Which meant…

Togami turned, staring down the long, straight stretch of empty hallway that led to the more sinister side of the fifth floor. The locked Biology Lab and the gruesome ruined classroom — why had he expected the device to lead him to anything else?

With every step Togami took down that hall, the light flashed faster, brighter, until it coalesced into a single blaze of solid red as he came to a stop just in front of the ruined classroom. He took a single step towards the Biology Lab, just to test his conclusion, but he hardly even needed the confirmation that the only place the light shone this madly was outside Classroom 5-C. Whatever he’d been tracking, it waited for him beyond those doors.

Had this been the device’s purpose all along? Was it meant to lure him up the stairs, to the isolated fifth floor, where the mastermind could deal with him alone? But… that made no sense, not when he’d already spent hours alone in the library, concentrating on his investigation while the door was out of his line of sight. If someone had wanted to attack him, that would have been the ideal set-up, especially after Jill had gotten bored of watching him work. And could this device really have been planted specifically to trick him into following it somewhere? It had been a part of Monokuma’s eye, after all, buried deep in the bear’s head. No matter how far in advance the mastermind might have planned, surely they couldn’t have prepared for that specific scenario.

But even if this wasn’t a plan targeted specifically at him, it could still be dangerous. Whatever was behind that door had the ability to affect pieces of Monokuma, the tool the mastermind used to communicate with the students — and Togami knew he hadn’t seen anything like that when he’d searched the room the day the fifth floor opened. Someone with power over Monokuma had put something in the ruined classroom — or worse, they might even be waiting there themselves.

And if so, they knew he was just outside. The scorchingly red light would snake through even the tiniest gaps around the edges of the door, announcing his presence as loudly as if he’d shouted. No one could possibly have missed it.

Which meant that there was no point in hiding it. Bracing himself, Togami reached out to yank open the classroom door. It stuck for a moment, but since the handle turned easily enough, it couldn’t have been locked. If anything waited for him in there, it hadn’t meant to keep him out.

But for a moment, faced with a silent, shadowy room, he wondered if he’d misunderstood. The classroom lights were off, and even when Togami flipped the switch by the door, nothing happened. The dingy hallway light seemed to stay behind as he took a cautious step into the classroom. The only illumination came from the device in his hand, its red glow giving new life to the old bloodstains, making them burn as if the blood had only just been spilled. Even the stench of death in the air had changed, shifting from the thick filth of human gore to something sharper, with acrid undertones that were almost chemical.

He took another step inside, his eyes slowly adjusting to the lack of light. He could make out the contours of broken furniture, fallen in the same places he’d seen it laying two days ago. He could
trace the markings on the walls, abstract evidence that some kind of fight had taken place here. If he looked along the floor, he could see the chalk outlines where so many bodies had piled together —

And he could see the slumped form of a new body splayed across the ground where the dead had been the thickest, red light gleaming off the knife impaled in its chest.

Chapter End Notes

And with that, I'm afraid I have to leave you. I will be taking a week long break to devote my full attention to moving. The next chapter will be posted on Sunday, July 3. See you then!
Chapter 165

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to identify the corpse in the ruined classroom.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Togami froze, gaze locking onto the body crumpled on the floor. With its head turned away and draped in some kind of long coat, he couldn’t immediately identify it — but even in the gray shadows and blood-drenched light, he could tell that whoever it was, they were no longer among the living. No one could have survived long with a knife buried deep in their chest like that.

But… with so few students left alive, there were only a few possibilities as to who it could be. Ice crept through Togami’s blood as he stared at the corpse, the device’s light turning its pale coat to a vicious red. He hadn’t seen anyone since he’d resumed his investigation hours ago… when he’d left Naegi in the care of a girl who had been the mastermind’s agent.

He’d thought that he could trust Ogami to protect Naegi. After seeing everything she’d done for the other boy, he’d believed her promises of protection. Could it all have been a ruse? Had she only acted that way to lull him into complacency, so that she could strike when he least expected it?

Togami couldn’t tear his eyes away from the body, hands clenched into painfully tight fists so that they didn’t tremble. All it would take was a few steps forward, just enough to turn the corpse’s head towards him, and he would know the truth. He’d always believed that it was better to know, better to live in reality instead of the what-ifs and maybes of uncertainty… but even so, he couldn’t cross that final distance. He couldn’t leave this horrifying limbo of possibility. As long as he didn’t look at the face, didn’t have an absolute identification, he could still tell himself that it wasn’t Naegi. He could look away, look at the twisted arms, the dark stains around the knife, and tell himself it wasn’t —

It wasn’t Naegi.

Togami felt himself breathe again for the first time since he’d caught sight of the corpse when he finally recognized the faint curves of breasts on either side of the knife. Lightheaded relief surged through him as he drank in a long breath of the sharp, acrid air, strong enough that he nearly staggered from it. This body had to be one of the girls. And while nothing good could come of one of them turning up dead, it was so much better than the other possibilities. The icy fear began to release its stifling grip on his mind, letting him think the situation through more rationally.

He’d thought that he’d considered every possibility of what might be waiting for him in this classroom before he’d entered — but he hadn’t thought that a corpse would be a particularly likely option. Why should it be, when Monokuma had disappeared and the remaining students were occupied with the investigation?

But then again — just because Monokuma had disappeared, it didn’t follow that the game had stopped. For someone truly determined, this might even be the perfect opportunity to act, with all the other students distracted by injuries and investigations. In fact, if not for Naegi, Togami had to
admit he might have taken advantage of such a situation himself. And knowing that, another death now shouldn’t come as a shock, especially not after so many of them.

Except… this death hadn’t been like the others. Togami hadn’t come across this corpse by accident, in the course of his normal activities — he’d been led here. Whether he’d been lured to the ruined classroom as part of some dark plan of the mastermind’s, or whether he genuinely had uncovered something that had been meant to remain hidden, the result was the same — he’d found this corpse in the middle of investigating the strange device he’d found inside Monokuma. And that meant that whatever was happening, it had to be connected to the mastermind somehow.

At that thought, Togami sent a sharp look back over his shoulder, scanning the shadows around him for any hint of movement. He hadn’t seen anything as he’d walked through a moment ago, but in this shifting darkness, it would be all too easy to avoid notice. He raised the device a little higher, trying to illuminate as much of the room as possible — but no matter how hard he squinted into the darkened corners, nothing suggested that anyone else was in the room with him. Whoever had done this appeared to be long gone.

Once he was reasonably satisfied this wasn’t about to turn into a double murder, Togami turned back to the body, though he stayed alert for any changes in the room behind him. He might have braced himself to take a calculated risk or two in the name of investigating the mastermind and Monokuma, but that didn’t extend to letting himself become a victim in someone else’s plot. But as long as the room stayed more or less the same behind him, silent except for the faintest whirring of the air conditioning, he could give the bulk of his attention to the corpse.

Togami took another step forward, holding up the device to light the area as best he could. Between the darkness and the concealing clothing, he couldn’t make out many details, but he could easily see that the corpse was far too small to be Ogami — which left only two choices.

Kirigiri had gone missing more than a day ago, in the middle of whatever convoluted plan she’d been pursuing with Ikusaba. But it wasn’t just her — Jill had gone missing, as well. Togami hadn’t thought much of Jill’s disappearance, since she got bored so easily if he wasn’t in her immediate line of sight… but with a corpse in front of him, he couldn’t just dismiss it any longer. This body had to belong to one of those two girls…

Or did it? After all, now that the sixteenth student in the school had revealed herself, there was a chance that she could have ended up dead herself. Of course, that assumed that someone here had been able to take down a Fenrir soldier in a knife fight, which hardly seemed likely.

Well, whoever it was, he’d know soon enough. Togami covered the last few steps towards the corpse, then dropped down to kneel beside it.

And his vision whirled around him, wind roaring in his ears. His knees hit the ground with a painful thud, and he lost his grip on the device as his head spun, light whirling madly around the room as it skittered across the floor. He tried to lunge after it, but a series of hacking coughs tore their way up from his lungs. He closed his eyes and braced his hands against the floor, trying to fight off the sudden surge of dizziness with slow, calm breaths — but with the filthy air of this blood-soaked classroom, it didn’t help. Not even the foul sting of the air vent blowing across his face could clear his head.

The air vent… which was near the ceiling in every other room in the school. Which should have blown in fresh, clean air, not this strange, chemical foulness.

The breath in Togami’s throat seemed to expand to choke him as he realized a little too late just what he’d been breathing while he examined the corpse.
And we're back! Still on a half schedule for one more week though, sorry. This week I'll be posting today (Sunday), Tuesday, and Thursday while I try to get back in the swing of things.
Chapter 166

Chapter Summary

Togami tries not to be overwhelmed by the chemicals in the air of the destroyed classroom.

With the air around him thick and befouled by chemicals, Togami knew he didn’t dare give in to the trembling weakness in his limbs that urged him to collapse. If he stayed here and kept breathing whatever was being spewed into the room, it would only sap more and more of his strength until he had nothing left to escape. And he hadn’t come so far in Monokuma’s vicious game to be defeated now.

He turned his head away from the stream of chemicals, gritting his teeth against the wave of nausea the movement sent shuddering through him. The telltale sharpness still lingered in the air in this direction, but at least it was less intense. Holding his breath, he mustered all the strength remaining to him and began dragging himself across the floor.

The room hadn’t seemed particularly large before, no bigger than any of the other classrooms, but now its length stretched out before him in an impossible distance. He’d been exhausted already, awake for more than an entire day without sleep, and now the sullied air drained steadily away at the little energy he’d had left. His body ached as it never had before, muscles screaming from strain and joints shaking under pressure. He tried not to breathe, tried to keep any more of the filth from contaminating his lungs — but he couldn’t hold his breath indefinitely. He did his best to inhale as little air as possible every time he had to draw breath, but even so, he could feel his head spin a little more fiercely with every breath.

The dingy light of the hallway gleamed ahead of him, a ray of hope just beyond the classroom door. Togami kept his gaze locked on that goal, trying not to think about how very slowly he was moving towards it. He could get there before his time ran out — he had to believe that. He had to have faith in his own ability to persevere beyond the weakness of his limbs, the spinning of his head, the hissing of his breath. He had to be stronger than this. He had to…

Had to rest. The heavy weight of his aching body finally grew too much for his trembling hands to support, and his arms gave way, knocking the air out of him as he collapsed onto his stomach. He instinctively drew in a deep gasp of air — and black spots bloomed before his eyes as his body convulsed with a fit of painful coughs.

Togami tried to fight past it, to look ahead towards the light beyond the door, but darkness surrounded him in spite of his best efforts. He tried to push his hands against the floor so he could lift himself and carry on — but he could hardly think clearly enough for the command. He felt his fingers spasming uselessly against the ground, unable to control them enough to bear his own weight. He might have fared better if he hadn’t been so exhausted when he’d entered the room, or if he’d recognized the chemical scent to the air faster… but now, his thoughts were too slow, too muddled to drive his body the way he needed it to move.

Was this the end of everything, after all? Was this how he would finally lose to the mastermind’s games? The thought burned, but with an empty fire that he couldn’t translate into action. Even his mind had begun to fail him now, the power of his intellect drained of its force. He’d always relied
on his intelligence and determination to carry him through any trials he faced, but now even his most trusted abilities were failing him.

Darkness surged around him, dragging him into a place beyond thought, where logic and rationality had no force. Shadowy oblivion overwhelmed all the mental bulwarks he’d erected throughout his life, every reminder of why he fought and why he couldn’t surrender. His family name, his position as heir, his achievements, everything that had sustained him until his arrival at Hope’s Peak — all of it receded into a distant haze, as unreliable and unreachable as if he didn’t have those things at all. And now, falling so close to the black depths of unconsciousness, stripped of his strongest weapons and last defenses, what did he have left? Nothing but darkness, nothing but despair, nothing but…

Stay safe.

Words echoed through his mind, words that hadn’t come from his own thoughts. Those were Naegi’s words, nearly the last ones the other boy had said to him. Just two simple words, but they’d carried so many unspoken pleas within them.

Stay with me.

Come back alive.

Don’t leave me alone.

The words rang through Togami’s head as clearly as if he could actually remember Naegi saying them. And in every way that mattered, Naegi had. The glimmer in his eyes, the quiver of his lips, the edge to his voice… it had all been there, as plainly as if he’d verbalized it.

And from deep in the bedrock of his being, a place beyond conscious words or formulated reactions, Togami felt his emotions rise up in response.

Need blazed through him — need to protect, need to trust, need to give and receive, to cherish and depend on, to support and adore. A thousand fragments cascaded through his awareness, part of something that could encompass all that he was and not be enough… something that needed another person to make whole.

He’d known that he loved Naegi… but he hadn’t understood everything that it meant. He hadn’t known how deep it went, beyond the superficial desire for the other boy’s presence in his life, even beyond his care for Naegi’s safety and wellbeing. Love seemed a small and pitiful word next to everything that he’d found within himself, solid and enduring. This felt real, in a way that the distant memories of a life outside Hope’s Peak no longer could. On his own, he didn’t have the energy he needed. But…

Stay safe.

He heard Naegi’s plea again… and found an answering strength that he hadn’t known lay buried within him. It seemed too deep, too enduring to have been based on the mere weeks he’d known the other boy… and yet there it was, strong and undeniable. He needed Naegi, yes — but more than that, Naegi needed him. It would devastate the other boy if Togami lost this battle… and that mattered.

It mattered enough that Togami found the will to pry his eyes open again and slowly force his weakened body off the floor.

His hands still shook with every inch he gained, and his head still whirled dizzily at the slightest
jolt — but with Naegi’s voice in his head, he had something to hold onto beyond the immediate pain. He had something to fight for, something to work towards… something that could carry him the last length of the room to the doorway.

Togami just barely made it over the threshold before collapsing on the floor. An air vent at the top of the wall across from the classroom door blew clean, unsullied air down onto him, and he gulped it in like water in the desert. He’d made it out.

And unless he missed his guess, he hadn’t been meant to.
Togami tries to get downstairs to rejoin Naegi and Ogami.

Far too many minutes passed before Togami felt capable of doing anything more strenuous than laying still on the hallway floor, taking breath after breath of clean air. He never would have thought that he would appreciate the clinical dryness of the school’s recycled air, but after the foulness of the classroom, nothing could be sweeter.

And slowly, Togami found his energy creeping back to him, a little more with every new breath he took. It wasn’t the rest and sleep he needed, not by a long shot, but it was at least enough to let him use the edge of the door frame to haul himself to a sitting position. His head spun at the movement, but nowhere near as violently as it had when he’d been in the classroom. That had to be a good sign — he must not have gotten a strong dose of whatever he’d been breathing. Maybe the effects would wear off entirely soon.

That certainly couldn’t happen soon enough. He might be out of immediate danger now that he was no longer breathing the foul air, but that didn’t mean he was safe. There was still a corpse in that classroom — and a trap that had nearly killed him before he’d been able to identify the body. He couldn’t be sure if the trap had been meant for him specifically, or if it had only been intended to kill whoever discovered the body first — but either way, it meant that whatever the killer was trying to accomplish, they weren’t finished yet. And at the moment, he was the only one who knew about their plans.

Which meant that he couldn’t stay here. The killer could return at any moment, and he wasn’t exactly in a state to defend himself. He needed to get back to the first floor, both for the safety of numbers and to alert the others about what he’d found. As soon as he thought his legs could bear the weight, he used the edge of the wall to lever himself to his feet, clutching at the corner while his head readjusted in a dizzy whirl of spinning lights. He could still feel his legs shaking unsteadily beneath him, but at least he didn’t seem likely to collapse again as he started moving towards the stairs.

Exhausting as it was to drag himself along the hallway, putting distance between himself and the ruined classroom helped. He could feel his thoughts sharpening again, regaining their usual piercing clarity. He might not have his physical strength back yet, but at least his head seemed to be working again — and he’d take mind over muscle any day. Strength on its own would be useless if he couldn’t think how best to use it.

And so, as he began lowering himself down the stairs, step by careful step, Togami began trying to put the pieces of what had happened together. He’d found both a corpse and some kind of vent blowing chemicals into the air — that couldn’t be a coincidence. After all, he might have gotten caught in the air vent trap, but he was fairly sure that he hadn’t actually triggered it. The vent had already been drugging the air by the time he’d arrived. And with the body so close to the adulterated air, it would hardly be a leap of logic to think that the unidentified student might have
been the first victim of the trap. And if an airborne toxin had played a role in this murder... well, the obvious connection was impossible to ignore.

Two nights ago, Kirigiri had revealed the murder plan she’d concocted to distract Monokuma... a plan that had involved pumping a gaseous poison into a sealed room. Yes, she’d claimed that she’d never meant to go through with the murder, but her intentions didn’t do anything to defang the plan’s potential.

Or did they? After all, Kirigiri hadn’t just told them about her murder plot — she’d also locked the poison away in one of the dojo lockers. The poison had definitely been sealed in the locker when they’d left the room, and Togami knew he’d burned the locker key himself. None of the other poisons could be administered as a gas, if he could trust Kirigiri’s word on that matter. Did that mean the similarity was a coincidence, after all?

Or perhaps the killer had simply adapted Kirigiri’s plan to the new circumstances. Other things could be pumped into the air than poison — it could just as easily have been some kind of knockout drug, especially given that its main effect on him had been to drag him towards unconsciousness. Togami knew he’d seen several medications in the nurse’s office that could knock someone unconscious, though at the time it hadn’t occurred to him to check whether they could be used as gases. Still, medical offices did use gaseous anesthesia all the time, so it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility.

And if the chemicals in the air had been drugs, rather than poison, that would explain the knife he’d seen sticking out of the body. The culprit wouldn’t have needed the knife if the gas itself had been deadly — they could have just left their victim in the path of the air vent until the poison did its work. But with a drug that only knocked the victim out, the killer would have had to get their hands dirty in person — though having the victim already unconscious undoubtedly made the deed easier.

Easy enough to take down a trained killer? Togami frowned at the thought. He’d doubted that the corpse could be Mukuro Ikusaba, since it wasn’t likely that a Fenrir soldier would submit to being stabbed in the chest... but if she’d been drugged first, that was a different story. It wouldn’t take any fighting ability at all, or even much physical strength, to stick that knife into a soldier who couldn’t fight back.

Togami scowled as he reached the bottom of the stairs and continued making his way to the dorms. He should have checked the corpse’s identity immediately, instead of wasting time worrying about who it might have been. It would only have taken a few seconds to determine, and if he’d managed, then he might have had answers to at least a few of these unanswered questions.

At least he was steadier on his feet now than he’d been when he’d left the room. He still had to brace himself against the wall as he walked to stop himself from swaying drunkenly with every step, but at least he was able to walk without fear of collapse. He’d feared that he might end up as weakened as Naegi had been after he’d been stabbed with Fukawa’s poisoned needles, but with the effects of the drug wearing off the further he got from the ruined classroom, that didn’t seem to be the case.

Cursing the layout of the school and its poorly-positioned staircases under his breath with every step, Togami finally managed to make it all the way across the first floor to the dorms. He slumped against the wall outside his room, pushing the doorbell in a long, hard buzz. He might not feel quite on the verge of collapse any longer, but that didn’t mean he felt like dealing with the heavy door to his room, not if he didn’t have to. Better to conserve his strength and let Ogami deal with the door. He tilted his head back against the wall, shoulders heaving as he tried to catch his breath, and
waited.

And waited.

There could have been a dozen perfectly good reasons that Ogami might not have come to open the
door — but with one confirmed dead body already lying upstairs, the excuses rang hollow. Togami
groped for the door handle, fingers clumsy with sudden terror as he clutched at the unlocked knob
and tore the door open —

But nothing seemed out of place at first glance. He’d been fearing blood, weapons, some evidence
of a struggle — but the room looked more or less the way he’d left it. Naegi slept on the bed in the
same half-sitting position he’d had before, propped up with pillows and his arm newly bound in a
sling. Ogami still sat in the chair at the bedside, slumping sideways against the wall, arms hanging
loose at her side and her eyes closed. Was she asleep? That seemed unlikely, after she’d given her
word to look after Naegi.

Togami took a deep, suspicious breath, searching for even the slightest hint of chemicals lingering
in the air, but he couldn’t detect any of the sharp undertones that he’d smelled up in classroom 5-C.
The only sound of a fan that he could hear came from the air vent high in the wall, and nothing else
seemed to stir the air in the rest of the room.

So this didn’t seem to be the same drug that had been in the trap upstairs. He might have dismissed
it as nothing more than negligence, with Ogami falling asleep on the job instead of keeping her
vow to keep Naegi safe — if it hadn’t been for the fact that apparently even the loud doorbell
hadn’t made her so much as stir. Togami frowned, slowly crossing the room towards the girl,
intending to try to wake her and demand an explanation.

But as he drew close to the chair, his foot crunched against something on the floor. Togami
glanced down — and saw shards of broken glass scattered along the ground. The largest shards lay
at the foot of Ogami’s chair in a pool of dark liquid, her nerveless fingers dangling inches above.

Chapter End Notes

And this is the end of the short posting schedule. Regular updates will resume on
Sunday!
Chapter 168

Chapter Summary

Togami fears that the attack in his dorm room might have included more than just Ogami.

The broken glass on the floor confirmed Togami’s worst suspicions — Ogami hadn’t fallen asleep through carelessness or irresponsibility. Something had happened while he’d been gone. And if one of the two people in the room had been taken out… that meant…

Togami spun away from Ogami’s chair, hurling himself towards the bed where Naegi lay. He didn’t dare grab the injured boy to try to shake him into consciousness — the most he could do was press one hand to Naegi’s good shoulder and the other along the side of his neck. Togami could feel a weak pulse beneath his fingers, but it was hardly reassuring, not when the other boy remained stubbornly, horribly asleep. “Naegi, can you hear me? Naegi!”

And then, at the sound of Togami calling his name, Naegi’s eyelids twitched once, twice, until they finally fluttered open. His eyes brightened when he looked up at Togami — but only until Togami half-collapsed against the side of the bed, his joints going weak and watery with relief. “Togami? What —”

“You’re all right.” Togami couldn’t stop the words tumbling past his lips, even though he hadn’t meant to say anything aloud. “You’re still all right. I thought —” He clamped his lips shut at that, before he could say anything further. There was no point in admitting how badly he’d been shaken by a possibility that hadn’t even occurred.

“What are you talking about?” Naegi asked, blinking away the last lingering sleepiness from his expression. “Why wouldn’t I be all right? Why did —”

And then he stopped short, eyes going wide as he caught sight of Ogami, slumped over in her chair. “No. Not again.”

“She’s still breathing,” Togami said, before Naegi could assume the worst. “Just unconscious.”

Naegi’s gaze flickered over Ogami a moment longer until he nodded slowly, still looking worried. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. She was like this when I got here,” Togami said. He gave Naegi a dubious look. “I don’t suppose you remember anything?”

But just as he’d expected, Naegi shook his head. “No. She woke me up a few times to make sure my head was okay and make me drink more, but she seemed fine when I fell asleep again.” He bit his lip. “Are you sure she isn’t just tired? I mean — she must have been here a while, right?”

“If it were natural sleep, she would have woken by now,” Togami pointed out. “Fighting is what she does — she’s highly attuned to sensing the movements of others. Anyone with her skills should have noticed the moment I got within reach of her, asleep or not.”

“Then — you think someone did this to her?” Naegi asked, horror creeping across his face. “But —
Togami grimaced. He might not know exactly why someone would want to do this — but he did have a much better understanding of the situation than Naegi did. After all, someone knocking out a single student and leaving her relatively unharmed was a very different scenario from a murderer drugging multiple people and leaving corpses behind. He didn’t particularly like the idea of telling Naegi about what he’d found upstairs, not when it would upset the soft-hearted boy so badly when he ought to be recovering — but leaving him ignorant would be far more dangerous.

“I think I might have some idea,” he said, and something in his voice made Naegi’s eyes go wide with horrified understanding.

He knew, Togami realized. After hearing the same news so many times already, of course Naegi would recognize the beginning of this revelation, no matter how much he hated admitting it. Togami wished that he could say that Naegi had misunderstood, that the situation wasn’t what he thought — but all he could do was reach out to take the other boy’s pale hand as he went on with the explanation he couldn’t avoid.

“It isn’t a coincidence that I came down here now. When I was investigating upstairs, I found a dead body.”

Even though he’d obviously been expecting it, the words hit Naegi like a blow. Togami’s stomach coiled into knots at the open misery written across Naegi’s face. He might not have committed the act that had caused Naegi that unhappiness, but his words had still been the impetus. Togami silently vowed to himself that forcing him into this role would be one more thing that the killer would have to answer for, once they worked out what had happened.

It had to be a mark of how much practice they’d all had in this situation that it only took Naegi a few seconds to pull himself together. He squared his shoulders, visibly bracing himself before asking, “Who was it?”

Togami scowled. Of course that would be the first question anyone would ask — the one question he couldn’t answer. “I don’t know. I couldn’t get close enough to tell.”

“You mean because it was in a weird place?” Naegi asked slowly. “Or because the body was… damaged?”

If there had been any way to avoid the rest of the explanation, Togami would have jumped on it — but the only other options were worse. Either he omitted key details, making himself look like an incompetent investigator, or he lied outright to the boy who had trusted him without hesitation from the moment their relationship began. Both choices were utterly unacceptable… meaning that the only thing he had left to give was the truth.

“Neither,” Togami said, letting his gaze drop down to focus on his hand entwined with Naegi’s. He didn’t have much experience admitting to failures, and it was easier if he didn’t try to meet Naegi’s eyes while he spoke. “The body was on the floor in the back of the destroyed fifth floor classroom, facing away from the door — and some kind of chemical was being pumped into the air around it. I didn’t notice it at first, and by the time I got close enough to examine the body, I’d already breathed it in.”

“You — what?” Naegi’s fingers clenched around his hand, and Togami looked up, startled at the almost painfully tight grip. To his shock, Naegi didn’t look annoyed or frustrated by the lack of information — he looked terror-stricken, in a way that he hadn’t since that first trial. “You left as soon as you noticed it, right? You — you don’t look sick. How do you feel? Is anything wrong?”
Naegi’s gaze darted all over Togami, like he thought he could see visible effects of whatever Togami might have inhaled. His breath came quicker, with a ragged edge that carried the threat of tears — and Togami got it. Hearing about what had happened upstairs hadn’t made Naegi upset to learn that the corpse was unidentified — it had made him afraid for Togami’s life. That was the same knife-edged fear that had cut cold and sharp through Togami’s heart every time Naegi had put himself in danger, the weakness and dependence that Togami hated being forced to feel. It should have been a relief to learn that at least Naegi shared that same vulnerability, that he felt the same for Togami as Togami did for him.

It wasn’t. While in any other circumstances Togami would have been pleased at the confirmation that Naegi returned some part of the depth of his feelings, this was one emotion he didn’t want to share. Faced with the choice, he would have preferred to spare Naegi the pain of that soul-crushing fear, even if it meant that he would never have known that Naegi matched him in that feeling.

“Of course I’m fine,” Togami said, pitching his voice to sound dismissively confident. He didn’t want to lie to Naegi — but there was no reason to go into detail about it, either. “I left as soon as I realized what was happening. It made me a little dizzy and weak, but it mostly cleared up after I left.”

Naegi didn’t look entirely reassured, but he nodded slowly. “I just… I don’t know what I’d do if you didn’t come back. If the next time I saw you, you were…”

“I expect it would be fairly similar to what I’d have done if Jill had stabbed more than your arm,” Togami said, unable to resist the opportunity to drive home that particular point. “But it won’t matter for a while yet. I have no intention of letting you out of my sight for a moment until this killer is caught and neutralized.”

“Right. That’s what we need to focus on,” Naegi said, giving him a determined nod. “We have to figure out what happened.”
Chapter 169

Chapter Summary

Togami begins to investigate what could have knocked Ogami unconscious.

Togami frowned at Naegi’s declaration. Yes, they did have to figure out what was going on with this series of attacks — but with only two of them left, how were they going to manage it? He and Naegi might be the best of the group at investigating, not counting Kirigiri and her convoluted manipulations that never seemed to benefit anyone but herself — but no matter how smart they tried to be about it, they couldn’t be everywhere. There were two different scenes that would need to be inspected, in the two areas of the school that were as far apart as possible. It was a simple matter of logistics — there was no way for them to search both crime scenes without leaving one or the other exposed to tampering.

Not unless they split up, anyway — but Togami barely even spared a moment’s consideration for that possibility. Naegi might be alive and unharmed now, or at least not any worse off than he’d been at the start of the night, but that didn’t mean he was safe. If a killer was wandering around the school, it would be all too easy for them to get rid of one of the most troublesome remaining students while he was too weak to resist. Leaving Naegi asleep in Ogami’s care during a potentially risky was one thing, but leaving Naegi to poke around a crime scene by himself with a murderer on the loose was an entirely different scale of threat.

And that was assuming that Naegi was even capable of doing any investigation in his current state. Togami looked the other boy over, taking in the makeshift sling that now held his injured arm cradled to his chest. Yes, that did look like it would allow Naegi to be a little more mobile than he’d been when his arm had merely been braced on a pillow, but it wasn’t as though that would help with pain or exhaustion. Maybe they weren’t down to two investigators — maybe they only had one.

“How are you feeling?” Togami asked at last, shifting his grip on Naegi’s hand until he could rest his thumb against the pulse point on Naegi’s wrist. The heartbeat he felt there wasn’t as strong as he would have liked, but at least it was better than earlier. “And don’t try to pretend you’re fine — I know you aren’t. If we’re going to do this, I need an honest estimate. How much movement do you think you can safely manage?”

“I…” Naegi bit his lip, clearly wanting to ignore the direct order and claim he was fine anyway. Finally, he sighed and shook his head. “I’m not sure exactly. I feel like I could stand up and walk around, but Ogami wouldn’t let me try.”

Togami thoroughly approved of that attitude. Ogami might not have had extensive medical training, but she’d clearly had the right skills for this situation. Given the opportunity, Naegi would probably drive himself right back into exhaustion. If Togami could think of any other choice, he’d be insisting that Naegi stay put in bed until he was completely recovered, too.

“All right, then,” Togami said, reluctantly disentangling his fingers from Naegi’s and using the edge of the bed frame to lever himself upright. He hoped that Naegi didn’t see how heavily he had to brace himself in order to stand under his own power — Naegi had enough to worry about with his own injuries.
When he was sure he could do so without swaying, he turned to face Naegi. “I’m going to start trying to figure out what happened in here. While I do that, I need you to try, very slowly and carefully, to see if you can get up under your own power.” He gave Naegi the sternest scowl he could muster, the one that had sent underlings scurrying for cover when he’d been back at the Togami Corporation. “You will not strain yourself, do you understand? If anything feels even slightly off, you are to stop moving immediately. Better to stop short than to collapse from overexertion.”

“I’ll be careful,” Naegi assured him at once.

“You’d better be,” Togami said grimly. “I’ll stay close, but I can’t investigate if I have to watch your every move. I need to be able to trust you with this.”

This time, Naegi didn’t respond immediately, looking down at his injured arm with a frown. Normally, Togami would have wanted to wipe away that unhappy expression — but for the moment, he needed it. The potential consequences of physical wounds had to outweigh a few moments of unhappiness. If Naegi didn’t have enough self-preservation instincts to keep himself safe for his own sake, a guilt trip would just have to act as a temporary substitute.

“I really will be careful,” Naegi said again, but this time, he sounded much more serious. “You can trust me.”

Togami gave him an approving nod, watching for a moment as Naegi began to shift ever so minutely towards the side of the bed. Only when he was certain that Naegi really was going to be cautious about moving did Togami turn a portion of his attention to Ogami.

The girl hadn’t so much as twitched while he and Naegi were having their conversation mere feet away from her. If he’d needed any kind of confirmation that she’d been forced into unconsciousness rather than a natural sleep, that clinched it. But that left the question of how the Ultimate Martial Artist could have been knocked out.

The only thing Togami could be sure of was that whatever had done this, it had only happened to Ogami. Anything that could put the huge, physically fit fighter so thoroughly out of commission would have had a much worse effect on Naegi, who was a fraction of the girl’s size and already weakened by other injuries. But Naegi had woken up easily, without even a hint of unnatural grogginess or disorientation. He would have already been asleep when the culprit acted — they must have decided that was good enough.

And if this had hit Ogami without touching Naegi, even though she’d been within arm’s reach at the side of the bed, then it couldn’t have been the same gas that had nearly knocked Togami out on the fifth floor. That seemed odd — why would someone bother to come up with two different methods for knocking people unconscious? Could their resources be limited somehow?

But if it hadn’t been more of the gas, then what had it been? Togami’s first thought was a physical blow — but when he examined the back of Ogami’s head, he couldn’t see any signs of such an attack. There wasn’t a lump anywhere on her scalp, and he couldn’t see any traces of blood in her pale hair. Well, that did make sense — with Ogami’s fighting skills, it would have been extremely difficult to knock her out by hitting her. He supposed it was possible that Ikusaba might have managed, using her Fenrir training, but even so, he would have expected to see evidence of a fight in that case. And side from Ogami’s sleeping form, the room didn’t look like it had been disturbed at all.

Which left some kind of drug administered in a form other than gas. Injections posed the same sorts of problems that a physical blow did, since he doubted that Ogami would have simply sat still
and let the culprit stick a needle in her. But if it had been taken orally…

Togami’s eyes dropped down to the glass shards on the ground blow Ogami’s empty hand. She’d been holding a glass of some kind when unconsciousness had overtaken her. Could whatever she’d been holding have contained the drug? After all, tricking one’s victim into drugging herself would be quite tidy — and clever, too, since the school’s limited chemistry facilities weren’t up to the task of testing for drugs. If that was what the culprit had done, there would be no way of proving it.

At a rustle of movement from the bed, Togami’s attention snapped away from the broken glass and back to Naegi. The boy had managed to turn in place on the bed and swing his legs over the side, but the effort appeared to have been considerable. He sat on the edge of the bed, trying not to look like he was fighting to catch his breath. Togami raised an eyebrow at Naegi, giving the boy a pointed frown.

Naegi did his best to offer a smile in return. “I’m okay… just a little tired. It doesn’t hurt or anything. And I won’t try to stand until I’m sure I can handle it.”

“You should try to move down to the other end of the bed before you get up,” Togami said. “You could lose your balance, and there’s broken glass here. It looks like Ogami may have consumed some kind of drug, and then dropped the container as it took effect.”

“What?” Naegi leaned forward a little, peering down at the area of the floor that he hadn’t been able to see when he was lying in bed. “But she was checking all the bottles so carefully — I don’t think she would have touched anything that had been opened.”

“She might have missed it, if someone tampered with a part of the bottle other than the seal,” Togami said. “Or it’s possible that someone might have been able to drug it after she’d already opened it… if they’d entered the room to do so.”
Chapter 170

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi try to determine how Ogami was knocked out.

It didn’t come as a shock for Togami realize that the culprit had apparently entered his dorm room in order to knock Ogami unconscious — but until he said the words, he hadn’t realized just how close they must have come to Naegi. Ogami had kept her chair right at the side of the bed, immediately in arm’s reach of Naegi in case he’d needed anything. Anyone who could have crept close enough to adulterate something in her possession must have been inches away from Naegi while he was asleep and vulnerable. If they’d decided at the last moment that an attack would be a better plan than simply drugging Ogami…

But they hadn’t. At least he had that much to be grateful for in this mess. Whatever the culprit was trying to accomplish, it hadn’t involved murdering Naegi as he slept. In fact, it apparently hadn’t involved killing Ogami while she was helpless, either. Which meant…

“But why would anyone do something like that?” Naegi asked with a frown, catching the same apparent flaw in the culprit’s logic that Togami had. “It would have been really hard to get in here without Ogami noticing. What would be the point if all they wanted to do was knock her out?”

“Exactly,” Togami said, sparing a moment to nod in acknowledgment at Naegi’s ability to keep up with him. “Especially when they obviously have no compunction about murdering their victims. Why leave her alive when they killed someone else? She’ll presumably wake up eventually, and then we’ll have a potential witness on our hands.”

“Maybe they were really sure she didn’t notice anything?” Naegi asked. “I mean, she wouldn’t have drunk something that had been drugged if she’d thought there was anything wrong. But… I guess that wouldn’t have helped much. I mean, she would have figured it out as soon as she woke up.”

Togami frowned. “Unless she had some other explanation for falling unconscious.”

He circled around to the scattered glass shards and slowly lowered himself to kneel on the floor beside them. Carefully, keeping well out of range of any contact, he leaned forward to peer down at the liquid pooling across the floor. He might not be able to test that for any chemicals it contained, but he could still learn something of value. The liquid ran thin, its consistency just barely thicker than water, and on closer inspection, its color was actually closer to a very dark brown than black. And when he leaned close enough, he caught the faintest whiff of a very familiar scent drifting up from the mess.

He leaned back abruptly — a little too fast, perhaps, since the movement sent the room tilting around him for a moment in a fresh wave of dizziness. But Togami held his expression stern and unchanging, and he was sure Naegi was too occupied with his own injuries to notice the brief weakness.

“That’s not just any liquid,” Togami announced, once he was sure his voice wouldn’t reveal anything that Naegi didn’t need to know. “That’s coffee — or at least something claiming to be
coffee, anyway. I’d say it’s from one of those bottles of pre-brewed muck some idiot stocked in the kitchen.” He scowled. Disgusting as that bottled garbage might be, after an entire night awake he could understand the appeal of getting a jolt of caffeine despite the appalling taste. “Sitting here alone for hours on end, she must have needed something to keep her awake.”

“Wait.” Naegi blinked, realization hitting him. “Wait, you mean — she was awake all night? Without a break or a rest or anything? But —” He looked over at the clock. “But it’s nearly morning!”

“Someone had to stay with you while I was busy. Thus the coffee,” Togami said impatiently. “And that must be why the culprit thought they could get away with simply drugging her. If I hadn’t come in and found her unresponsive, she could easily have assumed she just fell asleep.”

“So we wouldn’t have had any reason to think anyone had been in the room at all,” Naegi said, nodding. “They could do whatever they liked, and we wouldn’t even notice.”

“And I can only think of two things they might have done that would benefit from being unnoticed,” Togami said. “They could have taken something out of the room… or planted something incriminating.” He frowned. “It wouldn’t be the worst method of framing an alternative suspect, if you could be sure that you could sneak past her.”

“So you think they might have come down here after the murder to leave something behind that isn’t supposed to be here?” Naegi looked around the room with a frown. “Well, it’s your room — is there anything here you don’t recognize?”

Togami shrugged. “Considering that I have no idea what I might be looking for, it’s impossible to say. After all, last time we were dealing with needles — there’s no point in wasting time scouring the room for something that small that might not even be here. It’s not as though I’d be able to tell if something had been disturbed or —”

He stopped short, his words catching up to him. No way to tell if something had been disturbed — that wasn’t entirely true, was it? There was one thing in the room that he’d done his best to make sure he could tell if anyone had touched. Slowly, Togami raised his head to look up at the section of the wall near the ceiling where he’d hidden the vicious-looking knife in the air vent. The cover hadn’t been removed from the vent, of course, since he would have noticed immediately if something so obvious had been missing…

But all four screws had been turned until they faced in the same direction. His security measure had been sprung — and remembering the outline of a knife sticking out of the corpse’s chest, Togami thought he knew why.
Chapter 171

Chapter Summary

Togami checks the air vent to see if the hidden knife is still there.

Keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the air vent, Togami hauled himself to his feet, gripping the back of Ogami’s chair to make sure he didn’t stumble from the hurried movement.

“What’s wrong?” Naegi asked at once, worry making the words as sharp as Naegi’s voice ever got. “Did you see something that doesn’t look right?”

“Yes.” Slowly, Togami approached the wall beneath the vent, stretching up to run his fingers over the bottom screw. It didn’t move at all, turned until it was complete tight and flush with the wall, just like the other three. Someone had definitely been meddling with it — which had to mean they’d removed the knife.

But he couldn’t check to be certain. He scowled, cursing the fact that he’d left his screwdriver lying on the library floor instead of bringing it back downstairs with him. And since Naegi had traded his toolkit away for Asahina’s sewing kit before she’d gotten herself killed, he couldn’t even go across the hall to borrow a spare.

“Do you think whoever snuck in left more of that drug from upstairs in the vent here, too?” Naegi asked from behind him. “But… if it were, wouldn’t we already be knocked out?”

“Presumably. It was fast-acting.” Togami stepped back from the vent and turned to look at Naegi, a faint frown creasing his face at the other boy’s alarmed expression. “The drug wasn’t in the vent upstairs, though — it was much lower to the ground. And once I realized what was happening, I was able to detect the smell. There are fewer distractions to mask a chemical scent in here, so I’m sure we’d notice in time to deal with it.”

“Then what are you looking at the air vent for?” Naegi asked.

Togami sighed. “Do you remember the knife we found on the fifth floor?”

“Sure,” Naegi said, nodding easily. “You took it for safekeeping.”

“Yes. And that is where I hid it.” Togami gestured up at the vent. “And the vent cover is no longer the way I left it.”

“But… you said the person upstairs was drugged,” Naegi said, frowning.

“And stabbed,” Togami clarified. “That’s why I didn’t notice the drugged air immediately — the corpse had an obviously fatal murder weapon sticking out of her chest. I couldn’t see the knife clearly, but judging by the size, it could easily have been the one I had hidden here.”

“But there’s still a whole block of knives in the kitchen,” Naegi said, a shadow falling across his face. Togami scowled, recognizing the reference to Maizono’s murder plot. “Why would someone go to all that trouble to take the one you had? It didn’t seem like it was special or anything.”
“It wasn’t,” Togami agreed. “The size and design were unique, yes, but beyond that, it would have been no more effective than the kitchen knives. In fact, it might even have been less effective, since it’s easily identifiable.” He frowned. “Unless that’s what the culprit wanted.”

“You think that might be the change they wanted to sneak past us while Ogami was asleep?” Naegi bit his lip, looking up at the vent. “Then we need to know if that knife really is missing.”

Togami crossed his arms. “I’m not leaving you here with a murderer on the loose just so I can fetch my screwdriver from the library.”

“No, I know you wouldn’t do that.” Naegi considered the air vent a moment longer. “Those screws don’t look too big or heavy. They wouldn’t take much leverage, right?”

“No, they’re reasonably lightweight,” Togami said, regarding Naegi with a frown. “Are you suggesting that I use something else instead of a screwdriver? That… actually might work, if we could find decent substitute.” He tried to think of what he had in the room that might be thin enough to fit in the groove of the screw’s head. Something from the bathroom, maybe?

“I think I have an idea.” Naegi tried to shift his good arm across his body, but Togami reached out to catch him before he could strain his muscles in whatever idiocy he was attempting.

“Don’t do that,” he ordered flatly. “What on earth are you twisting around for?”

“I’ve got some Monocoins in my hoodie pocket,” Naegi explained. “They should be about the right size.”

Togami nodded slowly. From what he’d seen of those stupid coins Naegi insisted on collecting, they would be just about thin enough. They wouldn’t have been able to handle the larger, heavier screws on the door hinges, but for the smaller air vent screws, it might just work. “Your hoodie pocket, you said? On the left?”

Naegi nodded, and Togami tugged the grimy, bloodstained fabric of the hoodie further away from Naegi’s body so that he could more easily slip his hand inside. There really wasn’t much reason for Naegi to keep carrying a lot of heavy things around in his pockets, not when he needed to conserve his energy, so Togami just turned the pocket inside out and dumped the lot on the bed beside Naegi.

Monokuma’s obnoxious face gleamed up at him from several coins, spilled between Naegi’s e-handbook, dorm room key, and a few ridiculous trinkets he’d apparently gotten from that worthless machine in the store. With a grimace of distaste at having to touch something adorned with that horrible bear’s image, Togami took the nearest coin. Naegi seemed content to inspect the other belongings, picking up his handbook rather than trying to do anything else that might be too strenuous, so Togami just turned the pocket inside out and dumped the lot on the bed beside Naegi.

He wasn’t quite tall enough to reach the screws on his own, and he couldn’t commandeer the chair he’d used originally without pushing Ogami onto the floor. Fortunately, a few moments of looking around the room presented another option. He crossed to the table, dumped the medicines and other bottles out of the box Ogami had used to carry them to the room, and carried the crate over to place it on the floor below the vent. It wasn’t quite as much height as the chair had given him, but it was much more solid.

Togami braced himself against the wall with one hand, and with the other, he slid the edge of the coin into the head of the screw. It didn’t quite fit, not as easily as the screwdriver had, but all his work with disassembling the Monokuma robot upstairs had given him plenty of practice in using
tools that weren’t quite designed for the tasks he needed to accomplish. In a few moments, he managed to get each of the screws unfastened, and carefully tugged the vent cover away.

And just as he’d feared, the air vent it revealed was completely empty.

Or — no. Not completely empty. Just at the edge of the vent’s mouth, where it might have carelessly been snagged by the edge of the metal, a long strand of pale hair glimmered up at him.
Chapter 172

Chapter Summary

Togami investigates the strand of hair left behind in the air vent.

Togami reached out towards the hair dangling in the air vent. He didn’t intend to touch it, of course — he wasn’t stupid enough to try something like that. But he positioned his hand to block the illumination of the light behind him, trying to give himself a clear view of the pale strand without the reflecting gleam on it.

Silver or white, that was the question. He could tell at a glance that this wasn’t Jill’s dark hair, but he couldn’t immediately eliminate either of the other two girls. Both Kirigiri and Ogami had long pale hair, after all… but Kirigiri’s shaded just a little more toward silver than the strand in front of him. This one seemed to be the pure white of Sakura Ogami’s hair.

Togami let out a long breath, the strand of hair quivering in the faint breeze. If that hair belonged to Ogami, it made a kind of sense. He knew for certain that she’d been in the room during the past few hours, when the strand must have been caught. It wouldn’t be much of a stretch to think that she wouldn’t notice a loose hair being snagged on the metal.

Or it wouldn’t be if she hadn’t been unconscious, anyway. Togami scowled at the hair one last time, not bothering to replace the vent cover as he climbed down from the box. He almost wished it had belonged to Kirigiri, after all — its presence would have been incomprehensible, yes, but at least it might have suggested a different picture from the one that all these puzzle pieces were beginning to form.

“Was the knife really gone?” Naegi asked, setting his handbook aside.

“Yes, and there was a piece of Ogami’s hair in its place.” Togami crossed his arms and leaned against the wall, taking a moment to wait for his head to stop spinning after moving so quickly up and down.

“What? But — she couldn’t have been the one who took it,” Naegi protested. “She’s asleep! How could she have gotten the knife all the way up to the fifth floor?”

“She might have done it before falling prey to the drugged coffee,” Togami pointed out. “I don’t know how long that body had been hidden in that classroom by the time I found it. She would have had more than enough time to take the knife, go upstairs to commit murder, and return while you were still asleep.”

“You can’t really think that!” Naegi’s jaw dropped in a hurt kind of disbelief. “Why would Ogami have been drugged if she was the culprit?”

“Yes, and how would she have known the knife was there? Why would she go up to the fifth floor to commit a murder when you would have been right here in front of her? Why would she bother using gas to knock her victim out when she’s devoted her life to mastering physical fighting abilities?”
Naegi stared at Togami as he listed the litany of questions, problem after problem with the idea that Ogami had been the one to do this. “Then… you don’t think it was her?”

Togami looked over at the slumped figure in the chair, tightening his lips in a frown. “It isn’t impossible that someone might drug herself to try to create an illusion of innocence — but that kind of plan would take a depth of cunning she’s never demonstrated. And if she’s been lying to us all along to craft this deception, her willingness to reveal herself as a traitor makes even less sense. So… no, I don’t think she is the one behind this scheme. But I think someone wants us to think she is.”

And that didn’t leave a lot of possibilities. Togami could read the thoughts from Naegi’s expression easily as he realized how limited the options were. Jill wouldn’t use a knife to kill someone, not when she had her scissors available — and even if she’d run out of her preferred weapon, it was hard to believe that she’d go through so much trouble to disguise her handiwork. With the genocider eliminated, of course it would only take Naegi a few moments to work out that the only possibilities left were Kirigiri and Ikusaba.

Before the other boy could say something to make his new understanding obvious, Togami pushed away from the wall to propel himself across the room, dropping down to sit on the bed beside Naegi. He leaned down until his lips could brush against the curve of Naegi’s ear, whispering so that the cameras wouldn’t catch the rest of their conversation.

“I didn’t tell anyone where I hid that knife, and I don’t see any traces that this room was searched. Whoever took the knife knew exactly where it was — and the only way someone could have known that would be if they saw me hide it.”

He didn’t look towards the cameras — but he didn’t need to. After weeks under the mastermind’s observation, Naegi would be able to figure it out.

And sure enough, it only took a few seconds before Naegi nodded slowly, tilting his head up until he could answer in equal secrecy. “But why?” he said, once Togami lowered his head the last few inches. “If you think Ikusaba did this… what would be the point?”

Togami could think of several — but there was one that glared up at him, far more obvious than any of the others. “To get away with murder,” he answered simply. “Why else has anyone done anything during the mastermind’s game?”

It made a horrible kind of sense, in a way that Ogami’s guilt didn’t. The cameras would have shown Ikusaba the knife’s hiding place, and if anyone could have snuck into the dorm room to drug the coffee without Ogami noticing, it would be a Fenrir-trained soldier. And since as far as Ikusaba knew, only Kirigiri should have been aware of her existence, pinning a murder on someone else would have been easy.

Especially if Kirigiri was the victim lying in the ruined classroom upstairs.

Togami grimaced. He hoped that wasn’t the case, and not just because it would probably make Naegi cry again. If the mastermind and their agents had switched from inciting murder to committing it themselves, this game had just gotten an order of magnitude more dangerous. Dodging a murder attempt by the other idiot students was one thing, but avoiding a scheme by someone unseen and out of reach who had the entire school under constant surveillance was something else altogether. Could they even accuse Ikusaba of being the murderer, if it turned out that was what had really happened?

This turned the situation from bad to critical — and it meant that they had to know who the corpse
upstairs was. Togami looked down at Naegi again, evaluating the steadiness of the boy’s eyes and the extent of trembling in his arms and legs. “Do you feel up to standing? I think we need to look at the body upstairs.”
Chapter 173

Chapter Summary

Togami reconsiders the wisdom of trying to move Naegi.

Togami carefully scrutinized Naegi as the other boy took a moment to consider his response. Yes, Naegi did look much better than he had during both of Togami’s previous visits, with a little more color to his cheeks and less trembling to his movements. He could sit up on his own now, without leaning against the pillows and headboard — that had to be a good sign. And speaking didn’t seem to knock all the wind out of him the way it had before.

But none of that necessarily translated to an ability to get out of bed, let alone climb the long flights of stairs up to the fifth floor. All Togami’s insides twisted into knots at the thought of pushing Naegi too hard, only to see the boy collapse midway up the stairs and plummet down to the floor.

But then again, if Ikusaba really was the one doing this, there was nothing to say that Naegi would be any safer if Togami left him here in the dorms. After all, Ogami had been knocked out fairly easily, and she hadn’t sustained any of the injuries currently impairing Naegi’s ability to fight back. Even locking the door wouldn’t be a guarantee of safety, not if Ikusaba was the one behind all this. The mastermind would be a fool to leave themselves without a way to get past the dorm room locks. And while a barricade might be enough of an additional barrier, Naegi was in no shape to construct one.

No, if it was a case of danger competing with danger, Togami would prefer to keep Naegi by his side, where he could keep an eye on the trouble-prone boy. If Naegi wasn’t up to climbing the stairs right now, then both of them would just have to wait here until he felt stronger. Togami wasn’t going to leave Naegi alone with a murderer on the loose.

But after a long moment of contemplation, Naegi took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes. I think I can get up.”

Togami eyed his determined expression dubiously. The long pause for thought did suggest that Naegi hadn’t just blurted his answer out blindly… but on the other hand, Naegi had clearly believed he’d been up to traipsing all over the school two days ago, too, and it had left him too exhausted to climb down the stairs on his own.

“I really am feeling better,” Naegi insisted, clearly feeling like he had to give a longer answer in response to whatever he saw on Togami’s face. “I’ve had a really long time to sleep, and my arm can hardly move at all in this sling. I’m sure I’ll be fine if I don’t try to move too fast.”

Togami sighed. “All right, then.” He pushed himself to his feet and slid an arm around Naegi, so that he could take some of the smaller boy’s weight as he tried to get up. “Let’s see how well you manage standing, and we’ll go from there.”

Naegi gave him a determined nod, then used his good hand and Togami’s supporting arm to try to struggle to his feet. A small gasp hissed through Togami’s teeth as some of Naegi’s weight fell on his arm, feeling heavier than it should have considering the past times he’d supported Naegi. He scowled fiercely, holding his arm steady more through force of will than muscle as Naegi leaned
on him to stand. He would not let the already injured boy drop to the floor — it simply wasn’t an option, not matter how much his arm wanted to shake under the pressure.

But finally, after an eternity of gritting his teeth and clenching his fingers, the weight eased as Naegi regained some of his equilibrium, using the side of the bed as well as Togami’s grip on his shoulder to balance himself. His attention freed from his own need to stay on his feet, Togami looked down to scrutinize Naegi again after this latest exertion.

He’d half expected to see Naegi swaying on his feet and gasping for breath, as he’d been on the stairs coming down from the fifth floor the other day, but to his surprise, Naegi did actually seem to be managing. He wasn’t recovered, that much was obvious in the lingering pallor of his skin and the lines of strain across his face, but he wasn’t as badly off as he could have been. He’d gotten to his feet, and he seemed to be standing without too much difficulty.

But standing wasn’t good enough. He needed to be able to move around, to walk, to climb. And he would have to be able to do those things without relying on Togami to support him, since this first attempt had shown that the effects of the drugged air still hadn’t worn off entirely. Would Naegi be strong enough to endure the search they needed? What if he only made it partway to the fifth floor and then his energy gave out? That would leave them both entirely at the mercy of the murderer. Was the information they could learn from a search really worth that risk?

Togami sighed. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“What?” Naegi frowned, looking a little indignant. “But you said to try getting up, and I did! Okay, I didn’t do it by myself but —”

“That’s not what I meant,” Togami cut him off. “Yes, you stood up, but how long do you think you can stay this way? How many stairs can you climb before it’s too many?”

“You’re the one who just said we need to go upstairs,” Naegi objected.

“I know. And we do — but that doesn’t matter if we can’t get there.” Togami shook his head. “We should wait here, at least for a little while longer. If we wait until Ogami sleeps off this drug, that would give us more options. We could —”

“No!” Naegi’s sharp glare stopped him mid-sentence. “We can’t just hide down here. One of our friends is dead!”

“And she won’t get any less dead no matter when we go up there,” Togami countered. “There hasn’t been a body discovery announcement, so it isn’t as though we have to worry about time limits or trials. We can wait and do this safely.”

“But we don’t even know who it is,” Naegi said, tilting his head up to look at Togami with wide, miserable eyes.

Something clenched around Togami’s heart at the sight of that expression on Naegi’s face. It was wrong for Naegi to look that unhappy, even in the midst of this horrible killing game. Naegi’s safety was more important than his happiness, Togami knew that — but it was hard to hold on to that knowledge when Naegi looked like all the joy had been sucked out of his soul.

“I have to know.” Naegi said, with an obvious effort at keeping his voice from trembling. “Please — I have to know if I let her go to her death.”

Togami closed his eyes. It always came back to Kirigiri with Naegi, didn’t it? But… in this case, at least, Togami supposed he could see where the other boy was coming from. From everything
they’d discovered from searching the dorm room, it was looking more and more likely that the body upstairs belonged to Kirigiri. But it wasn’t certain, not until someone had seen her with their own eyes — and uncertainty could destroy the mind in a way that cold fact wouldn’t. The not knowing would tear at Naegi’s peace of mind, putting more unnecessary stress on him and halting his recovery.

And if Togami had to be honest with himself, it wasn’t doing him much good, either. Who was their enemy in this case, the mastermind or one of the other students? He didn’t know, and until he knew, he couldn’t make a solid plan.

With a sigh, Togami opened his eyes again and looked down to meet Naegi’s unrelenting gaze. “All right,” he said. “I’ll figure out a way to get you there safely.”
Chapter 174

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi discuss the problem of how to deal with the stairs and drugged classroom air.

Togami knew that returning to the fifth floor classroom would be difficult, and the stairs were only going to be the first obstacle. Even if he and Naegi could make it safely to the top, they would have to deal with the classroom itself, where the drug would still be lingering in the air to limit the time they could spend inside. He'd left the door to the hall open, since he certainly hadn't had the strength to close it behind him, but he doubted that the short amount of time that had passed since then would have made a significant impact in letting the room air out.

And even if they could find a way to get rid of the chemicals in the air, that didn’t change the fact that the lights were out in that room. He supposed that the red light of the device he’d found inside Monokuma might still be burning, but even if it hadn’t burned itself out, it hadn’t been very useful as a source of illumination. He didn’t like the idea of letting Naegi rummage around the site of a murder without being able to see clearly what he was doing.

Togami reviewed the problems once more in his head, then nodded once to himself. “All right. If we’re going to go upstairs, there are three things we’ll need.” He held up three fingers to tick off each of the requirements. “First, something that can get you up the stairs. Second, a source of light. Third, a way to avoid getting knocked out by the drug in the air.”

Naegi nodded slowly. “Our handbook screens give off some light when they’re turned on. Would those work?”

Togami frowned. “Not as primary light sources. They might be helpful for checking corners or hidden areas, but they wouldn’t be anywhere near powerful enough to search for anything important. All the lights in that classroom are broken.” He thought for a moment. “We can check the storage room for something useful. With any luck, the mastermind stocked something that we could use in the event of a power outage.”

“They might have,” Naegi said. “But I’m pretty sure they didn’t have anything like gas masks. I didn’t search the whole room or anything, but I know I would’ve remembered seeing those.”

“So would I,” Togami agreed, deciding not to add that he might have considered trying to incorporate them into some plan of his own if he’d noticed something so useful. “But even so, there are a few ways we can improvise.”

“What, like covering our noses and mouths?” Naegi asked, frowning.

“It isn’t ideal,” Togami admitted. “But it should give us just about enough time to go in, identify the body, and get out. I got caught earlier because I hung around breathing in the chemicals before I knew they were there. If we can be quick enough, that might not be an issue.”

Privately, Togami wasn’t at all convinced that Naegi would be able to be quick enough, especially not after climbing five flights of stairs — but he knew that saying so right now would only
encourage Naegi to insist that he was perfectly capable of it. Better to wait to bring it up until they were actually at the classroom, when Naegi felt the full force of his exertions. Then he might be more inclined to agree to waiting outside and away from the dangerous fumes.

As for options that they could use… Togami scanned the room briefly, then nodded. “I’m going to try to put some improvised masks together. I want you to see if you can stay on your feet while I work on that.”

“All right.” Naegi shifted again, leaning more heavily on the edge of the bed than on Togami’s arm. Once he seemed to have found his balance again, Togami slowly moved his arm away. When Naegi didn’t topple to the floor, or even sway too alarmingly, Togami nodded and stepped back towards the supplies Ogami had brought from the clinic and the dining hall.

The bandages would work to cover their faces, he decided, picking up the last of the supply. It was probably unrealistic to think that this might be the last time any of them might need bandages, but hopefully there was a larger stock of them in the supply room somewhere.

It would have been ideal if he could have soaked the bandages in water somehow, but with the water turned off, that wasn’t an option. He gave the thermoses of water that Ogami had brought a brief, speculative glance — but no, not when someone had drugged at least one liquid in the room already. Besides, now that he looked more closely, it seemed as though Ogami had emptied all the thermoses already anyway, so there was no potentially tainted water left for him to consider using. They would just have to make do with the bandages alone.

Which left only the last, most difficult problem of the three — how to get Naegi up the stairs to the fifth floor. It would have been hard enough if Togami had been at his best, able to help Naegi climb without worrying about his own stamina… but with the trouble he’d had just helping Naegi stand, it seemed impossible. Naegi needed something sturdy to lean his weight on, but —

Wait. Togami frowned, turning abruptly towards the side of his dorm room where most of the items not necessary for the makeshift sickroom had gotten moved. If his memory was right, then the music stand that had been collecting dust here since he’d arrived should be just about the right size for what they needed.

He crossed the room to examine the stand, testing the sturdiness of the central pole. It wasn’t quite as well-crafted as the stand he used at home, but it wasn’t some flimsy collapsible rubbish, either. The pole seemed to be solid wood, though still light enough for the stand to be portable. It was the work of a moment to disassemble the stand, pulling the pieces apart until the pole had nothing left attached to it.

“Try using this.” Togami handed the pole to Naegi, setting one side on the ground so he could lean on it. “It should be a decent enough walking stick.”

Naegi tested a little of his weight on it hesitantly, like he was afraid it might crack, but then a grateful smile spread over his face. “This is perfect. I’m sure I can make it up the stairs with this.”

“If you can’t, you have to tell me immediately,” Togami instructed, giving Naegi his least forgiving glare. “Pressing on won’t accomplish anything if you collapse. The sooner I know you’re having difficulty, the better I’ll be able to help you.”

Naegi gave him a serious nod. “I know. And I’ll tell you if anything’s wrong.”

That was probably the best Togami was going to get out of him. Togami sighed, turning around to inspect the room for anything else they might need one last time before they headed out. He
scooped Naegi’s dorm key and e-handbook off the bed, then gave a final nod. “All right — let’s go.”
Chapter 175

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi search the storage room for a light source.

Togami kept a close eye on Naegi as the two of them walked out of the dorm room, checking for any signs that might point to increased pain or returning fatigue. Naegi seemed as all right as could be expected now, with his injured arm carefully cradled in the sling and his good hand using the music stand pole to balance his weight, but Togami didn’t expect that to last long.

Once they were both safely in the hallway, Togami closed the door behind him — and frowned. He’d left the door unlocked while Ogami had been awake and taking care of Naegi, so that she could leave if necessary without having possession of his room key — but now, with Ogami unconscious, the situation had changed. There was nothing to stop the murderer from returning to finish what they’d begun, especially if they suspected that Togami and Naegi hadn’t bought their frame job, and this situation was complicated enough without throwing another dead body into the mix.

But locking her in would cause a different set of problems. If she stayed asleep, there would be no issue — but if she woke up to find Naegi missing and the door locked, who knew what she might take it into her head to do? The culprit must have been in that room, after all, and there could still be important clues to their actions that he and Naegi hadn’t uncovered yet, clues she might destroy by flailing around without restraint.

And aside from that, Ogami had gone so far as to break down two doors already, even though one had been at Asahina’s request. Togami remembered the girl’s broken eyes when he’d found her sitting alone in the dark in the immediate aftermath of Asahina’s death — it wasn’t a stretch to think that fear for another person she’d sworn to protect might drive her to defy the locked door rule a third time.

“Is it really okay to just leave her like that?” Naegi asked, frowning at the door. Apparently he’d been thinking along the same lines.

“No,” Togami decided, swinging the door back open. “Wait here a moment.”

He strode quickly back into the room and retrieved a pad of paper and pen from one of the desk drawers. He jotted down a simple note informing Ogami of the basic facts of the situation, then left it on the bed in front of her, so that she ought to see it immediately if she woke. She’d guarded most of the other dead bodies, so she ought to understand the idea of not disturbing the scene without another student present. That would have to be good enough.

Returning to the hall, Togami found Naegi giving him a rather puzzled look. “What were you doing? Did you try to wake her up?”

“No, if she’s drugged, I doubt there’s much we could do to snap her out of it.” Togami pulled out his key and locked the door with a reassuring click. “I left a note telling her what happened and that she shouldn’t do anything stupid.”
For some inexplicable reason, this brought a smile to Naegi’s face as they started walking down the hall. “That was nice of you.”

“It was sensible,” Togami corrected him sharply, trying to ignore the warmth that Naegi’s smile sent curling through his stomach. “She might have done any number of obstructive things if I hadn’t told her.”

“Okay.” But in spite of his agreement, Naegi quite annoyingly didn’t sound like he believed Togami at all. “I’m glad you two are getting to be friends again.”

Togami gave Naegi a dark glare. “She is not my friend, and certainly not ‘again.’”

But even in the face of that glare, the smile didn’t drop from Naegi’s lips, and Togami ended up having to look away from the boy at his side before he did something ridiculous like bend down to kiss him in the middle of the hall. That would have given Naegi completely the wrong idea as to how Togami felt about his refusal to see sense.

Fortunately, they rounded the corner and reached the storage room before Naegi felt the need to say anything else on the subject. Togami quickly scanned the room before entering, just to make sure no one seemed to be concealed inside, but it seemed empty enough, with the shelves pressed directly against the wall to avoid creating any hiding places. When he was sure it seemed safe, he walked in, Naegi following just a step behind.

“We need some kind of portable light source,” Togami said, turning to begin to study the items on the shelves. “Flashlights, a lamp, something like that. It will have to be battery-operated, though, since I don’t know what the killer did to sabotage the lights. If they blew the fuse for that room, anything with an electric cord won’t work.”

Naegi nodded. “Okay. I’ll start from the other side, then.”

Naegi had always been good at spotting anything unusual or out of place. If that side of the room held anything useful, he could trust Naegi to find it. Togami left him to it, turning his attention to the shelves in front of him.

He’d looked through the storage room before, when it had first been unlocked. He hadn’t explored it exhaustively, but he’d taken note of the general organization and types of items it contained. Most of the shelves held food, drink, or the various other consumables the students would have needed if they’d resisted longer before beginning to play Monokuma’s game. He could ignore most of those things, skipping over the large sealed packages of some revolting instant noodles or the stacks of enough soda cans to hydrate an army.

When he reached the shelves that contained other miscellaneous items, he started paying more attention, looking over each shelf to make sure he didn’t miss something useful tucked away behind another item. He didn’t see anything that looked like a portable light, though he did find a box full of several different sizes of light bulbs.

“I found some candles,” Naegi said from across the room. “No matches, though.”

“Probably for the best,” Togami said, grimacing. “I wouldn’t trust an open flame in a room with unidentified chemicals in the air. I wouldn’t put it past the mastermind to stock the school with flammable gases that could destroy the whole building.”

“I don’t know about that,” Naegi said slowly. “Sure, there’s a lot of dangerous stuff in the school, but… it’s mostly been smaller scale, things people would use to kill just one or two other people.
There haven’t been any weapons we could use against a lot of people at once.” He frowned suddenly. “Except the poison, I guess.”

“Which we couldn’t access until more than half of us were dead already,” Togami pointed out, pausing his search as he considered what Naegi had said. “That makes sense. We know the mastermind has access to explosives, but they haven’t given us anything like that. They gave us weapons that we’d need to pick a deliberate target to use — nothing where we’d have the option of setting off enough destruction to cause an arbitrary death, while the killer could pretend they’d kept their hands clean.”

And of course, with Ikusaba physically present in the school, there was another reason the mastermind wouldn’t have wanted the students to have access to the tools for general mayhem. Whether Ikusaba was the mastermind herself or just their tool, it only made sense that none of the weapons would give the students the ability to harm her unwittingly. But of course, Togami knew he couldn’t say that aloud, not if there was a chance someone was still observing them through the cameras. Fortunately, he knew he could trust Naegi to be clever enough to work it out for himself.

“Not that it matters,” was what he chose to say, instead of his musings on the mastermind’s thoughts. “I still won’t trust fire in that room even if we did find matches.”

“Okay,” Naegi said, moving past the shelf with the candles. “Then I’ll keep looking.”

Togami moved on as well, getting closer to the dustier areas near the back as he dismissed more and more of the irrelevant items. Why hadn’t there been some kind of inventory of the storage room contents? If he’d been in charge of the room, it would never have been so shoddily managed. It would have been properly cleaned, too — food storage should never have been allowed to gather dust this way.

He glanced at one of the upper shelves near the back, and paused as an unexpected empty space caught his eye. Most of the items back here had been relatively undisturbed, judging by the layer of dust — but he could see a large, clean rectangle that indicated something had been removed from that shelf fairly recently.

No — not that recently. Togami remembered the investigation before the fourth class trial, when he’d told Jill to search the storage room to get her out of his hair. She’d said something about a large object being missing then, but it hadn’t turned up during the trial, so it hadn’t seemed all that relevant. Still… he didn’t know what it was or who had taken it, and he didn’t like the idea of not knowing.

“I think I found something that will work.”

Togami looked over at Naegi. The other boy was gesturing at one of the bottom shelves near the back corner on his side of the room. Tucked between bottles of dishwashing soap and boxes of pens, there was a large electric lantern.

Togami crossed over to pick up the lantern, flicking the power switch to check whether it worked. When bright light flooded the storage room, he turned to give Naegi a grim smile. “Perfect.”

Naegi nodded. “Then let’s go upstairs.”
Chapter 176

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi head upstairs to check the dead body in classroom 5-C.

Climbing the stairs to the fifth floor was even more of an ordeal than Togami had expected it to be. With the lantern in one hand weighing him down, his body kept swaying to the side with every step he took up the stairs, threatening to send him toppling into the emptiness behind him. Even keeping a grip on the railing could only do so much to help when the effects of the drugged air lingered, leaving his hands weaker than they should have been.

His only consolation was that at least Naegi seemed to be coping better with the climb than he’d feared. The other boy could only make slow progress, using the pole rather than the railing to haul himself up one stair at a time, but at least he was moving steadily. Pain hadn’t made him falter, except once when he’d jarred his injured arm, but he’d kept going almost immediately after doing so. And with the slow pace, exhaustion didn’t seem to be a problem, either.

In fact, Naegi was managing the stairs so well that by the time they reached the top, it had dawned on Togami that he wasn’t going to have the leverage he’d expected in trying to convince Naegi to wait outside the classroom. Naegi still had to move slowly, that was the problem, and to avoid breathing the drugged air, they would have to move fast. Togami knew he’d barely managed to get himself out, and he’d been in excellent condition, other than the exhaustion of being awake for a full day. What would that same drug do to Naegi, who was already wounded and still weak from blood loss?

But would Naegi see it the same way, especially with the likelihood that Kirigiri’s dead body lay in the middle of that drugged air? Considering the risks that Naegi had already been willing to endure for the girl, Togami had a sinking feeling that he wouldn’t care.

Still, that didn’t mean he shouldn’t try to convince Naegi to see sense. The trials had shown that Naegi did know how to recognize reason and logic, even when he didn’t like what they were telling him. If Togami could manage to marshal his arguments strongly enough, argue skillfully enough, he just might be able to talk Naegi out of doing something irrevocably stupid.

When they reached the edge of the long hall that led to classroom 5-C, Togami stopped and turned to Naegi. “Before we go any further, there’s something we should discuss. When we get to the classroom itself, I think it would be better if you waited outside.”

Naegi blinked for a moment — then nodded. “Okay.”

The arguments Togami had been constructing dropped out of his head as he stared at Naegi in disbelief. “You — what?”

“Okay,” Naegi repeated. “I’ll wait outside if you want.” He sighed. “I’m better than I was, but — well, I know I’m not completely recovered, not yet. You’ll have to move fast if there are drugs in the air, and I don’t want to be something that slows you down.”

Togami didn’t quite know what to make of the easy acquiescence to his wishes. He’d expected a
battle, and Naegi hadn’t given him one. “But I thought you wanted to identify the body,” he said, the question probing at Naegi’s resolve. Did he really mean what he’d said…?

Naegi looked towards the door, sadness seeping into his eyes. “I want to know who it is,” he said. “I have to know. But that doesn’t mean I need to see it for myself. I trust you to look for me, and to tell me the truth.”

Togami froze, feeling as though someone had unexpectedly placed a small, fragile treasure in his hands, one that would shatter if he made the wrong move. He’d known that Naegi trusted him, but this went beyond what he’d thought that meant. The awareness that the corpse could be Kirigiri’s loomed unspoken between them, and Togami knew how strongly Naegi felt for the wretched girl, even if he couldn’t understand why. The need to know the truth about her had driven Naegi out of bed in the middle of his recovery, up flight after flight of stairs through pain and exhaustion.

And even so, Naegi had agreed to let Togami check the body on his behalf. He hadn’t even objected. Togami didn’t know if he would have been able to do the same, if he had been the one to need information so badly. Not that he didn’t trust Naegi or thought the other boy would lie if their positions were reversed — but he knew he couldn’t have let go of the need to learn such a critical truth for himself.

Slowly, with an immense dignity that was the only appropriate answer he could make to the faith Naegi had placed in him, Togami placed his hand on top of the one Naegi had wrapped around the pole, a feather light touch that offered warmth without pressure. “Then I’ll go for you,” he said, the words as heavy as a vow.

Without words like that, he might have felt differently about letting his hand fall away from Naegi’s and turning to walk down the corridor to face the ruined classroom again. After all, it was a place where he had nearly been overcome by an enemy who’d been just a little more clever than he’d expected, where he’d fallen to the ground and been forced to crawl out on hands and knees like an animal. If the situation were different, he might even have been afraid to walk through those doors again, no matter how briefly.

But not now. With Naegi’s trust settling around his shoulders like a warm cloak, he had something more important to do than fear. He had to tie the strips of bandages over his nose and mouth, doing whatever little they could to strain out any drugged air he might be forced to inhale. He had to fill his lungs with one last breath of the clean air in the hallway. And he had to step over the threshold to the ruined classroom, holding up the lantern to send light flooding through the shadows, all the way to the body still lying on the far side of the room.
Chapter Summary

Togami enters classroom 5-C to identify the body.

Togami knew he didn’t dare linger long in the wreckage of classroom 5-C. He couldn’t hold his
breath indefinitely, and the bandages he’d tied over his mouth and nose wouldn’t do much to filter
any remaining drugs from the air. He needed to cross the room, check the body, and leave again as
quickly as possible, ideally before he’d had to inhale more than a breath or two of the tainted air.

But even so, he forced himself to take a moment to scan the room as he entered, checking for
concealed enemies or suspiciously hidden areas. Avoiding the filthy air would do him no good if
he focused so much on moving quickly that he left himself vulnerable to attack. And with the
destroyed furniture scattered broken through the room, there were plenty of places where someone
could stage an effective ambush…

Except that to do so, they would have had to wait here in the classroom, breathing the befouled air.
It was just barely possible that someone might have heard him and Naegi approach and hurried to
conceal themselves just moments before he entered, but it seemed highly unlikely that anyone
would bother with such subterfuge when it would be so much easier to attack out in the hall.

With that in mind, Togami started walking forward before more than a few of his precious limited
seconds could tick away. If he intended to go through with this, he had a great deal to accomplish
before his breath ran out. He sent cautious glances to either side as he strode across the room,
taking special care to look behind the piles of furniture — but the largest pieces had fallen near the
front of the room. The space thinned out as he approached the area with the piles of chalk outlines
— the area where the body still lay.

Even with the bandages covering his face, Togami refused to breathe this close to the body. His
skin shuddered under the chilly caress of air currents stirring where they had no business moving,
and he could hear a faint whirring that he could tell now was ever so slightly distinct from the
sound of the air conditioning vents. So not only had the drug not dissipated, it seemed as though it
was still being pumped into the room. His stomach seized up in protective spasms, and the only
thing that stopped him from gagging at the thought was that he knew he’d have to suck in some of
the poisoned air to do it.

He couldn’t stay here, not with the air hanging dirty and disgusting all around him — but he
couldn’t leave either, not yet. Not when Naegi had only agreed to wait outside because he trusted
Togami to find out whose body lay on the ground. And all the while, time kept ticking away,
counting down the seconds until he no longer had a choice.

And Togami knew he couldn’t go back out into the hallway and tell Naegi that he hadn’t been able
to find out the truth after all. The thought of seeing the shards of broken trust in Naegi’s eyes was
almost as bad as the knowledge that Naegi’s reaction would be to try to enter the classroom and
identify the body himself. Either of those outcomes would be unacceptable.

So before any more time could pass, Togami dropped to one knee beside the body. With the
lantern in one hand, he could see other details now, tiny things that he’d missed in the shadowy
darkness. He recognized the coat draped over the body as some kind of ankle-length lab coat, and above it the victim’s head had been concealed by some kind of smooth gray helmet. And he could tell at a glance that it was definitely the huge knife from his air vent that had pierced through the corpse.

And more than that, he could see the body wasn’t the only thing that had been stabbed. The knife pinned a piece of white, bloodstained paper to the corpse’s chest, with the single word TRAITOR emblazoned across it.

Togami nearly forgot himself enough to gasp at the sight. The room seemed to grow a few degrees colder with that accusation scrawled on a dead girl’s body. What did it mean? Who had made it? And, most importantly, who had been accused?

He couldn’t delay any longer, not if he wanted to make it back to the hall without collapsing. A faint tremor in his hands as he reached out towards the body’s head told him he was pushing it already — he had to act now or not at all. And with a message like that raising so many new questions, not acting wasn’t an option. He focused all his attention, gripped the head, and turned it to face him.

Beep.

It was a mask covering the head, not a helmet, with huge mirrored eyes and an obscenely large grin. Naegi had said Ikusaba wore a mask, Togami remembered, but of course masks could be removed. That didn’t tell him anything. He felt along the edges of the mask, trying to determine how to get it off.

Beep.

It didn’t seem to have a zipper or other clasp. Could it just be pulled on and off? That seemed too simple, if someone had gone to the trouble of masking the victim, but maybe the culprit had assumed the drugged air would stop anyone from getting this far.

Beep beep.

The mask’s reason for being there couldn’t matter much, though. The important thing was to get rid of it. Togami slid his fingers beneath the edge of it —

And felt the presence of a trigger, far too late to do any good.

Beep beep.

The full meaning of the faint beeping finally registered, and he threw himself backwards, scrambling to get as far from the corpse as he could. How had he not recognized the sound sooner — the same beeping they’d all heard from Monokuma that first day in the gym, after Owada had been stupid enough to attack the robot in direct defiance of the rules?

Beep beep beep.

But the faster he tried to move, the more the room shook and spun around him, reflexes slowed by the side effects of the drug and his lack of sleep dragging at his limbs. He knew that too much space stretched between him and the door. How long had Owada held the robot before flinging it up to explode in midair?

Beep beep beep beeeeeeep —
As the beeping turned to a screaming howl of noise, Togami abandoned the door and threw himself to the side, behind the nearest pile of overturned desks. His last thought as he threw his arms over his head was that at least Naegi had stayed safely out in the hall.

And then the world blew apart around him, and there were no thoughts in the darkness that followed.
Naegi knew he couldn’t have been waiting in the hallway for more than thirty seconds since Togami had disappeared into classroom 5-C, but it felt like hours had passed since that moment. Watching Togami walk away from him, he’d almost called out for the other boy to stop, wait, think of another plan that wouldn’t send him into danger — but what other plans were there? Anything else they could do would still involve entering the room and exposing themselves to the drugged air.

But at least he knew Togami would be cautious about it. The heir was always cautious to the point of paranoia, suspecting the other students of any number of machinations against the two of them. That sense of self-preservation would surely be enough to keep him safe even in a murder scene with drugs poisoning the air around him. Togami had survived for years in a world that Naegi barely understood. He knew how to protect himself.

And then an explosion shook through the hallway, and all Naegi’s justifications burned to ash.

He clutched at the music stand pole with his good hand, trying not to lose his balance and crash to the ground. Noise rang through his head, sending waves of the dizziness he’d thought he’d conquered roaring back. The hallway seemed to twist and tilt beneath his feet, threatening to dump him to the ground — but he knew he would never be able to pull himself back to his feet one-handed. If he fell now, there was no one left to help him.

And he couldn’t let that happen, not when Togami had been in the room with that explosion. If Naegi had heard the force of the blast even out in the hall, then how bad must it have been inside that room?

What if the explosion had left a second corpse smeared across that floor?

Naegi started moving towards the classroom door before he could let himself dwell on that thought. His knees trembled at the movement, a sure sign that he’d started walking too soon after being so badly shaken, but as long as he wasn’t actually going to collapse, that didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but getting into that room as quickly as he could, before it was too late.

If it wasn’t too late already. In spite of his best efforts not to think about the worst possible outcome, Naegi couldn’t silence the insidious voice whispering through his head that surely Togami would have come running out already if he were capable of doing so. If he hadn’t left the room, it had to mean that he couldn’t leave…

Hot tears blurred across Naegi’s eyes, but with one hand injured and the other gripping the music stand pole, he had no choice but to let them slide freely down his face. Togami would hate seeing him that way, vulnerability written across red eyes and damp cheeks for all the cameras to capture. Naegi just prayed the other boy would get the chance to scold him for it again.

Finally, finally he reached the doorway and plunged over the threshold into the classroom — and
he saw the flames devouring a half-charred body at the far end of the room.

A strangled sob choked all the air from Naegi’s lungs, catching halfway through his throat in tight, wheezing pain. He lunged forward, the pole scrabbling roughly against the floor as he forced himself to stay upright. There had to be something he could do, something to stop this from happening — this couldn’t be how everything ended.

Heat blazed against his skin as he approached, every one of his cuts screaming at the burning air. The fire pulsed out at him with an almost physical presence, like it wanted to force him back from it, to compel him into allowing it free rein within the classroom. But Naegi’s eyes locked on the sprawled form of a body in the flames, and he gritted his teeth and kept pressing forward, trying not to gag at the stench of scorched meat. Whoever that was — and he wouldn’t, couldn’t name them, not without knowing — but whichever of his friends that was, they deserved better than fire and ash in a room that had already been a graveyard.

He tried to squint through the hazy heat to see the fire itself. The actual flames hadn’t grown that big yet, only burning part of the body — but he could already see them spreading, grasping for more fuel. And with so much broken furniture in the room, so much wood, the classroom could easily turn into an inferno.

Naegi turned, desperately scanning the room for something that might help. Weren’t schools supposed to have things to put out fires, in case of emergencies? But if the classrooms of Hope’s Peak had ever been equipped with such safety precautions, the mastermind had stripped them away. No fire extinguishers, no sprinklers, not even a blanket he could smother the flames, there was nothing —

Water. There was water, nearly a whole bucket of it, tucked away with a mess of other scattered paraphernalia where it would have disappeared into shadow without the blaze of fire lighting this side of the room. Naegi staggered the few steps towards it — but as he reached it, he realized that there was no chance he could lift something so heavy. He only had one good hand, and he knew if he let go of the music stand pole he had no chance of staying upright even without the bucket.

But there was another option — there always was, if he could just think of it in time. His hands might be weak, but he still had his feet. Leaning heavily on the stick for balance, Naegi used his foot to kick the bucket away from the other broken trash, past the lazily blowing fan and the discarded bottles and the dripping sponges. It was slow, maybe too slow, but what other choice did he have?

He couldn’t just sit back and do nothing. He’d chosen to do nothing when he’d waited out in the hall while Togami went into this deathtrap at his request. He’d done nothing but stay behind when Kirigiri disappeared on her bargain with Ikusaba. And there had been so many others, Alter Ego and Asahina and Maizono and Fukawa and all the rest, one after the other, so many friends he’d been forced to watch die at the mastermind’s hands — and he’d done nothing.

But not this time. Now, close enough to the burning body that his own skin felt as though it might blister, where he could no longer ignore the fleshiness of the smoke around him, now he could act. He checked the bucket’s position, took careful aim, and with a solid kick he sent the water splashing over the body.

The fire went out in a smoky hiss of protest, the room growing sharply darker with the only light coming from the lantern fallen midway across the floor.

Naegi sagged down against his walking stick, wanting to collapse to the ground but knowing that he couldn’t allow himself to do so. He wasn’t going to let himself do nothing — not ever again.
Naegi tries to figure out what happened to Togami in the explosion.

As thick, grimy smoke curled into the air, Naegi forced himself to look down at where the fire had been. The sight of what had been a body twisted through his stomach, and he had to swallow back the sharp taste of vomit at the back of his throat. Even though he’d been forced to see so many other corpses over the past few weeks, they’d all looked human in his last glimpse of them, more or less — and for the ones that hadn’t, there had been very little left to recognize in what remained.

But it was impossible to ignore the fact that this charred thing in front of him had been a human body just a few minutes ago. The flames had only destroyed part of the body, leaving the outline of a leg or the sprawl of an arm to proclaim the truth. This had been someone he cared about.

Who had it been, though? Much as Naegi hated to think of anyone’s corpse being so badly desecrated, he had to cling to the desperate hope that this was the body that had already been in the classroom. Because if it wasn’t someone who’d already been dead… if it was someone else…

He squeezed his eyes closed for a moment, trying to force back the tears that kept trying to surge up to blur his vision, and then looked down at the body again. The face had been burned beyond recognition, he could tell that much at a glance, but there had to be some way to identify what remained of the body. Something on the bottom half, maybe, or —

Or the knife sticking out of the torso. Relief weakened Naegi’s knees as he realized what the blackened metal on the corpse’s chest had been, and he staggered against the music stand pole as a sob shook its way through him. This was the dead body they’d come to identify, the student that someone had already murdered, the life that had already been lost. It was still terrible, still a tragedy, but he couldn’t help the gratitude sweeping through him at the knowledge.

But if this was the corpse, then where was Togami? Naegi turned towards the rest of the room, looking around with renewed alarm. He’d watched the other boy go into this classroom less than a minute before the explosion — so he had to be in the room somewhere.

“Togami?” The first time Naegi tried to call the other boy’s name, it caught in his throat, barely letting more than a whisper escape. He clenched his fingers tight around the pole and tried a second time, louder. “Togami!”

But nothing happened. Naegi felt the brief stirring of relief drain away like water. He couldn’t believe that Togami would fail to answer if it was in his power to do so. Could the explosion have knocked him unconscious? But if it had, he would have been in the middle of the floor, impossible to miss. Unless…

Naegi’s eyes went to the piles of furniture, scanning along their length. And when he reached the middle of the room, he could see the shadows moving as one of the fallen desks tried to shift.

Before another second could pass, Naegi rushed in the direction of the moving desk, as much as he was capable of doing so. He wished, suddenly and fiercely, that he could just run, that exhaustion
and blood loss didn’t slow his limbs and tether him to the stupid music stand pole. If he could just have moved a little faster, been a little stronger, maybe none of this would have happened in the first place. He could have gone into the classroom himself instead of selfishly insisting that Togami go on his behalf — or at least he’d be able to hurry to the other boy’s side now, to offer whatever care and support he could.

“I’m coming,” Naegi promised, wishing he had something more than words to offer. “Just — just hold on, please.”

The motion had come from a little bit past the halfway point of the room, near the place where the lantern had crashed to the ground. The broken desk had fallen together with several chairs, casting a long shadow back against the wall. And now that the fire was no longer consuming his attention, now that he looked at the wreckage instead of past it, Naegi saw the movement even more strongly than before — and a moment later, the broken desk slanted back, knocking the chairs to the floor in a crash. Pale blond hair flashed in the light as Togami sat up, strips of bandage falling from his face.

The music stand pole clattered to the ground as Naegi fell to his knees beside the other boy, barely even registering the shock of pain as his knees hit the hard floor. “It wasn’t you. It really wasn’t you!”

He wanted to throw himself forward and cling to his boyfriend with his one good arm — his clever, brilliant boyfriend who had managed to protect himself even in the middle of an explosion — but he didn’t quite dare. He could see traces of angry red blood smearing their way across Togami’s hands, and he knew better than to touch the other boy when he didn’t know what might have happened or what injuries he might make worse. “You — you’re hurt. Are you bleeding? What happened?”

Togami didn’t answer his question, raising a shaky hand to one ear and shaking his head slightly… almost like he hadn’t really heard what Naegi had said. Explosions could do that when you were too close, Naegi remembered — they rang in your ears and left you unable to hear anything else. Sometimes it went away, but if it had been very loud and you’d been very close… sometimes it didn’t.

Naegi reached out a hesitant hand and laid it against Togami’s cheek, letting his fingers curl on top of the hand Togami had pressed to his ear. Slowly, Togami’s own fingers went still as he blinked hazily at Naegi, not just shaken by the explosion but disoriented in a way that Naegi had never seen him before.

And he was like this because of the request Naegi had made of him. Togami had wanted to turn around, to wait, to come up with a different plan… but he hadn’t. He’d ignored the cautious instincts that would have kept him safe and whole because Naegi had pleaded with him to do it. And that meant that all these injuries, whether they were permanent or would fade with time and care, were Naegi’s fault.
Naegi wanted to cry as he watched the look on Togami’s face as the other boy tried to get his bearings, but tears somehow seemed too far off to reach. He might have felt a little better if he could have cried, if the tears could purge some of the guilt churning through his stomach at the puzzled way Togami looked back at him.

Before this moment, Naegi would have said that nothing could make him dislike an expression on the other boy’s face — but that had been before disorientation blurred the sharp edges of his frown and confusion muddled the sting of his eyes. Naegi would have wiped that expression off the face of the earth if he could, knowing how much Togami would hate the fuzziness that had forcibly overtaken him.

Just how bad was it? Naegi almost didn’t want to know the truth… but it wouldn’t be right not to face it. Not when he’d been the one to send Togami in here.

“Togami?” he asked softly, before realizing that was the wrong approach to take. He raised his voice and tried again, staring directly into the other boy’s eyes as he spoke as loudly as he could. “Togami? Can you hear me at all?”

He’d hoped that Togami would just roll his eyes and make some cutting remark about how they could probably hear him several floors away… but instead, Togami’s eyebrows knit together in a deep frown as he stared intently at Naegi’s face, swaying with the effort of concentration. “Say that again,” he said, the words slurred strangely together and unnaturally loud.

That didn’t sound like a good sign at all, but Naegi tried to ignore his fears and did as the other boy asked, speaking even louder than before. “Can you hear anything I’m saying?”

Togami paused for a long moment — and then nodded. “Some of it.”

Naegi felt his face crack into a brilliant smile. “You — you’re okay! I thought you might not be! When you didn’t answer at first, I was so scared, I —”

“Slow down,” Togami cut him off, volume barreling right over Naegi’s half-babbled response. “And try to enunciate.”

“Right, it must be hard to hear,” Naegi said with a grimace.

Togami let out a frustrated huff of air. “I can’t understand you when you make faces like that,” he said, irritation plain in spite of his muddled words. “None of the sounds I’m hearing make sense — like they’re coming through water. I’m trying to read your lips.”

“Oh.” Naegi blinked, then tilted his head up so that he was facing Togami directly. “Is this better?” He spoke slowly, trying to form the words as clearly as he could.

“A little.” Togami scowled. “I haven’t needed to read lips in years. I’m out of practice.”

“You’re doing well so far,” Naegi said, trying to offer a reassuring smile after he’d finished speaking.
Togami didn’t look mollified. “It’s hardly as though you’ve said anything complicated.” He’d probably meant for the words to have a cutting tone, but the harsh notes didn’t come out quite right, sounding more uncertain than unkind. Togami frowned, pale pink spots flushing high on his cheeks in what could have been either embarrassment or fury. He was clearly aware that his words hadn’t been what he’d intended, but Naegi could see that he didn’t quite want to risk feeling even more ridiculous by trying again and getting it wrong a second time.

Words wouldn’t help when Togami couldn’t hear them, even if Naegi had known what he ought to say — so he didn’t try. Instead, he tugged Togami’s hand away from where it still rested against his ear, bringing their hands down to rest on the other boy’s knee. Letting their fingers tangled together, Naegi wrapped Togami’s hand in his with a gentle, undeniable pressure. It had to be horribly unsettling to lose an entire one of the senses so suddenly, and with the heir’s high levels of paranoia, Naegi knew he’d hate it more than most — but maybe this small reminder of the other senses could offer some measure of comfort or peace. It was the least Naegi could offer, after the role he’d played in this.

Slowly, a few of the lines on Togami’s face relaxed, and his hand melted in Naegi’s grip, his thumb stroking the edge of Naegi’s wrist. It wasn’t true happiness or a real solution to the problem, not when Naegi could still see a trace of fear lingering behind the other boy’s eyes — but at least it was better than having that emotion written plain across his face.

And then Togami blinked again, and all the tension came flooding back as his grip tightened on Naegi’s wrist. “Wait. What are you doing in here? You were supposed to wait outside!”

“And you were supposed to come back to me.” Naegi couldn’t help but feel a little grateful that Togami couldn’t hear the way those words scratched out of his throat full of the terror of what could have happened. “How could I stay outside when there was an explosion? I thought you were —” He couldn’t even bring himself to finish the sentence.

“Well, I’m not.” Even mostly deafened, Togami had heard those unspoken words. “And you shouldn’t have followed me.” He tugged his hand free of Naegi’s and began trying to push himself to his feet.

“Don’t,” Naegi tried to object. “You’ll hurt yourself if you do that!”

Looking at his own hands rather than Naegi’s face, Togami couldn’t have read the words from Naegi’s lips — but he could clearly guess the intent anyway. “This doesn’t matter,” he said, using the edge of the broken desk to finish hauling himself to his feet. “Or have you completely forgotten why I wanted to come in here alone?” He swung around to face Naegi head on with an impatient glare —

And the other danger of the classroom came rushing back to the forefront of Naegi’s mind. “The air,” he said, horrified. “We’ve been in here breathing the drugged air.” He turned and reached for the fallen music stand pole so that he would have some kind of tool to help force himself back to his feet. “We can’t stay in here.”

Chapter End Notes

Unfortunately, there will not be a chapter posted tomorrow. I had to do some major revisions on the chapters for this week, and I only just barely got this one done in time for tonight. The next chapter will be posted on Thursday, and it will also include an
updated posting schedule for when I go on vacation next week.
Naegi couldn’t believe that he’d forgotten about the drugs in the air — but the explosion had completely blown the more subtle dangers of the classroom out of his head. But he shouldn’t have let himself forget, not after Togami had told him about the powerful knockout drug that had nearly made him collapse when he’d first found the body. Naegi should have been working to get the both of them away from the tainted air in here, not sitting around to breathe in more of it.

But… it couldn’t have taken Togami more than a couple minutes to examine the body, since he hadn’t even had a chance to try to identify it. This time, they’d both been in the room far longer than that. With the lingering weakness from his existing injuries, Naegi knew he didn’t have the strength left to resist a strong drug for long, especially not while trying to douse the fire — and if Togami had lost consciousness even for a moment after the explosion, the drug should have ensured that he wouldn’t wake up again. Why hadn’t either of those things happened?

There was only one reason that Naegi could think of. The drug must have lost its potency somehow, between when Togami had been in here the first time and now. He wasn’t sure how that could have happened, though. Would a knockout drug just stop working? Could gases do that? He tried to think back to his last chemistry class, but all the facts seemed to tangle together in a mess of confusion.

Well, he could try to work out why it had happened this way later. What was important now was that the drugged air hadn’t taken them down while they were distracted — and that meant they had time to get out of the classroom and away from the threat.

He tried to lean on the music stand pole, attempting to lever himself off the ground — but it wasn’t strong enough to take all of his weight. Without a second hand to brace against the floor or grip some handhold, he couldn’t get back to his feet by himself.

Before he could so much as look up, let alone ask for help, an arm wrapped around Naegi’s side, giving him the support and balance he needed. Naegi was just about able to struggle to his feet with that extra leverage, but he couldn’t help but notice the way Togami’s arm trembled against him, proclaiming a weakness that the heir would never admit to aloud.

Naegi hated that he had to rely on the other boy to support him, just minutes after Togami had been through a terrible ordeal… but he knew there was no way he could stand on his own without help. He shouldn’t have let himself drop to the ground in the first place, knowing that he couldn’t stand again by himself — but the realization that Togami was alive had driven the thought from his head. No matter what he did, he just kept making mistake after mistake… and the people he cared about kept getting hurt because of it. Maybe it was time to stop worrying so much about getting answers, and start thinking a little harder about how to keep people safe.

But when Naegi finally made it to his feet and glanced up at Togami, ready to move towards the door so that they could go somewhere safer, just like Togami had suggested in the first place — he realized in shock that the other boy was already turning towards the far end of the room, where the burned body lay.

“What are you doing?” Naegi started to ask, before realizing that Togami wasn’t looking in his direction. He shrugged one shoulder sharply against Togami’s side.
That brought Togami’s attention sharply back to him. “What’s wrong?”

“It isn’t safe here,” Naegi said as clearly as he could, trying to use words Togami would find familiar. “We should leave.”

“Not yet.” The cold ice of fury burned in Togami’s eyes, made all the worse by the way it was blunted in his tone. “Someone set two different traps to stop me from getting a good look at that corpse. I’m not leaving until I know why.”

Naegi blinked. He hadn’t quite thought of it like that — but Togami was right. The knockout gas could possibly have been explained away as part of the murder, but a touch-triggered bomb was something else altogether. He looked down at the corpse in front of him, reassessing it from that perspective. Was there something about the body that the culprit hadn’t wanted them to see, something that the burns had concealed?

“But… the explosion burned the body,” Naegi pointed out, in case Togami hadn’t realized. “Really badly. There might not be anything left to see. And if the drugs aren’t really gone, we’d just be breathing more of them while we looked.”

“I told you that I’d identify the body for you,” Togami said. “I will not let some common killer force me to alter my decisions. Another few minutes won’t make a difference at this point.”

Togami eyed him for a moment. “You can wait in the hall —”

“Not without you!”

A hint of a smile ghosted across Togami’s lips at Naegi’s immediate response. “Then be careful, and don’t touch anything. That trap triggered when I moved the body’s head.”

Naegi bit his lip, trying not to worry as he and Togami headed back towards the body. He wanted to get out, to take Togami somewhere safe where he could recover in peace — but to his disgust, another part of himself wanted to do the opposite. He did still want to find out whose corpse that was, to know which of his friends had been so brutally destroyed. How could he make a choice like this, between two things he needed so badly?

Well, it wasn’t as though he even had a choice to make at the moment. Togami didn’t want to leave, and Naegi knew he didn’t have the strength to force the other boy out of the room against his will. The only thing he could do to get Togami to safety faster would be to look at the body and try to identify it as quickly as possible.

Naegi sighed to himself as they reached the body, trying to ignore the feeling that he was choosing one side over the other. He had to put those thoughts out of his head and focus on who the corpse might be.

There was nothing to see in the wreck of the victim’s face, so Naegi didn’t even try to look. Instead, he turned to the bottom half of the body, the part that hadn’t been burned quite so badly. The body seemed to be dressed in a long white coat, big enough that it could easily conceal either Kirigiri’s distinctive boots or Jill’s long skirt. It made sense that the culprit would have hidden the body in a coat like that, if they wanted to stop an investigation… but there was something else about it that bothered him, something he knew he should remember…

And in a flash of recognition, his last conversation with Kirigiri echoed through his memory. While she’d described her meeting with Ikusaba in detail, she hadn’t been able to do the same for Ikusaba herself — because Mukuro Ikusaba had concealed her appearance with a mask and heavy coat.
A twisted mix of hope and fear began to curdle through Naegi’s stomach as he considered the possibility. Could this really be Ikusaba, and not either of his missing friends? But… he couldn’t tell for sure, not when clothes were the only clue he’d seen so far, and they could just as easily have been used to conceal one of the missing girls. There had to be something else, something that would tell him the truth either way. Because if this body was either Jill or Kirigiri, that would be bad enough, sacrificing yet another one of his friends to the horrors of the killing game. But if it wasn’t, if it was Ikusaba, then that brought up an entirely different question — who could have killed her?

Being very careful not to disturb anything, Naegi circled around to view the body from the other side, hoping to see something that he’d missed. He did his best not to look at the scorch marks near the head, where the bomb must have been hidden — and as he looked away, a glint of light drew his gaze further down near the victim’s waist, where the flames had only been beginning to burn. Some sort of small metal object lay on the ground beside the victim’s hand, as though she’d dropped it when she’d fallen.

And on the back of her right hand, not entirely obscured by the burn marks, he could just make out the outline of a large, circular tattoo… and the image in the center might have been a fierce wolf growling up at him.

Chapter End Notes

And I guess that will have to be a good ending note for the next week and a half. I'm going to visit family, and I don't expect to have much time to write while I'm gone. Next chapter will be posted on Tuesday, August 9. See you all then!
Naegi stared down at the tattoo on the corpse’s hand, his thoughts whirling as he tried to process what this had to mean. When Kirigiri had told him about her encounter with Ikusaba, she’d said that the other girl had revealed a wolf tattoo as proof of her ties to Fenrir. And then last night, when Naegi had repeated the story, Togami had confirmed that members of Fenrir really did get that tattoo. And that wasn’t all — he’d said that the tattoo’s existence wasn’t common knowledge, that he only knew about it because of his family’s position. Only a member of Fenrir or someone very close to the organization should have known about it.

Which meant that his suspicion at the sight of the corpse’s clothes must have been right — this body didn’t belong to Genocide Jill or Kirigiri. This had to be Mukuro Ikusaba, the mastermind’s ally.

It should have been a relief. He should have been glad and grateful that he’d finally found confirmation that his missing friends were still okay, or at least that they weren’t dead and burned into an unrecognizable wreck. After he’d spent so long fearing the worst, trying to convince himself that this had to be someone other than Kirigiri, praying that he hadn’t helped her walk off to a horrible death… the realization that it was true left a hollowness gaping where he’d expected joy to bubble through his chest.

Maybe it was just that there was no room left for joy in him when he had to look down at such horror. Even if Ikusaba had been working for the mastermind, even Togami was right that she hadn’t really been trying to help Kirigiri after all — that didn’t make it any easier to see this done to what had once been a living person. If she’d really been on the mastermind’s side, then of course he wanted her stopped… but not like this. There was no justice or fairness here.

A hand pressed against his good shoulder, warm and steady, pulling him out of his thoughts. Naegi looked up to see Togami frowning down at him in concern.

“You saw it, didn’t you?” Togami’s words were still too loud and awkward for his usual knife-edged subtlety… but it almost sounded like he was trying to be gentle. “Her hand?”

Naegi started to nod, then stopped the movement abruptly when he realized it would probably make it hard for the other boy to read his lips. “Yeah. Is that… the tattoo as a mark of Fenrir, glancing warily up at the cameras. “Is that what we were talking about earlier?”

“It looks close, from what I can see through the burns,” Togami said. He eyed Naegi for a moment. “And… you know what it could mean?”

Naegi blinked, not sure why Togami seemed to be dancing around the issue so much. “Well… it means that this isn’t Kirigiri,” he said slowly.

“Not quite,” Togami said, fingers tightening slightly on Naegi’s shoulder. “Think about what we discussed.”

Naegi couldn’t help but give the other boy a puzzled look. Everything he remembered of their discussion proclaimed that this had to be Ikusaba. Maybe he hadn’t spoken clearly enough for
Togami to read his lips correctly. “I was trying to say that this is someone else, not her.”

“I understood you perfectly.” Togami scowled at him. “I meant that you’re drawing an unwarranted conclusion.”

“I am?” Naegi frowned, thinking back over what he’d said. What had he said that could have been wrong? For a moment, he had the same dizzying sensation of hearing different arguments flying past in the midst of a class trial, except that the logic he was reexamining was his own.

The body had a Fenrir tattoo on it — well, it had some kind of tattoo, anyway, and Togami had agreed it looked like the Fenrir wolf. Only members of Fenrir had that tattoo, and Ikusaba had shown hers to Kirigiri to identify herself as a member of the group. As far as Naegi could judge, it all lined up pretty well. Ikusaba had a Fenrir tattoo, and here a corpse was with the same marking, so that had to mean —

Wait. Naegi froze, seeing the shaky part of his string of assumptions, the one that Togami must have zeroed in on already. The tattoo only identified a member of Fenrir — it didn’t necessarily prove anything else about the person’s identity. And yes, the tattoo might be a secret, but if someone already knew what it was supposed to look like…

“You think it might be a fake?” Naegi asked, glancing back down at the marked hand. “Something that the real culprit put there to distract us?”

“That’s one possibility,” Togami said. “But there’s another one, too.” He crossed his arms, studying Naegi for a long silent moment… and Naegi almost had the feeling that the other boy was evaluating him somehow.

“So… if you don’t think it’s the mark we were talking about before…” Naegi said slowly, when it didn’t seem like Togami was going to continue. “And you don’t think the culprit put it there… you think the victim did it themselves? But Kirigiri always has a good reason for everything she does, and I don’t see how making a fake mark would help her.”

“No, that’s true,” Togami agreed. “A fake wouldn’t accomplish anything. Even if she found the materials to create a genuine replica here in the school, it would look obviously new. And according to you, she only saw the real version for a few seconds at most — hardly enough time to memorize the details. I doubt she could have managed a good enough fake to fool anyone, let alone someone who knew what it was supposed to look like.”

Naegi frowned. Every time he thought he understood what Togami was driving at, the other boy showed him a reason that couldn’t have worked. And the only possibility left was just… absurd.

“So… if you don’t think it’s a fake…”

“I think we have to consider the possibility,” Togami said grimly. “Naegi, you’ve spent the most time with Kirigiri out of anyone else left. Have you ever seen anything to prove that she didn’t have this mark on her hand all along?”

Chapter End Notes

And I’m back! Sort of. I didn’t get as much writing done on vacation as I’d hoped, so I’m skipping tomorrow's post. Next chapter will be Thursday, and then we'll resume the Sunday-Thursday posting schedule next week.
Naegi had known what Togami was going to say before he asked the question, but that didn’t make it any easier to hear. He’d only just let himself believe that this body really might be Ikusaba instead of one of his few remaining friends, and his stomach clenched up in nauseous protest at the thought of having to consider the possibility again. The knowledge of what it would mean if this really was Kirigiri, if this ruined corpse had been the ultimate result of his own actions, loomed ahead of him with dark promises of pain and guilt… but he couldn’t let that distract him from figuring out what had really happened.

Could Kirigiri have had the Fenrir tattoo on her hand all along? Togami had posed the question without malice, without accusations, without any of the viciousness he’d thrown at Kirigiri in their earlier fights. He’d just asked, because they had to know whether or not this was a legitimate possibility. Naegi knew he couldn’t just ignore the question.

“I’m not sure,” he said at last, trying to think back to the different interactions he’d had with the mysterious girl. “She always wears those gloves… I’m not sure I ever saw her hands without them.”

It did seem a little strange, now that he thought about it. All he knew about fashion was the little he’d picked up from his sister, but he didn’t think gloves were all that common among high school girls. Kirigiri didn’t seem like the type to wear an unusual accessory just for the look, not like Celeste or Enoshima might have. And no matter how far he thought back, he couldn’t remember a single occasion when she’d taken them off — not to eat, not to type on Alter Ego’s laptop, not even when she’d examined the dead bodies.

“No,” Naegi said at last, hating the words even as he had to say them. “I never saw her hands. But… she could have had another reason to keep her hands covered. She could get cold easily, or just want to avoid leaving fingerprints.”

“You wear two jackets at all times, and I’ve never seen you bother with gloves,” Togami pointed out. “And it’s not as though we’ve been running prints in our investigations, so why would she care about that?” He shook his head. “The only reason I can think of to wear gloves as constantly as she does would be if she has something to hide.”

“But that doesn’t mean she’s hiding this,” Naegi objected. “She might just not want us to see the burn scars.”

Togami blinked, frowning at Naegi’s mouth. “What are you talking about? Say that again, I don’t think I got it correctly.”

“Oh — sorry.” Naegi tried to calm down enough to slow his words, so that Togami would be able to read them from his lips. “I said that she could have other reasons to hide her hands, like a scar.”

Togami sighed. “It’s possible that she had another reason, yes. This could all be nothing more than coincidence. But I think we need to consider the possibility that it isn’t.”

The possibility that Kirigiri had had that tattoo hidden beneath her gloves right from the start — the tattoo that signified a member of Fenrir. The possibility that she’d been a member of Fenrir all along, and that everything she’d ever said to him had been a lie. Could she have been one of the mastermind’s agents, just like Ikusaba? Or… could that story about Ikusaba have been a lie, too? After all, what proof did he have that she’d been telling the truth about meeting some mysterious
student that none of the rest of them had ever seen?

But… no. No, that was the wrong way to think about things. Kirigiri was his friend — he had to believe that. She’d worked with him on investigations. They’d tried to help Alter Ego together. She’d helped him understand the truth about Maizono’s friendship for him, when he’d been trying to come to terms with her betrayal. After everything they’d been through, he couldn’t let himself believe that their entire friendship had been nothing more than a ploy to win his trust.

Naegi looked up directly at Togami, not wanting the other boy to misunderstand these words. “I don’t believe it,” he said slowly and distinctly. “I know I don’t have any proof… but neither do you. And until I have a real, solid piece of evidence that something’s not right, I’m going to trust my friends.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t expect anything else.” Togami sighed, a little more heavily than he’d probably meant to. “But no matter how much you want to trust her, try to remember to keep an open mind. If we do find some evidence, I don’t want you to let your trust blind you to reality.”

“I won’t,” Naegi told him. “I haven’t wanted to believe the worst of any of our friends in the other murders, either… but you can’t argue with facts. If we know someone did a terrible thing, then… I think it’s better to know the truth about it than to let fear and suspicion eat away at us.”

“It’s always better to know the truth than to hide from it,” Togami agreed. “And it’s not as though any of these deaths have been tragic accidents. Someone deliberately murdered every body we’ve found — just like someone killed this girl.” He glanced back down at the body for a moment before looking back at Naegi to continue the conversation. “And I think I have an idea why.”

Naegi frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Before I touched the head and set off the bomb, I noticed one other thing about the body,” Togami said. “The knife wasn’t just stuck through its chest — it was pinning a piece of paper there. There’s not much left of it now, after the fire, but I managed to get a pretty good look. And there was only one word on it — traitor.”

“Traitor?” Naegi echoed blankly. “What is that supposed to mean? Who do they think she betrayed?”

“Exactly the right question,” Togami said with an approving nod. “I’ve had longer to think about an answer than you have, and I can only think of two possibilities. Either the sign was meant to accuse her of working for the mastermind when she should have been on our side — or it was meant to announce that she’d worked for us instead of the mastermind.”

Which was exactly what Kirigiri had said Ikusaba had offered to do, Naegi realized. “Why would someone leave a note like that on a dead body — especially if they were just going to burn it anyway?”

“That depends on what the message meant,” Togami said, shrugging. “The way I see it, it could be a warning… or it could be a threat. But the dead can’t read messages, so whatever it was meant to do, it was aimed at us — the ones who are still alive.”
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_Traitor._

The word blazed across Naegi’s mind, a name that had become uglier to him than the worst insults he’d heard before entering Hope’s Peak. Loyalty and trust were so hard to maintain here in the middle of the mastermind’s game, where they were all supposed to be pitted against one another — and suspicion of a traitor could destroy the fragile bonds everyone had built. He could still feel echoes of the icy fear that had gripped the students in the wake of Ogami’s exposure, turning friendship to ashes.

Four people had died because of what revealing one traitor had done to their ability to trust one another. How much more could be destroyed now, if they all started wondering whether Ogami had been the only one?

But on the other hand, the word might have meant something else — something no less dangerous, for all that the threat came from another direction. _Traitor_, the sign had said… and Ikusaba had offered to betray the mastermind to help them escape. Was it possible that the mastermind had discovered her change of heart, and that this had been some elaborate plan to eliminate her? Had the sign been meant to warn them all that this was how the mastermind dealt with betrayal?

But… Naegi’s eyes went back to the knife, still plunged through the blackened corpse’s chest. “How did they do it?”

“What are you talking about?” Togami demanded. “Do what?”

“Leave a message for us,” Naegi said, frowning. “I mean… they can’t have done it from a distance, right? Whoever did this would have had to be right here in the room.”

“Yes?” Then Togami blinked, and his frown deepened. “Yes… that’s true. This room was full of chemicals strong enough to knock someone out fast when I was here before — and the knife was definitely already there. I suppose someone could have stabbed her quickly, especially if she’d already fallen unconscious… but they couldn’t have rigged that bomb trap in the few seconds they’d have left. Not unless they had some kind of edge the rest of us don’t.”

“Like an antidote?” Naegi asked dubiously. “Are there antidotes for knockout gases?”

“There are neutralizing agents,” Togami said. “But those tend to diffuse over large areas. For a single person, the best solution would be a gas mask.” He crossed his arms, scowling down at the body. “And if I were going to release a bunch of potential murderers into a building armed with poison gas, I would make sure that anyone on my side had a way to get around that weapon.”

“You think there might have been a gas mask in the school after all?” Naegi asked, considering the possibility. He supposed it might make sense for Ikusaba to have one, just in case something went wrong… but he wasn’t entirely sure what Ikusaba was really supposed to do in the school, other than possibly operating Monokuma. There really wasn’t a way to judge what kind of equipment she might have had on hand.

“I wouldn’t be surprised to find one lying around somewhere,” Togami said. “After all, there are still some areas of the school we haven’t been able to explore yet.”

That was true — they might have run out of staircases after reaching the fifth floor, but there were still all too many hidden areas scattered through the school. Naegi’s thoughts turned immediately
to the locked doors on the fourth floor, the fifth floor, and the dorms — the areas he’d been checking on his upgraded e-handbook map ever since Kirigiri had disappeared. Ikusaba had claimed that she would let Kirigiri explore one of those locked areas… which would have given both girls access to anything that might have been meant to stay hidden from the students.

Assuming that Ikusaba had kept her promise, of course. Togami had been pretty certain it sounded like a trap, rather than a genuine offer. And considering that Kirigiri had never returned from her exploration… well, this situation really eliminated a lot of the reasons why she might not have come back.

Two missing girls — well, technically three, but Jill didn’t seem to fit into it. They’d all seen her bare hands often enough to know that she didn’t have a tattoo, and however much this body had been brutalized, nothing about it resembled her scissors and crucifixions. So the options were two girls, one corpse… and one culprit. Naegi didn’t like the conclusions that train of thought led towards at all.

He shook his head. “We don’t really know if anyone really went into those areas, or if they even could. We’re still just guessing.”

“Not quite,” Togami said. “There’s one inaccessible room that we know someone’s been inside — one that’s very conveniently been sealed up again so the rest of us can’t get a look of our own.”

Naegi’s eyes widened. “The headmaster’s office?”

That’s right… now that he thought about it, both Kirigiri and Ikusaba had definitely been in that room. Of course, Kirigiri hadn’t said anything about finding new tools in there — but if she hadn’t needed his help with anything that she’d found, she would have kept her mouth shut. In some ways, Kirigiri could be even more paranoid and distrustful than Togami at his worst.

But… that didn’t make sense, did it? Naegi frowned at Togami. “Why would there be a gas mask in the headmaster’s office?”

“It’s as good a place as any,” Togami said, shrugging. “If you’re going to hide a cache of tools where you don’t want students to get at them, why not put them in a place students would typically have no business going?”

“Except that we all wanted to get in there as soon as we saw the name,” Naegi reminded him. He smiled a little at the memory of exploring the fourth floor with Togami, before the other students had forced them apart. Naegi would have checked every room as he came to it, but Togami had dismissed the identical classrooms out of hand, heading for the room with the most obviously useful label — and then he’d been so outraged at being denied entry. “That was why Monokuma had to make the new rule about locked doors, remember? We were all talking about breaking it down to explore the headmaster’s office.”

“That means there must have been something important in there,” Togami said, his eyes narrowing again with echoes of his earlier frustration. “I shouldn’t have hesitated — I should have found a way to break down that door before he had a chance to make that stupid rule.”

“I don’t think he’d have let you,” Naegi said. “I mean, he keeps calling himself the headmaster, so…”

He trailed to a halt as his own words caught up with him. Monokuma always called himself the headmaster. But if Ikusaba was the one operating Monokuma, that wouldn’t make sense. How could a girl their own age, one that Kirigiri and Ogami had both referred to as the sixteenth student,
But… Kirigiri hadn’t said that Ikusaba operated Monokuma *all* the time. In fact, she’d said the opposite — that had been why she’d needed Naegi to distract Monokuma while she snuck away to meet Ikusaba. That all might have been part of Ikusaba’s trap, of course… except for one thing.

“Alter Ego,” Naegi said slowly, his thoughts swirling so madly through his head that it seemed to take an age to piece them together into real sentences. “Alter Ego said the headmaster was here in the school, too.”
Chapter 185

Naegi hadn’t thought much about the results of Alter Ego’s data analysis in a while. With everything that had happened to him since Alter Ego had finished his work, Naegi had barely felt like he had a moment to catch his breath, let alone to consider the complicated new information. It had receded to the back of his mind, too important to forget, but not immediately relevant enough to remember. It had been more important to figure out what to do about the deepening rifts among the survivors, or to find ways to help Kirigiri with her complicated investigations.

But he shouldn’t have let himself get so distracted. Most of the information had been confusing — how could Hope’s Peak have closed a year ago without any of them hearing about it? — but that one piece of data had gleamed critically in the midst of the riddles. The headmaster of Hope’s Peak planned to isolate a group of students in the school, and was likely still in the building now.

But at least Naegi hadn’t been the only one to forget this vital clue to their situation. Looking up at the stunned expression on Togami’s face, the same look he wore whenever someone managed to come up with an idea that forced him to rethink some of his own theories, a tangle of shock and irritation — Naegi could tell that the other boy hadn’t remembered Alter Ego’s information about the headmaster, either. Of course he hadn’t. When they’d been discussing Ikusaba, Togami had brought up the possibility of a seventeenth person wandering around the school as if it were an unlikely possibility that poked a hole in Ikusaba’s story, rather than as a theory that had support from another source.

“The headmaster,” Togami said slowly, his words slurring even more than they had been when he’d been concentrating earlier. “That would be another possibility altogether, wouldn’t it? And its one that even she might not have seen coming.”

There was no need for Togami to explain who he meant — he only spoke about one other student with that particular twist to his tone. Even Fukawa’s stalking and Genocide Jill’s cheerful discussion of murder hadn’t earned quite the level of venom that Togami used to talk about Kirigiri.

“I think she’d have remembered, though,” Naegi said, not allowing his eyes to drift over towards that body. “She wouldn’t have forgotten something so important. It wouldn’t have surprised her.”

After all, Kirigiri had always been the most determined of any of them to uncover the mysteries of their imprisonment. She always seemed several steps ahead of everyone else on that front, and Naegi couldn’t imagine that she might have lost track of even the tiniest clue. Had that been why she’d been so willing to accept Ikusaba’s claims of being a mere subordinate who was willing to defect to their side — because she remembered that Alter Ego had identified the headmaster as someone else?

But Togami was already shaking his head. “That’s not it,” he said, sounding a little impatient. “She said something to me about it later, while she was still insisting we couldn’t be trusted to speak to one another. She —” His gaze flickered towards the cameras. “She had some suspicions about whether we could believe the truth of what Alter Ego had told us.”

Naegi blinked. Kirigiri had thought Alter Ego might be wrong about the headmaster? “She never said anything like that to me.”

Togami shrugged, looking annoyed. “I couldn’t begin to try to explain why that girl does anything. But mistrusting that data isn’t an entirely unreasonable stance. After all, Monokuma did admit that
he deliberately left it for us to find and decode. I doubt he’d have done so if it contained information that we could actually use against him.”

“Well, unless knowing and not being able to do anything about it would be worse for us than not knowing at all,” Naegi said, thinking back to Monokuma’s utter glee every time he dropped some scrap of information for them to try to use.

“But if this is another possibility,” Togami said, crossing his arms thoughtfully, “then it might explain why the killer went to so much trouble to prevent anyone from learning too much from the victim’s body. If Alter Ego was right and the headmaster truly is here in the school, he’s gone to a great deal of trouble to hide his presence. He would presumably want to prevent us from finding any trace of him.”

“How would burning the body do that, though?” Naegi asked, blinking.

Togami scowled. “I don’t have enough information to work that out yet,” he said, the admission sounding like it had been torn from his teeth. “But it fits better than most of the other theories about why anyone would go to the trouble of setting a bomb to destroy the body.”

A chill slid down Naegi’s spine at the thought of that bomb going off so close to the other boy, and the music stand pole trembled in his grip as he couldn’t suppress a shiver. “And to get rid of anyone who might investigate,” he added.

But Togami frowned. “Actually… that might not have been a primary goal. The bomb didn’t go off immediately — it had a few seconds of delay, enough for me to get away from the worst part of the blast. But it would have been just as easy to set it to go off the moment I touched the body, if they’d been determined to get rid of whoever found the body.” His frown deepened to a scowl. “And I fully intend to make them regret giving me that chance.”

Naegi tried to smile at the confident determination in the other boy’s tone, overpowering even his inability to judge his own speech — but the best he could manage was a wobbling sort of grimace. Fighting the mastermind was important, but hearing his boyfriend draw their attention by making dramatic pronouncements of defiance wasn’t exactly calming.

“I don’t regret it,” he said, swallowing back the lump that seemed to fill his throat at the thought. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t gotten out of the way, or if I hadn’t been able to put out that fire. Even if they didn’t mean to kill you right away, those flames could’ve destroyed the whole room if they’d gotten to the furniture, and I don’t think I could’ve gotten you out. I had enough trouble just moving the bucket of water.”

“The what?” Togami turned to look back at the ground near the body, scanning the area until his gaze fell on the empty bucket lying where it had rolled some distance away. He looked back at Naegi with a frown. “You’re saying there was a bucket of water just… sitting around nearby?”

“Yeah, it was over there with a bunch of other stuff,” Naegi said, nodding in the direction where he’d found the bucket of water. “I don’t remember seeing any of it when we were in here the first time, though.”
Naegi and Togami examine the place where the too-convenient bucket of water was hidden.

Naegi wasn’t quite sure why the mention of the bucket of water he’d found had suddenly put Togami on edge. If he’d been setting up a bomb that could leave fires behind if it went off accidentally, he would’ve wanted to have some water on hand too. And Togami was the one who’d said it sounded like the culprit might have wanted to give any investigators a shot at escaping, so surely it ought to make sense that they would’ve left the water behind to deal with the flames.

But if seeing the place it had been left behind would make Togami feel better, Naegi wasn’t going to object. After the ordeal that Togami had been forced to endure because of that bomb, Naegi figured the other boy needed all the answers about the situation he could get. So he nodded and began moving back towards the shadowed corner where he’d found the bucket of water.

With the flames gone, the only light in the ruined classroom came from the lantern that had fallen in the middle of the floor. The powerful camping lantern did have strong enough illumination to let them see most things in its direct path fairly clearly — but the piles of broken furniture cast a long shadow over this corner, leaving the abandoned items hidden in their own pocket of darkness.

Naegi only knew they were looking at the place he remembered finding the bucket of water when he felt the faint breeze of the slowly running fan brush across his skin.

“Here,” he said, tilting the top of the music stand pole in the direction that he knew the items had to be. “This is where I found it.”

He looked back at the sound of footsteps, and he saw Togami crossing over to retrieve the lantern from where it had fallen. Naegi couldn’t help but frown at the visible lines of strain that creased Togami’s face at the effort of hauling the lantern over to a place where it could illuminate the shadowy corner. Of course he’d known the explosion had hit Togami hard. It had knocked him unconscious and left him mostly deafened — well, temporarily deafened, Naegi hastily corrected his own thoughts, it had to be temporary, it couldn’t be anything else. But… had those been the only side effects? Was Togami really as okay as he’d claimed? The twisting nausea of fear clutched at Naegi’s gut as he watched the other boy struggle to bring the lantern halfway across the room.

But even if something was wrong, Naegi was pretty sure this wasn’t the right time to ask. Togami would never admit to something that looked like weakness if he thought the mastermind’s cameras might catch it. And as long as he seemed to be managing, Naegi didn’t want to draw attention to a potential vulnerability. He’d just have to try to wait until they could communicate privately, so that Togami would feel like he could be honest. Naegi was sure Togami wouldn’t lie to him about something so important as his wellbeing.

As Togami finally set the lantern where it could send light flooding into the shadowed corner, Naegi forced his concerns away, focusing on the newly-lit area instead. He might not be sure how it could be relevant, but Togami clearly thought it was important — and that was enough for him.
The area was pretty much the way Naegi remembered it during his frantic search for a way to stop the fire. A small, rectangular fan sat in the middle of the floor, blowing a gentle stream of air out towards the rest of the room. It had to be battery-operated, since he didn’t see any cords connecting it to an outlet, and in any case, the room’s power was out. It was probably for the best that the fan didn’t have any dangling plugs, though, because right at the fan’s base, someone had dropped a couple soaking wet sponges, leaving an ominously shiny pool around the fan. There almost seemed to be more liquid on the floor than the sponges could have held, but he supposed that the empty bottles scattered across the floor could explain that.

All in all, it did look pretty dangerous — but in a far more mundane way than he’d come to expect from Hope’s Peak. This looked like the sort of careless hazard that could happen by accident in any school, something that could just be dismantled and forgotten. Naegi turned to look up at Togami to say as much —

And he was shocked to see Togami lunge past him towards the fan, jabbing hard at the off switch with cold horror written across his face.

“What are you doing?” Naegi asked, eyes wide. “What’s wrong?”

Togami didn’t answer, staring down at the fan as it wound down to a stop. It took Naegi a moment to realize that the other boy wasn’t exactly ignoring him — since he was looking at the fan instead of Naegi’s face, he probably didn’t even realize Naegi had said a word. Naegi frowned at that, his fingers tightening to white where they gripped the music stand pole. Togami had said that he could hear Naegi a little, enough to tell that he was speaking — but what if he’d only said that for the benefit of the cameras? Togami didn’t usually pretend to have a lower level of skill than he actually possessed — but maybe his lip reading abilities were better than he’d been letting on. Maybe his hearing was even worse than he’d been letting on.

Or maybe he’d just been distracted by whatever had alarmed him so much about the fan. It only took Togami a moment longer to turn away from the fan and look back at Naegi. “It was still running.”

“Well… yeah, I guess it must have been running the whole time we’ve been in here,” Naegi said slowly. “But… it’s just a fan, isn’t it? Does it matter?”

“Quite a lot,” Togami said grimly. “If this is the same fan I felt blowing on me the first time I was in this room — then this is the device the culprit used to put knockout gas in the air.”
Chapter 187

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi try to figure out how the strange device distributed chemicals into classroom 5-C.

Naegi blinked down at the fan Togami seemed so alarmed by. That was the thing that had been putting gas into the air? He didn’t know a whole lot about electronics, but it really just looked like an ordinary battery-operated fan to him. He couldn’t see a canister of gas or anything attached to it, and it wasn’t as though it could just produce drugs from thin air.

Maybe he was missing something. Naegi looked up at Togami. “I guess it could be. But how did it get chemicals into the air? Or… did you mean that it just blew them over to where they’d hit people who went near the body?”

“Both.” Togami scowled. “Do you remember Kirigiri’s idiotic plan to pretend to murder you?”

“Yeah…” Naegi said slowly, eyes going back to the fan. “She didn’t say anything about a fan, though. And she said she got rid of everything she was going to use for it.”

“No, she said she dismantled it,” Togami corrected. “All she got rid of was the poison. She very carefully didn’t explain the rest of her set-up to us, but it sounded as though she left the materials intact enough that anyone who knew how she planned to do it could duplicate her efforts.” His lips tightened. “I’d been wondering just what method she’d meant to use.”

Naegi shook his head, but remembered to stop the movement before he began speaking again so that Togami could read his lips without trouble. “I know you sound pretty sure about it, but — well, I just don’t see how it’s supposed to work.”

“Understandable,” Togami said, rolling his eyes. “It’s so crude I’m amazed it worked at all. You can hardly be expected to spot how it works when it’s so inefficient.” He gave the fan another suspicious glare before turning back to Naegi. “It’s a form of a humidifier. You attach something soaked with a liquid to a fan, and as it spins, it forces some of the liquid into the air.”

“Oh.” Now that Naegi thought about it, he thought he might vaguely remember seeing a few other kids try a similar trick with wet cloths during the hottest days of summer. He’d thought it just cooled the air down a little, but he supposed it made sense that some of the water would get pushed into the air, too. “And that works?”

Togami snorted. “No. Not well, anyway. It’s the sort of cheap alternative to air conditioning people only resort to when they can’t be bothered to afford anything better.”

“And Kirigiri said she only wanted something that looked impressive,” Naegi said, thinking back to the conversation when she’d explained part of her murder plot. “She wasn’t really trying to kill me, so she must’ve chosen something that wouldn’t work well on purpose.”

Togami’s frown deepened, the way it always seemed to whenever Naegi tried to point out that Kirigiri’s motives weren’t as awful as Togami kept insisting. “Except that it did work.”
Naegi blinked. “That’s right… you said you started to feel some of the effects the first time you came in here. Maybe it would work better than you thought.”

“Possibly,” Togami allowed. “If the drug was powerful enough, it might not take much.” His eyes flickered away from Naegi, back down in the direction of the fan.

Naegi followed his gaze, grimacing at the sight of the sponges sitting in a pool of liquid. If he understood Togami’s explanation, that wasn’t actually water spread around the base of the fan — that had to be the remnants of whatever chemical the culprit had used. It probably couldn’t do much in liquid form, at least as long as they stayed well away from it, but Naegi had the urge to back away a step anyway. If one of them tripped, or it splattered up on them, then…

Wait.

Naegi shifted his weight against the pole and one of his legs, just long enough to use one of his feet to give a gentle tap at Togami’s ankle. The other boy looked sharply back at him, startled by the unexpected contact. “Did you just kick me?”

“No,” Togami said, still looking a little unsettled. “But I’ll have to come up with a better way for you to get my attention.” He shook his head. “Well? What was so important?”

“The bucket I used to put out the fire,” Naegi said slowly. “I thought that was water, but… was that actually the culprit’s drug?”

“That’s… possible,” Togami said, frowning as he considered the possibility. “But that seems like an excessive amount of a knockout drug to leave lying around. Everything we’ve seen in this place so far has been in limited quantities — I can’t imagine that there’s enough of this drug around that the culprit would so easily abandon that much of it.”

“The bucket was nearly full when I used it,” Naegi said.

Togami nodded. “It would have had to be, to put out a fire big enough to burn that much of the corpse. And if it was a chemical instead of water, odds are good that it wouldn’t have put the flames out without any side effects. Even in the best case scenario, you should have gotten a lungful of the drug, probably enough to knock you out.”

Naegi remembered enough basic chemistry that he didn’t have to ask what the worst case scenario could be. Instead, he shook his head and said, “It didn’t even make me dizzy.”

“Good.” Togami’s eyes flashed with far more viciousness than Naegi would have expected. “You don’t have the strength to spare.”

He did have a good point. Despite feeling better after resting most of the night, Naegi knew he was still far weaker than he needed to be. With his body’s defenses compromised, he would have been an easy target for the drug’s effects.

Still, that didn’t mean Naegi liked seeing that painful level of concern in Togami’s eyes. “I’m getting better, though,” he assured the other boy. “The pole helps a lot — I hardly feel unbalanced at all, and it’s taking much longer for me to get out of breath. And I think the dizziness is starting to go away after all the water Ogami kept making me drink.”

“You should never have been hurt badly enough that you needed to recover at all.” Togami sounded unmollified, but Naegi could see a little of the worry in his eyes lighten, just a bit. And as
long as they were still stuck here in Hope’s Peak, surrounded by evidence of a murder and with an unidentified corpse at their back, that was really the best either of them could expect to get.
Naegi and Togami search for clues about the culprit’s intent with the knockout gas.

Naegi would have liked to spend just a few more moments easing the tension that had strung through Togami ever since the other boy had woken up. They couldn’t really spare the time, not with at least two missing friends and an unidentified killer running loose — but seeing even a whisper of fear on the proud heir’s face turned Naegi’s stomach. He found that he couldn’t help wanting to banish that look, even when he had so many other concerns demanding his attention.

But before he could say anything else, Togami scowled and looked away, and the fragile moment of respite from horror broke around them. “We need to finish here so that you can get back to bed where you belong.”

Naegi suppressed a regretful sigh and let the opportunity pass without complaint. He would just have to find another chance to try to deal with the worry that Togami seemed determined not to acknowledge. And in any case, Naegi knew he wasn’t the only one who needed to go back and rest — but of course saying so in front of the cameras would just make Togami dig in his heels and insist he was fine. He had to pick his moment if he didn’t want to make things worse — but at least he was pretty confident he knew the other boy well enough now that he could recognize the right moment when it happened.

So for now, he just nodded his agreement and looked around the area again. Was there anything else they needed to examine — something that could give some hint about the culprit, maybe?

Togami seemed to have the same idea. He narrowed his eyes down at the fan. “That was in the storage room.” He looked quickly back at Naegi before continuing to speak. “I didn’t see the fan itself, but I recognize the shape from the place where it was missing.”

“And that bucket looks like one I saw with a bunch of cleaning supplies,” Naegi said, his mind flashing back to the two times he’d crossed through the cleaning supply closet in the second floor boys’ bathroom to get to the hidden room beyond. He could easily have missed the entrance to the hidden room if Kirigiri hadn’t told him it was there, so he supposed that someone might have been able to retrieve a few supplies without finding the door and getting attacked the way he had. “The sponges might have come from there, too.”

But Togami shook his head. “No, these have to be from the clinic. Someone cleaned out the supply there, at some point before the time we were investigating for the last trial.”

“Probably Kirigiri — that’s when she was putting together her plan.” Naegi looked back down at the large sponges, which were lightening from sodden dark gold to a lighter yellow as they slowly dried — and he frowned. It looked like there was something attached to each of them. “Wait… what’s that?”

It looked like someone had attached a short piece of string to each of the sponges, trailing to nothing after only a few inches. And… were there a few loops of the same type of string threaded through the slats of the fan? The liquid had to be attached to the fan in order to work, that was what
Togami had said when he’d explained the device…

Naegi looked back up at Togami. “I think this must be how the culprit attached the sponges to the fan,” he said, gesturing down at the string. “It doesn’t look like it held too well, but I guess a sponge can get pretty heavy when it’s full of liquid.”

“Surprisingly short-sighted to use something so breakable,” Togami said, narrowing his eyes. “I’m sure there must be wire or metal clips of some kind stashed in the storage room somewhere.”

“But that must be why we can breathe in here now, right?” Naegi asked, trying to puzzle through Togami’s brief explanation of the improvised humidifier. “If the string on the sponges broke and the fan wasn’t blowing through them anymore, it would have to stop blowing drugs into the air.”

“It’s hard to say without knowing the exact properties of the chemical the culprit used,” Togami said. “But you’re right, some kinds would stop working once the device stopped adding fresh drugs to the air. If it’s one of those, then the culprit might even have meant for the string to break eventually, so that the room would clear on its own.”

“I guess they must have wanted us to be able to get in here,” Naegi said, grimacing. “That message they left on the body wouldn’t do anyone any good if no one could get in to see it.”

“Or they might have meant to come back here and meddle with the crime scene,” Togami pointed out. “They certainly left a good bit of evidence behind. I’d have expected a murderer to at least make an effort to hide their tools.” He sighed. “It would only be possible if they used the right kind of drug, though. Quite a few would need some kind of neutralizing agent to counteract the effects.”

Naegi peered down at the sponges. “Is there a way to tell what kind it was?”

“What, just by looking?” Togami scoffed, a bit of an amused smile showing in one corner of his mouth. “No. We’d have to take them down to the chemistry lab to even have a chance of finding out anything useful — and neither of us is going to be stupid enough to touch a sponge full of unknown chemicals.” Togami raised a pointed eyebrow at him after those last words.

“I wasn’t going to touch it!” Naegi protested.

“Hmm.” Togami didn’t look convinced. “Well, hopefully you won’t need to — not if the murderer was as careless as it looks like they may have been.”

And with that, he turned towards the wall where the empty bottles had fallen. Naegi did his best to hurry after him, but even after Togami’s injuries, Naegi still found he moved slower than the other boy could. By the time Naegi managed to haul himself around to a place where he’d be in Togami’s line of sight, Togami had already knelt on the floor beside the nearest bottle.

Even standing, Naegi could tell that the small, dark brown bottle had fallen with its label against the wall — but of course Togami would be too cautious to try to touch it with his hands, especially after implying Naegi would try to handle the drug-filled sponge. Carefully, Togami slid a pen out of his pocket and began nudging the bottle with it.

A hint of recognition sparked in Naegi’s memory as he watched Togami rotate the bottle. There was something familiar about it…

And then Togami gave the bottle one final turn, enough to finally reveal its label — and as the skull and crossbones image started up at them both, Naegi realized just where he’d seen it before.

“That’s the same bottle from Fukawa’s trial,” Naegi said, slow horror creeping through him as he
recognized it. “It isn’t a knockout drug — it’s poison.”
Naegi and Togami consider the implications of finding poison in classroom 5-C.

Naegi stared down at the bottle of poison in shock, not wanting to believe his own memory. It was possible he was wrong about what had been in that bottle, wasn’t it? After all, it didn’t look quite the same without the cap, and it wasn’t like he was looking at it from up close. He could have been mistaken, just momentarily overcome by its similarity to the type of poison that had already caused them all so much pain.

Except that he knew he wasn’t mistaken. The skull and crossbones on the label were proof enough that he couldn’t be. That bottle had come from the cabinet of poisons in the chemistry lab — and Kirigiri herself had told them that there had only been one type of poison that could be used as a gas.

This was the poison that Fukawa had coated on her needles in her attempt to murder Togami, the one that actually had killed Hagakure. It was the one Ogami had meant to use when she’d intended to commit suicide to try to stop her betrayal from tearing the surviving students apart. And it was the one that Kirigiri had chosen as part of her plan to fake a murder attempt.

And it shouldn’t have been there. After Fukawa’s trial, the two bottles of poison she and Ogami had taken were gone, leaving only the one Kirigiri had — and they’d gotten rid of that one, Naegi was sure of it. He, Kirigiri, and Togami had all been present when they’d locked the poison in the dojo locker, and they’d stayed together to watch Togami burn the key. That poison should have been safely out of reach, unable to be used in another murder attempt. How could it be lying there on the floor in front of him now?

Naegi looked over at Togami, hoping the other boy might have some kind of explanation for the impossible occurrence — but Togami’s gaze was locked down on the bottle, his mouth a thin line. He wouldn’t see anything that Naegi tried to say to him now, and Naegi had the feeling that trying to get Togami’s attention by kicking him while he was this deep in concentration would make him jump out of his skin. He didn’t want to terrify the other boy just to get him to look up — especially not when Togami was kneeling mere inches away from a bottle that had contained deadly poison.

And… this wasn’t the first time Togami would have been so close to that poison, was it? Naegi turned sharply to look over towards the fan and the still-wet sponges lying beside it. If this empty bottle really had contained poison, however the culprit had gotten hold of it… then that meant that at least one of those sponges had to be filled with its contents. When Togami had first discovered the body and felt the effects of the drug in the air, he hadn’t been breathing in some relatively innocuous knockout drug from the clinic — it had been poison. And if he’d been distracted by investigating the corpse, if he hadn’t been able to get out fast enough, then he wouldn’t just have collapsed for the culprit to deal with later. He would have been…

A horrible gasping sob shuddered up from Naegi’s chest, sending new aches throbbing through every one of the cuts and bruises he’d gotten when the library bookshelf had fallen on him. He tried to swallow it back and hold himself still — but the effort only made it worse, catching in his throat until a deep, hacking cough shook his entire body. Naegi tried to lean on the music stand
pole to keep himself upright, but he couldn’t help but slump over —

Sending a long lance of white-hot pain through his left arm. Black spots bubbled up across his vision as every neuron from elbow to fingertip blazed with fresh agony. He clenched his teeth together and tried to hold himself together through the pain, tried to keep hold of the pole so he could at least remain upright, but he’d forgotten how badly it hurt. Echoes of his own voice rang in his ears, barely recognizable as the pain tore mangled sounds from his throat with every breath.

He could feel his head spinning, sending waves of nausea churning through his stomach as the room tilted madly around him — or was he actually swaying on his feet enough to make it seem like the room spun? He couldn’t tell anymore, not with his injured arm sapping so much of his energy and awareness. His fingers twitched and cramped in spite of his best efforts, and he could feel his grip on the pole shifting. It slipped across the ground, and the impact as it bumped into an obstacle hit his injuries like a blow.

It was too much. Enduring the pain, gripping the pole, maintaining his balance — he couldn’t do all of it. With his mind clouded and his vision blurred, he wasn’t sure he could do any of it. The fingers of his right hand went slack, and he heard the distant clatter of the pole hitting the ground as his knees buckled.

He knew what was coming next, tried to brace himself for the pain of hitting the floor. but before that could happen, strong hands caught him and held him upright —

Caught him by the shoulders. Pain exploded down through his arms, even worse than it had been before.

Naegi screamed.
Chapter 190

Chapter Summary

Togami realizes the terrible mistake he just made.

Togami could only hear the faintest traces of the scream that had to be tearing itself from Naegi’s lips, but even that small bit was enough to make him cringe. The sound hardly mattered, anyway — he could see the agony twisting plainly across Naegi’s face.

He’d shifted his grip on Naegi’s arms immediately, moving to hold Naegi by the waist and chest, but it was too little, too late. When he’d looked up after the bottom of Naegi’s makeshift walking stick had bumped into him, he’d barely had an instant to realize what was happening and scramble up to catch Naegi before he hit the ground. If he’d had even a few seconds to think, he would have known better than to grab the smaller boy by his injured arms — but he’d had to react on instinct, not logic. And the results had been predictably horrifying.

Naegi’s left arm had fallen askew in its sling, his fingers twitching uselessly through the air. Togami couldn’t see any fresh blood seeping through the cloth, which was at least a small blessing… but then again, maybe Ogami had wrapped the wound so thoroughly that it was just taking the blood a long time to work its way through enough layers to become visible. And if that wound had reopened now, without even Ogami’s limited medical skills available to help…

Togami shoved the fear to the back of his mind, keeping an eye out for any indications that it might be happened, but no more. He had too many other definite problems to focus on right now to worry over one that hadn’t manifested yet. His arms had begun to tremble under Naegi’s weight, and much as he would have liked to keep holding the smaller boy close, he knew it wouldn’t be an option for long.

Slowly, Togami lowered Naegi to the ground, doing his best to jar the other boy as little as possible during the process. He couldn’t be sure if he succeeded, though — he didn’t have a clear view to read Naegi’s lips from this position, and if he was trying to speak, the words weren’t loud enough to penetrate the thick cocoon of silence that had wrapped itself around Togami ever since he’d woken up from that damned explosion.

Togami had been trying his hardest to focus on the situation at hand instead of the real implications of his sudden deafness. After all, he knew temporary deafness was perfectly common after being so close to such a loud noise. The problem might resolve itself given time, and he’d at least been able to communicate with Naegi well enough that they could get on with some sort of investigation. He’d done his best to focus in spite of the stifling emptiness that surrounded him, the rush of nonsensical almost-sounds that filled his head with a blankness that was almost worse than complete silence would have been — but he’d only managed to do it by blocking out any scrap of noise that might have distracted him.

And now he realized that one of those sounds might have been Naegi crying out for help. Whatever had happened to make Naegi collapse like this, Togami doubted it would have come on suddenly. Naegi must have been fighting off pain for a while, stubbornly refusing to admit how bad it had gotten — but there would have been signs, if only Togami had had the ability to hear them.
Even now, as he laid Naegi on the floor, he could see the other boy’s lips moving in what seemed to be incoherent noises of pain, long wet tear tracks stretching out from his closed eyes. As much as every sound would have hurt, the knowledge that he couldn’t hear them burned even more. He’d caused this, destroying the fragile balance of Naegi’s wellbeing and dragging him back into this suffering, and he couldn’t even judge how badly he’d made the other boy cry out in pain.

Except… no. He hadn’t caused this, even if his actions had been the trigger that made it happen. The blame for Naegi’s injuries lay with whoever had murdered that dead girl behind them and left behind a bomb to destroy the evidence of their crime. This killer had done more than just take the life of one of those other students that he barely cared about — they’d hurt him in a way he’d never expected, digging deep into his actual body and robbing him of one of his defenses, and they’d forced him into a position where he’d accidentally hurt the boy he loved.

And he was going to destroy them for it.

Togami had never had a problem with the idea of getting rid of his enemies, but before this, it had always been in a more metaphorical sense. He’d been willing to ruin the lives of his rivals, bankrupting companies or closing off opportunities, and he’d been eager to shatter the dreams of all the older siblings that he’d gotten disinherited… but until Hope’s Peak, he’d never considered going so far as to arrange for someone’s actual death. And even back when he’d planned to win the killing game, he’d only made that choice because that had been the only option he’d seen for survival, not because he’d had any particular desire to turn himself into a murderer.

But now, with nonexistent winds roaring through his ears and his love crying from the pain he’d been forced to inflict, Togami knew what it felt like to want another person dead. He didn’t know how he would pull it off yet, since killing someone during the killing game would just trigger another class trial, which was the last situation he wanted — but he’d figure it out eventually. No one got to hurt him this badly and walk away.

But until he managed to put together a plan, he had other things to worry about. Togami reached out and brushed Naegi’s hair away from his forehead to warn the injured boy of his touch, then let his fingers trail down to rest gently on the pulse point on Naegi’s neck. His heartbeat at least hadn’t gotten any weaker, though it still wasn’t as strong as Togami would have liked. However bad this might turn out to be, it didn’t show signs of being life-threatening — there was that much to be grateful for, however little it was.

And Naegi didn’t seem to have lost consciousness, either, even if that might have been a way for him to get some respite from the pain. His eyelids twitched a couple times, and then slowly pried themselves open. Togami held his breath as Naegi stared blearily upward, not daring to move until the other boy’s eyes managed to focus on him.

“Sorry.”

Togami couldn’t tell if Naegi had mustered the energy to speak the word aloud or if he’d only managed to mouth it, but either way, he could read the apology all too clearly from the other boy’s lips — and the fire of hate inside him burned just a little more intensely. The thought of Naegi feeling guilty about being injured on top of everything else made him want to snarl with rage.

But he knew Naegi wouldn’t understand a reaction like that, so he forced the fury to the back of his mind and let whatever softness he had creep into his expression instead. “You have nothing to be sorry about.”

Naegi grimaced like he didn’t entirely believe it, but at least he didn’t try to object. “Can you help me stand up?” he asked instead.
Togami’s first instinct was to say no, Naegi didn’t need to be walking around getting into trouble, he needed rest — but this was hardly the place for that, with a corpse rotting a few feet away in one direction and a puddle of poison in the other. “Are you sure you feel up to it?” he asked instead.

“I think… I have to be,” Naegi said, his pale face taking on the too-familiar lines of determination.

He was right, much as Togami hated to admit it. He shouldn’t stay here and Togami couldn’t carry him out, so getting up had to be the only option — but not yet. Not until at least a little more color had returned to his face, or until his eyes stopped trembling from the effort of staying open.

“Can you wait for me to check a few more things?” Togami asked.

“Well… I guess so,” Naegi said, agreeing in spite of looking a bit puzzled, just as Togami had known he would. That should buy the other boy at least a few minutes of rest. “But… just be careful, okay?”

“Obviously.” Togami hesitated, then leaned down to press a kiss to Naegi’s forehead. “Try to rest,” he said, hoping he’d managed to make his voice sound gentle. “I’ll keep us both safe.”
Chapter 191

Chapter Summary

Togami investigates the second empty bottle left behind with the fan.

Before Togami moved away from Naegi, he reached over to retrieve the music stand pole from where it had fallen when Naegi collapsed and set it beside the injured boy’s right hand. “Use that to get my attention if you need anything,” he instructed. “And don’t wait to try to decide if it’s important enough to interrupt me. Anything.”

Only after Naegi had given him a small nod of agreement did Togami take a couple steps away, back towards the remains of the humidifier. He made sure not to turn his back on Naegi, though, and even with the pole, he kept glancing over to check that the other boy was still okay every few seconds. He’d missed the signs of one problem already, and that had only made things worse. He didn’t know how Naegi would make it through another case of something going wrong — so he’d have to catch any other problems before they could occur.

But he’d told Naegi that he still needed to check things, and the other boy would start to get suspicious if all Togami did was watch over him from further away. But fortunately, it hadn’t been entirely a lie — there was still another empty bottle that he needed to examine.

He knelt next to it and pulled out his pen again, tapping carefully at the small green bottle to rotate it so that he could read the label, just as he had with the poison bottle. He didn’t think this was another container of poison, since there weren’t supposed to be any others left in the chemistry lab that could be used by inhalation, as this one apparently had been — but even so, being cautious never hurt. Even if it wasn’t another bottle of poison, it could still be something just as dangerous.

When he finally turned the green bottle enough that he could read the label, he frowned. *Monokuma Neutralization Agent*… what was that supposed to be? He highly doubted that the name meant that it was actually a bottle full of something that could neutralize the horrible little robot bear, much as he would have liked to have a liquid like that on hand.

It looked like there was another section of the label wrapping around to the back of the bottle, though. Togami took a moment to glance up and make sure that Naegi was still all right. Once he’d assured himself that yes, Naegi appeared fine, was breathing peacefully, and had closed his eyes to rest, he went back to the bottle and began rotating it again until he could read the back label.

“One dose of Monokuma Neutralization Agent can be combined with an equivalent dose of poison to create a boring nontoxic saline solution. Warning: use only in case of fatal lack of spine.”

Togami blinked down at it. So… there was a way to neutralize the poison, after all. It hadn’t just dissipated on its own. That would explain the second sponge, at least.

And… his memory flashed back to his investigation of the chemistry lab during the fourth class trial, when the three bottles of poison hadn’t been the only things he’d found missing. Someone had taken another bottle from the middle cabinet, the one with the reagents, although they’d arranged the cabinet contents so that it was impossible to tell what was missing without a list of inventory. That cabinet was certainly the one place in the school he’d expect to find an item like
But if it had disappeared before the fourth trial — did that mean Kirigiri had taken it as part of her idiotic plan to pretend to murder Naegi? She hadn’t mentioned anything about neutralizing the poison — but with her, that never meant anything. He wouldn’t be surprised to find out that she’d squirreled away an antidote to the poison that only she would know about.

Except… no, the label didn’t say that the reagent could be used as an antidote, did it? It said it could neutralize the poison, which wasn’t the same thing. It looked as though it would have to come into contact with the poison before anyone got a fatal dose in order to work. It sounded quite dangerously useful, and he could see several ways someone might use it to craft a murder without even stopping to think hard.

Not that it mattered now, with the bottle empty. Most of it must have been used up getting rid of the poison gas in the air, and the rest had to be pooled on the floor by the fan. He didn’t think he’d seen any other bottles like this in the chemistry lab, either, though it wouldn’t hurt to confirm that with another check of the cabinet when he had a moment.

But that would have to wait for some later time. He didn’t want to drag Naegi down to the fourth floor in this state without a very good reason, and he certainly had no intention of leaving the injured boy alone and defenseless at a murder scene. He’d already had some sort of attack bad enough to make him collapse once — what if it happened a second time, without someone nearby to help? Or worse, what if the murderer decided to return?

That wasn’t a thought Togami cared to dwell on for any length of time. He glanced back at Naegi to reassure himself once again that the boy was still all right. He couldn’t see much improvement, but at least Naegi didn’t look worse. That was probably as much as he could expect at the moment. Still, he’d prefer to give Naegi a few more moments of uninterrupted rest if he could — not that he thought for a second that Naegi would be willing to go along with it if he realized that was what Togami was doing. Was there anything else he could do to give Naegi a little longer?

Well, he supposed that checking the body again couldn’t hurt, and if he did it, that meant Naegi wouldn’t have to force himself to try yet again. Maybe he’d even find some clue they’d missed that could say once and for all who this body belonged to.

Togami carefully circled around Naegi, giving the boy as wide a berth as possible to avoid disturbing him. He couldn’t quite tell if he made any noise or not, but he did his best to set his feet down gently and avoid obstacles. It seemed to work, since Naegi didn’t so much as open his eyes as Togami passed him to head back over to the body.

Or what had been a body, at any rate. It was hard to think of it that way now, after the fire and bomb had destroyed any possibility of identifying the girl’s face. Togami grimaced and looked away from the upper body. Any clues that had been there were long since destroyed. If he wanted to find something, he’d need to look lower.

Not that the rest of the body was any more help, covered with the draping coat as it had been. Togami’s fingers itched with the urge to pull it off and check whether the corpse was wearing Kirigiri’s clothes — but after what had happened the last time he’d thoughtlessly handled the body, he wasn’t going to try that again. That coat might hide another bomb trigger, or any number of other nasty surprises. Anything he learned wouldn’t be worth the risk — especially since clothes could be changed so easily.

But there was at least one important area of the body that he could see clearly without touching anything. Togami circled around to the far side of the body, where the girl’s tattooed hand lay
palm down on the ground.
Togami knelt down beside the corpse so that he could both have a decent view of the girl’s outstretched hand and keep Naegi easily in his line of sight. He did want to take another look at the tattoo, but he couldn’t afford to let himself get too distracted again.

Not that the tattoo provided all that much distraction. There had been a chance that he might have overlooked something in the immediate aftermath of the explosion, when he’d still been mentally reeling from this new world of silence he’d woken into — but that didn’t seem to be the case.

The girl’s hand looked the same as he remembered from his earlier examination, partially burned until her tattoo was almost but not entirely obscured. If Naegi had doused the flames even a few moments later, there probably wouldn’t have been anything left to see at all. The arm down to the wrist had gone blackened and crisp, and the heat had already begun to melt the obnoxiously red fake nails, leaving them to ooze down her fingers like bloody talons aimed at the bit of metal on the ground beside her. It was only sheerest luck that the back of her hand hadn’t been made as thoroughly unidentifiable as her face.

Or was it luck? Could the culprit have managed to control the explosion so precisely that it would leave the girl’s face destroyed but the mark on her hand visible? It was an interesting possibility to consider as an intellectual exercise — but based on his knowledge of explosives, Togami doubted it wouldn’t work when put into practice. There were just too many variables that a plan wouldn’t have been able to account for — what exact direction the flames would spread, whether Togami would actually be knocked unconscious, how quickly Naegi would be able to retrieve the bucket of water, and so many other details that could have gone just a little bit differently. Anyone smart enough to try to time the burning that closely would have to be smart enough to know that it would never work.

Which had to mean that the tattoo had been something the killer hadn’t wanted them to find. A small kernel of bitter satisfaction coiled up in the center of Togami’s chest. This was at least one clue they had that they could use against the killer, a weapon they hadn’t been meant to possess. He wasn’t sure precisely how they’d wield it yet, but he would figure it out.

Or maybe Naegi would. The other boy always managed to put the different pieces of the murders together in exactly the right way, even if it sometimes took him a few tries to get there. With that thought bringing a ghost of a smile to his lips in spite of the unpleasant sight before his eyes, Togami couldn’t help but look up to check on Naegi again, just for a moment.

To his surprise, he found Naegi looking back at him. The smile bloomed across his face when their eyes met, instinctive and instant — before he realized that this meant Naegi had apparently decided to stop trying to rest. Damn, he’d hoped that he’d get at least a few more minutes before Naegi started trying to act like he was perfectly fine again.

He could see Naegi’s mouth moving, but the other boy hadn’t quite managed to raise his head high enough for Togami to read the words from his lips. Irritation burned at the back of his mind, curling the fingers of one hand into a fist at his side — but he pushed it back again. Naegi had enough to worry about without seeing the anger and misunderstanding what it meant.

“I didn’t see that last sentence,” Togami said, once he was sure he wouldn’t express his anger by snapping at the innocent boy. He pushed himself up to his feet so he could see Naegi’s mouth properly. “Do you need something?”
“I asked if you found anything else,” Naegi said, with a remarkable lack of irritation about being forced to repeat himself. From the expression on Naegi’s face, he hardly seemed to mind at all that their conversation kept faltering.

“Yes — that other bottle was from the chemistry lab, too,” Togami said. “It was a reagent that neutralizes poisons.”

“So we don’t have to worry about the poison anymore, if someone used that reagent to get rid of it,” Naegi said, nodding. Then he blinked. “Wait — does that mean the culprit came back in here just to get rid of the poison?”

Togami frowned. Now that Naegi pointed it out, that did sound unlikely. “If they returned to the scene, I would have expected them to take the opportunity to get rid of some of the other evidence, too,” he said, thinking over the possibilities. “I suppose it might have been automated somehow — a trick with the string, a pulley between the two sponges, something along those lines. They might have set that up and intended to return later on.”

At that thought, Togami’s head snapped back towards the door, and he scanned the room again to make sure they were still alone. He didn’t see anyone — but between the shadows and the broken furniture, he couldn’t be certain the room really was empty. There were all too many places that someone could hide if they wanted to make sure that some evidence of their crimes would never make it out. And between Naegi’s collapse and his own deafness, Togami knew it would be all too easy for a killer to deal with them.

It would be against the rules, of course, since Monokuma had stated quite clearly that a blackened could only kill a maximum of two victims — but that only held true if they were still playing by the killing game’s rules. And between the note declaring the victim a traitor and the information Alter Ego had shared about the headmaster… it was starting to look like this hadn’t been part of the game at all. Whether the death had been a loyal agent eliminating a student who knew too much or multiple members of the plot turning against one another, there was no real reason to think that Monokuma’s rules held any longer.

And that meant that he and Naegi weren’t safe here. With one death already confirmed, they should have been fine as long as they stayed together — but if they couldn’t rely on the rules any longer, just being in a pair was no protection. In normal circumstances, Togami might have considered risking it — but not now, when he wouldn’t be able to hear either the signs of an approaching enemy or any warnings Naegi might try to share.

He frowned in Naegi’s direction, wondering whether he ought to share this particular conclusion — but from the look of dawning horror on Naegi’s face, he’d already put together at least some of the pieces.

“Do you think they might come back now?” Naegi asked.

“The longer we stay, the likelier it seems,” Togami admitted with a heavy sigh. He didn’t particularly want to ask the next question, but he couldn’t see any other option. “Do you feel up to moving to another room?”

“I think I have to be,” Naegi said — which was not the same as agreeing. Still, Togami knew it was probably the best he was likely to get. At least Naegi wasn’t screaming now.

He started to head back over to Naegi when a flash of metal next to the corpse caught his eye. He glanced back down and realized that it had come from the small metal rectangle that had fallen near the corpse’s tattooed hand. What was that? He hadn’t had a chance to work that out yet, and
he didn’t like the idea of leaving an unidentified object sitting around a murder scene when he was about to leave. But he didn’t have time to waste pondering over it, either…

Well, it clearly wasn’t attached to anything — it had fallen too far from the body for that. And with no wires or electronics attached, it couldn’t be part of another bomb. Assured of that much, Togami shrugged and scooped the metal rectangle up and dropped it in his pocket. He could think about it more once he and Naegi had gotten somewhere safer.
Chapter 193

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi leave the murder scene.

As much as Togami hated being enveloped in silence, he had to admit that it was probably better that he couldn’t hear Naegi as he helped the injured boy to his feet. He could feel Naegi trembling against him, shaking like some small furry animal unexpectedly lifted into a human hand, and he knew that whatever Naegi might try to say later, this had to be agonizing. If he’d been able to hear the little gasps of pain that he knew his actions had to be causing, Togami wasn’t sure he would have been able to force himself to keep going.

But as it was, deaf to the audible proof of the pain and looking down at his own hands instead of Naegi’s face, at least he could pretend that he wasn’t acutely aware of every instant of Naegi’s suffering. Ogami could have managed to help Naegi without hurting him further — but though Togami wouldn’t call himself weak, brute strength had never been one of his talents. The only way for him to get Naegi back to his feet was if Naegi bore some of the weight — no matter how unpleasant it was for the other boy. At least this allowed them both enough of an illusion to do what had to be done. Once they were away from this room and the danger of the killer returning, there would be time to worry about just how badly Naegi’s injuries might have been worsened.

For now, Togami did his best not to look at the new lines creased deep into Naegi’s face as he tried to hold himself steady or the clammy pallor of his hand as he took hold of the music stand pole again. He was upright for now, at least, and they had to take advantage of that fact before his injuries overcame him again.

“Let’s go,” Togami said, settling one arm around Naegi’s waist to hold the other boy steady, taking as much of his weight as possible. It meant that he couldn’t spare any strength to haul the heavy camping lantern out of the room with them — but then again, it wasn’t as though they’d need it anywhere other than in here. It might as well stay behind. “I think —”

Suddenly, the ringing in Togami’s ears seemed to double for a moment, cutting his words short in confusion. And at the same time, Naegi went ramrod stiff in his arms, sharply enough that Togami nearly lost his grip on the other boy. What had caused that? Had he moved too fast, or jarred Naegi’s injured arm again — or was it something else entirely? Had that ringing been something more than a trick of his ears — some alarming sound Naegi had heard clearly that was still too faint to penetrate the muffling blanket of silence that still surrounded Togami? He turned to scan the rest of the room —

Just in time to see the television screen on the far wall flicker to life, with Monokuma’s familiar face beaming out at them.

It looked like the same background set, the same layout as the many other times Monokuma had used the televisions to address them — but was it the same? Togami couldn’t tell for sure. As well-constructed as the robot’s face and jaw had been and as many expressions as they might allow the bear to make, they hadn’t been enough to give the bear’s mouth the same type of definition that human lips had. Whatever Monokuma was saying, Togami couldn’t understand it.
He looked down at Naegi, craning his neck enough to get a clear view of Naegi’s mouth. “What is he saying?”

“What?” Naegi blinked, then realization dawned. “Oh, his lips don’t move. It was just the usual morning announcement, not — not anything else.”

“Not a body discovery announcement,” Togami said, finishing the sentence Naegi hadn’t quite been able to bring himself to complete. “So that means it’s seven in the morning, and the messages are still running automatically.”

“They must be,” Naegi said. “If Monokuma were back, I don’t think he’d just leave us alone with everything that’s been happening.”

That was true enough — Monokuma always seemed to show up when the students wanted to see him the least. Togami gave the television another suspicious glance, but it had faded back to darkness after the message ended. It seemed as though whatever had caused Monokuma to go silent the previous day was still in effect. He shook his head and returned his attention to helping Naegi walk towards the door.

Stepping over the threshold was almost like waking from a nightmare, leaving behind the classroom’s foul air and dark shadows. He wouldn’t have thought that he’d ever consider the dingy, chilled hallways of the fifth floor to be welcoming — but after so long in a room heavy with reminders of blood and death, the clean and evenly lit hall seemed warm and bright.

But of course the nightmare wasn’t over yet — the soundless rustling that filled his ears was more than proof of that. Even in the unsettlingly quiet halls, he still should have heard his and Naegi’s footsteps echoing as they walked away from the classroom, just as clearly as when they’d approached earlier that morning. And yet no matter how much he strained, he couldn’t detect so much as a hint of the sound he knew was there.

But it wasn’t total silence, not really. Togami had to cling to that, reminding himself that he’d still heard a few sounds when they’d been loud enough. He’d heard something from Naegi when the other boy had raised his voice, even if it hadn’t been enough to make out the actual words. And that ringing a few moments ago must have been the bell that preceded Monokuma’s announcements, not a mere trick of his mind.

The sounds were there, just beyond his reach, if only he could manage to grasp them — and while it wasn’t quite the rosy picture of hearing sound with his head underwater, like he’d told Naegi, it might be closer to scraps of sense making their way through the rushing of a deep and disordered river. He would come through this, he had to believe that — and until he did, there was no point in giving Naegi more to worry about with the extent of his inability to hear. If the last few minutes in the ruined classroom had proven anything, it was that Naegi did not have the strength to spare on anyone else’s problems, regardless of what the soft-hearted boy might believe.

Of course, Naegi didn’t really have the strength to spare on walking, either. Even relying on the music stand pole and with Togami taking as much weight as he could, Naegi still swayed and trembled alarmingly with every step they took down the hall. Togami had initially thought they could return to the dorms on the first floor, checking to see if Ogami had woken up again yet — but Togami didn’t dare let Naegi near the stairs until the other boy was steadier on his feet. Horrible visions of Naegi losing his balance flashed before his eyes, and Togami knew that after hours of exhaustion, the poisoned air, and the explosion, he no longer had the strength to catch Naegi before he fell.

But staying in the hall was hardly safer than classroom 5-C had been. They had to pick another
room, one where he and Naegi both could try to recover from their ordeals. But of course… there was also no reason not to pick a room that might have useful information. He might as well take the chance to gather whatever clues he could, since he doubted Naegi would be able to make it up the stairs again once they started descending.

With that in mind, Togami steered Naegi past the corner that would lead to the stairs and instead brought them both to the entrance to the dojo.
Chapter 194

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi rest in the dojo and inspect the locker that should have contained Kirigiri's poison.

Togami had thought that the dojo would be a perfect place to rest for a few minutes, allowing Naegi a chance to recover enough to chance the stairs and offering an opportunity to investigate those lockers again. He hadn’t spent a long time in the dojo the first time he’d explored the fifth floor, especially not after determining that there wasn’t anything of interest in the long row of boringly identical lockers, and he hadn’t paid a lot of attention when he’d come back with Kirigiri and Naegi — but he’d had a general impression that the room had been constructed not so much as a workout location, but to invoke some hackneyed notion of idealized beauty. Obviously artificial, perhaps, but it had at least struck him as quiet and peaceful.

But it didn’t feel that way any longer. The dojo itself hadn’t changed, with its fluttering cherry blossoms and dark ceiling reminiscent of the midnight sky… but knowing that this room had been created as a strange little idyll just across the hall from the nightmare of classroom 5-C drained away any peace the dojo might have offered. The pleasantly cool air brought goosebumps slithering down his neck, and every tree branch that bent in the pretense of a gentle breeze sent his gaze skittering through the room’s shadowy corners.

Togami almost suggested leaving the dojo for now and going to rest in the garden instead, where at least the threats and contradictions were more apparent in the too-bright colors and the supposedly man-eating plant — but one look down at Naegi’s pale face told him that wasn’t a good idea. Naegi needed to rest, whatever he might claim about how recovered he was. Togami was certain that any doctor worthy of the name would have insisted on at least a week of solid bed rest after all the injuries Naegi had been through. Naegi shouldn’t even have been on his feet this soon in the first place — but it wasn’t as though they’d had any other options, with murderers running around and their only ally knocked unconscious.

If Togami couldn’t give Naegi the care he deserved, at least he could make sure he didn’t demand too much of the injured boy. He knew Naegi would never complain — he’d try to manage what he thought someone he cared for was asking of him even if he destroyed himself in the process. And that… that was unacceptable.

And so Togami let the dojo’s screen door slide shut behind them and helped Naegi over to the left side of the room. The dojo understandably didn’t have chairs or tables, but there was a raised sort of semi-stage displaying samurai armor and a few other trinkets. Togami brushed them all aside, clearing enough of a space for Naegi to sit on the small ledge. It didn’t seem to be the most comfortable option, made of hard wood and sharp corners, but at least it had to be better than the floor.

The lack of protest with which Naegi relinquished his grip on the music stand pole and settled back to lean against the wall spoke volumes for his level of exhaustion. Togami would have liked to sink down beside the injured boy, holding Naegi close in his arms so that he knew that for at least those few precious moments, Naegi would be safe — but he didn’t quite dare. Adrenaline and terror had
forced his own fatigue back for a while, but the burning at the back of his eyes was an ominous reminder that such a respite was only temporary. If he let himself sit with Naegi, no matter his best intentions, he might relax just a little too much.

“I’m going to look at the lockers,” Togami said instead, taking a step backwards, away from temptation.

Naegi nodded his agreement, not even mustering the energy to speak. Togami approved of this in terms of conserving his strength — but he didn’t like what it suggested.

“You can’t fall asleep here,” he warned the other boy. “You remember the rule, don’t you?”

“No sleeping outside the dorms,” Naegi said, and Togami suspected the boy had barely whispered the words. “I remember.”

Togami frowned down at Naegi for a moment, then reached into his pocket to retrieve Naegi’s e-handbook. He flipped it on opened the section with the school regulations, propping it up beside Naegi so that he’d have a clear view of the rule in question. “Don’t forget.”

Only after Naegi nodded again, eyes a little more alert as he looked down at his e-handbook, did Togami feel safe enough to leave him alone. He forced himself to turn away quickly, before the urge to sit could buckle his knees in spite of his best intentions, and crossed the room to inspect the dojo lockers.

From what Togami remembered, the locker closest to the door had been the one they’d used to hide the poison. Sure enough, that locker was the only one in the long row to have a key missing. He reached out to tug on the door — not with the force necessary to break a functional lock, but just enough to test whether the door might open without the key.

It wouldn’t. He pulled at it again, a little harder this time, but with the same result. The locker door stayed just as firmly shut as it had been when he, Naegi, and Kirigiri had left it two nights ago.

Togami glared at it. Of course it made sense that the door would still be locked, after he himself had thrown the key into the incinerator and looked down at its ashes… but then how the hell had that bottle of poison ended up in the classroom? It wasn’t as simple as Kirigiri being mistaken in her claim that there had only been one poison that could be administered as a gas — it had been the same type of poison. He and Naegi had both recognized the bottle, and he knew that when he’d looked in the chemistry lab before Fukawa’s trial, all three bottles had been missing.

Could Monokuma have restocked the lab with fresh poison? It was a possibility, but based on previous trials, Togami doubted it. Monokuma might clean up all the evidence of a murder, but he had never gone so far as to replace any limited resources. The bags of blood that Yamada had used to fake his death hadn’t been replaced in the clinic refrigerator, even though Monokuma could have encouraged other potential killers to make use of them. The knife Maizono had taken from the kitchen was still missing, the empty space on the wall a constant reminder of her failed crime. Once a weapon had been used by one culprit, it seemed to be confiscated so that no one could use it in future attempts. It might be an attempt to force them all to come up with their own plans, or perhaps something to encourage a killer to act before their weapon of choice disappeared. But either way, it was gone for good.

And that meant that the poison in the classroom had to be the bottle from the locker, even if he couldn’t figure out how the killer had retrieved it. Togami contemplated the locker a moment longer, then circled around to inspect the back of the structure. It appeared to be pressed fairly
solidly against the wall, and when he tried to push it away, it wouldn’t budge. So much for the possibility that someone might have gotten into it from the back.

He glanced down the row of other lockers, identical keys sitting in easy reach of anyone who wandered in. He’d always figured this sort of public locker couldn’t be terribly secure, but… surely it wouldn’t be *that* bad, would it? He pulled the key from the nearest locker and tried it in the locked door — but no. It slid about an inch into the lock, shifting the mechanism just a hair, and then stopped short. Togami breathed a sigh of relief — if that had worked, he would have had to curse himself as an idiot for leaving the poison out where anyone could get it by grabbing any of the other keys.

But that still didn’t answer the question of how someone could have gotten into the locker without a key. Togami crossed his arms and tried to think past the dull ache of exhaustion that was beginning to form at the back of his skull. There had to be something he was missing. The poison clearly wasn’t in the locker anymore, so there had to be a way to get at it.

Could the door have been picked? It wasn’t as though the lock was a terribly complex mechanism, and the wording of the rule only said that they weren’t allowed to break down locked doors. Monokuma had made a great point of telling them that the dorm room doors were unpickable… which seemed to suggest that a loophole existed, if someone was skilled enough to pick a lock without breaking it. It would be a big risk, considering what had happened when Asahina had attempted to exploit an apparent loophole, but someone sufficiently confident might try it.

Kirigiri’s chilly, emotionless face flashed before Togami’s eyes as he studied the locker. If any of the other surviving students had confidence in their abilities, she would be the one.
Chapter 195

Chapter Summary

Togami tries to figure out how the dojo locker could have been opened.

Togami frowned at the dojo locker door, searching for some evidence of lock picks or other similar meddling. But no matter how he examined the lock, there didn’t seem to be any evidence that someone had tampered with it. Well, that did seem to make a certain type of sense — whoever had opened the locker door had apparently gotten away with it, however they’d managed it. After Asahina’s execution for failing to exploit a loophole correctly, Togami doubted that the mastermind would let another student get away with flouting the same rule.

And if Kirigiri really had been the one to open the locker, Togami had no doubt that the wretched girl would have managed to do so successfully. That was exactly what made her so terribly obnoxious — she was smart, far too smart for someone who revealed so little of herself. He’d known from the start that she had to be hiding something, since somehow no one knew where she’d come from or what her ultimate talent could be — and if that was the case, then she’d been playing a much longer game than she seemed.

Years of experience with backstabbing siblings and corporate politics had taught Togami that someone who didn’t have a solid reason forcing them to remain his ally would turn to an enemy as soon as they had the power to do so. Naegi had been the only exception he’d ever encountered, sweet and soft-hearted and nice even when he’d had every opportunity to be otherwise. There was no way that a girl like Kirigiri had that depth of kindness buried in her heart. It was all too easy to envision her turning on them, tricking them into believing the poison had been sealed safely away while intending to retrieve and use it all the while.

Except… as well as that explanation fit Togami’s knowledge of how the world operated, he wasn’t sure it matched the specifics of the situation. It would have made sense if the poison had been used against him and Naegi, or even against Jill or Ogami, but that wasn’t how matters had played out. The dead girl in classroom 5-C, burned into an unrecognizable slab of blackened meat with a Fenrir tattoo on its hand, had to be either the mysterious Mukuro Ikusaba or Kirigiri herself. Naegi seemed determined to believe that the girl had to be Ikusaba… but he didn’t have any proof beyond his unreasonable belief that Kirigiri would never lie to him. And considering that Naegi had also trusted Maizono so easily that she’d nearly succeeded in framing him for murder, Togami wasn’t inclined to take the boy at his word.

Of course, he wasn’t about to start arguing with Naegi about it, either. He’d seen the hurt in Naegi’s eyes, stark and stinging like a fresh bruise, when they’d tried in vain to figure out which girl that corpse might be. Togami might find Kirigiri horrible in every way imaginable — but Naegi cared about her, little though she might deserve it. Whether she turned out to be a victim or a murderer, the truth would hurt Naegi badly… and there was nothing Togami could do to protect the other boy from the pain that was coming. Of all the reasons Togami had to despise Kirigiri, the decisions she’d made and problems she’d caused, this might well be the worst.

If he couldn’t spare Naegi the pain of knowing what had happened to Kirigiri, at least he could delay the inevitable a little longer, until Naegi had regained more strength to cope with the truth.
Togami glanced back over his shoulder to check on the other boy, just to make sure he was still safe and well — and yes, to his relief, Naegi still rested on the ledge across the room. But even from this distance, Togami could still see the other boy’s hands trembling as he tapped at his e-handbook, the device’s eerie electronic glow highlighting the pallor of his skin. He needed true sleep, not the illusion of peace that the dojo offered… but that would mean the dorm rooms. And unfortunately, he still didn’t look up to an attempt at the stairs.

Togami had originally intended to rest for a while himself along with Naegi when he’d steered them into the dojo… but now, he found that he couldn’t face the thought of turning away from the impossibilities of the lockers. Someone had worked out a way to get past these locked doors, and if he gave up without figuring out what they’d done, it would be as good as admitting they’d outsmarted him. He had no intention of doing that — especially not with Naegi watching. He wanted to present the other boy with triumphant solutions to their problems, not slink back in ignominious defeat with the riddles looming worse than ever.

So with fresh determination, he returned his attention to the lockers — but this time he took a step to the left, swinging open the door of the next locker over. Maybe he could find some kind of hint if he examined an opened locker instead of the locked one. They all ought to be identical, after all.

And as far as he could see, the second locker did look exactly like what he remembered of the corner locker. The interior was made of solid wood, its walls unmarred by any scratches. It briefly crossed his mind that breaking through the connecting wall between the two lockers might not count as breaking down a locked door… but whether or not that was a viable loophole, a mere glance was enough to show that the killer hadn’t even tried. There wasn’t so much as a knothole in the locker wall, let alone a large enough opening to fit the bottle of poison through.

Togami sighed, resettling his glasses in a fruitless attempt to relieve some of the pressure in his aching head. Maybe after the long day and longer night, he’d just ended up too exhausted to think his way through this problem. Or maybe he was thinking too hard, and the answer really was as simple as a picked lock. He gave the open locker door a frown, tapping at the back of the simple lock mechanism. It sprang easily back and forth beneath his fingers, shiny metal flashing out from under the dark wood…

Wait.

The locker door was made of solid wood, just as all the locker keys were. It wasn’t a complicated mechanism, little more than a simple twist that circled from open to closed — a device that could easily have been made entirely from the same wood as the locker itself. So what was that bit of metal doing in the midst of it?

Togami pressed slowly down on the lock mechanism, letting it gradually switch from locked to unlocked. The wooden lock shifted, moved, and revealed a small metal panel embedded in the mechanism. It didn’t seem visible if the door was locked or unlocked, though — the only way to reveal it was if the lock stopped just on the edge of one of those two states. But what good did a bit of metal on the back of the door do?

A flicker of suspicion tingled at the back of Togami’s mind, the baying call of a hunt that had finally sighted its prey. He took the spare locker key and tried to slide it into the locked door again. This time he held it in place, a mere inch into the lock, and watched with narrowed eyes as the device shifted. With the dark wood, he hadn’t noticed it the first time… but now that he was paying proper attention, he could see what he’d missed.

In the spot where the metal panel would be, the lock had turned just enough to reveal a small keyhole in the locker door.
Chapter 196

Chapter Summary

Togami inspects the hidden keyhole in the dojo lockers.

Togami studied the keyhole for a long moment, trying to work through how the mechanism might operate. It was impossible to be certain without taking the door apart — an action that would certainly count as breaking the rule about locked doors — but based solely on the positioning, there was only one thing that this keyhole could be meant to do. This had to be some kind of alternate way to open the dojo lockers, without using the wooden keys.

It was obvious from a glance that a wooden key like the one they'd burned wouldn’t fit in this keyhole. That key had been large, blocky, and unwieldy, suited only to opening something as basic as the obvious lock mechanism. This seemed to be a more traditional keyhole, smaller and subtle, fitted to a key of more ordinary size. Togami frowned, searching his memory, but he couldn’t recall seeing any keys that might fit this lock at any point during their imprisonment.

Could Kirigiri have known about it? Togami didn’t see how she could have, not when her entire motivation for locking the poison away had been to keep it out of use. She must have missed the lock during her investigation, just as he and Naegi had. After all, she’d left the poison in that locker before she ever told them about it, when she’d still been fighting to keep her plan a secret — so she must have believed she could trust the locker to stay closed.

And they’d all been wrong about it. Togami scowled at the locker one last time before turning away and heading back over to Naegi. At least he had something useful to share with the other boy, even if it did seem to pose more questions than answers.

Naegi looked up at him as he approached, a tired smile lifting the corners of his mouth. A few of the lines in his face relaxed, some of the tension draining from the tight set of his shoulders. In spite of the nightmare that trapped them, a small, secret bit of happiness burrowed its way into Togami’s heart at the knowledge that he had the power to ease a little of Naegi’s misery, just by staying nearby. Even with all Naegi’s injuries, with his fears for his missing friends and his inability to identify the corpse rotting across the hall, he still smiled when he looked up into Togami’s face.

But happy as that thought made him, Togami was absolutely not going to say it aloud, not with the mastermind’s cameras might still be capturing their every word. That moment of happiness was theirs, his and Naegi’s, and he had no intention of sharing it with an enemy.

Instead, he frowned, crossed his arms, and announced, “Those locker doors have hidden keyholes in them.”

Naegi blinked, his expression slowly morphing into one of confusion. “What? You mean… other than the obvious ones?”

“Yes, two keyholes per door,” Togami confirmed. “The one where we left the poison was still locked, but it doesn’t matter now. There was a way someone could have gotten the door open.”
“You mean with a master key?” Naegi nodded thoughtfully. “I guess that makes sense. I mean, this was a school before the mastermind took it over, right? So there would probably have been a way for the teachers to get into all the students’ lockers, in case of emergencies or something.”

“That’s true,” Togami said. “The mastermind does seem to prefer to leave the school’s existing furnishings in place, as far as I can tell. It seems likely that those hidden keyholes were present all along for the Hope’s Peak staff to use, not something new that the mastermind had installed.”

“Not just the staff.” Naegi looked as though he would have gone pale if he’d had enough color in his cheeks to do so. “The headmaster.”

Of course. Now that Naegi said it, the idea seemed obvious. Who else would have control of such an important item as a way to open locked doors but the man in charge of everything? It was certainly another clue pointing towards the idea that the Hope’s Peak headmaster was behind all of this. With the keys, the bomb, the secrecy… everything about this murder was starting to make it look as though the only person who could have done it was the headmaster himself.

Or… was that true? After all, there was supposedly one other person in the school who had access to a portion of the mastermind’s toolbox.

“What about Ikusaba?” Togami asked, crossing his arms. “If she’s the mastermind’s agent, she might have known about the second keyhole.”

“Well… Kirigiri did say that Ikusaba was going to open some locked areas of the school,” Naegi said. “So… I guess that means she must have had keys to those areas. I thought she was talking about rooms, though, not just any old lock.”

“But there’s no reason to hide the keys to empty lockers if she has access to the keys for locked rooms,” Togami pointed out. “But even beyond that speculation, this does narrow down the possibilities of what could have happened. Someone had a key that could open that locker.”

“So… whoever has that key has to be the culprit,” Naegi said, not looking very excited about this conclusion.

“Or whoever had access to it during the right time frame,” Togami added. “Keys can be hidden, if you don’t want to keep them on your person at all times.”

“And even if you try, they can be dropped or stolen,” Naegi said. “It would really open up a lot of possibilities again if we found a key just lying on the floor somewhere.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “I’d expect a killer to be far more careful with their keys,” he said. “Locks are dangerous here. It’s not as though we’re likely to come across any mysterious keys sitting where anyone could —”

He stopped short, an awful thought occurring to him. It seemed impossible, and yet…

Togami reached into his pocket and pulled out the strange metallic object he’d found lying beside the dead girl’s hand. It was small and oddly colored, a blue rectangle decorated with geometric shapes attached to a longer black piece, patterned with grooves and indentations. Looking at it carefully, it was just possible that this was some kind of key.
Togami and Naegi consider the mysterious new key they found beside the corpse in classroom 5-C.

Togami hadn’t had a chance to examine the metallic object in much detail before pocketing it, and he certainly hadn’t formed much impression of what it might be. All he’d been sure about was that it didn’t seem to be part of a bomb. But now that he looked at it in a calmer state of mind, the idea that it might be a key was undeniable. The long black rectangle was just the right size to slide easily into a lock, and the blue part could be a handhold, complete with a hole where it could be attached to a key ring.

A hand settled on Togami’s wrist, and he looked up at Naegi with a start.

“Isn’t that the thing that was next to the body back in the classroom?” Naegi asked, and from the patient curl of his lips, Togami could see this wasn’t the first time he’d asked the question.

“I wanted to give it a closer look, so I brought it along,” Togami explained. “And I think it must be some sort of key.”

“The key to the lockers?” Naegi asked, peering down at it in puzzlement.

But Togami shook his head. “No. I don’t even need to try it — I can see just from here that this isn’t the right shape for that keyhole. The locker key will be something more traditional. Whatever lock this opens will be thinner, flatter, more modern.”

“Oh.” Naegi’s one good shoulder slumped a little in disappointment. “I guess that would have been too easy.”

“And instead we have a lock without a key and a key without a lock,” Togami said, tapping one finger against the new key thoughtfully. “I haven’t seen a key like this anywhere else in the school… which means that it doesn’t open any of the doors we already know about. It has to open something, though — and whatever it opens has to be something we haven’t seen yet.”

“You mean one of the locked areas of the school,” Naegi said. “One of the places Kirigiri might have gone.”

That wasn’t the way Togami would have put it, but he nodded rather than argue the phrasing. “Unless there are some other locked doors that we don’t know about, it seems likely.” He considered it a moment longer. “And I think we can eliminate the headmaster’s office as a possibility. Ogami destroyed that lock, so there would hardly be a point to carrying around a useless key.”

“So that leaves the biology lab, the data center, the dormitory staircase, and….” Naegi counted off three fingers on his working right hand, then hesitated before raising a fourth. “And the front door.”

Togami’s hand reflexively curled into a fist around the key, fiercely protective at the thought that it
might be their ticket out of this hellhole. He had to force back the sudden lightness the possibility raised within him, knowing that he couldn’t afford to give in to a hope that would almost certainly prove false.

“That would be the least likely possibility,” he said at last, hoping that his voice didn’t sound strained as he tried to force out the words. “I can’t imagine that the mastermind would have let a key like that out of their sight, even in the care of a trusted agent. And even if they did — well, there are still all the guns to stop us from trying anything.”

“I know,” Naegi said, a shadow falling over his eyes. He had to be remembering Asahina. “We shouldn’t do anything that could set off those guns.”

“It would make more sense to test the other doors first,” Togami mused, considering the possible approaches. “As long as we’re careful not to break any part of the key or the door while we check what it opens, that should keep us on the right side of the rule about locked doors.”

“The biology lab is here on this floor,” Naegi pointed out.

Togami’s head lurched dizzily in protest against retreading the entire length of the fifth floor to get all the way back to classroom 5-C, and then continuing on down the long stretch of empty hall to the biology lab. He didn’t know why the lab had been set so far back from the rest of the floor, but it would be a terribly long distance to go in their exhausted state, just to find out that the key didn’t fit that lock after all. Or worse, what if they did manage to get that door open, only to reveal danger on the other side of it? That hall didn’t have anywhere for them to hide — and neither of them had the strength left to run.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said at last. “You’ve obviously been out of bed too long. If you have the energy to go anywhere, we should try to make it down some of the stairs, not head off in the opposite direction.”

Instead of jumping straight to the objection that Togami had braced himself to counter, Naegi frowned up at Togami, biting his lip as he considered the other boy. Togami blinked, feeling the slight inclination to shift under Naegi’s unusually intense stare. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt self-conscious about another person’s inability to tear their eyes away from him — after all, it was only reasonable for them to stare when he was around. But now, after everything he’d been through in the last twenty-four hours had taken its toll on his usually immaculate appearance, he didn’t know how to take Naegi’s observation. Smears of dirt, grease, and dried blood still flaked from his skin, and oil matted some of his hair to his head in layers of filth from the classroom floor. His clothing hardly even deserved to be called such any longer, ruined and torn. And his face had to be showing the effects of so many hours awake, his eyes presumably bloodshot and shadowed. So whatever Naegi saw with that long, quiet stare, he couldn’t be looking in admiration.

Eventually, Naegi met his eyes again. “If we go back to the dorms, will you rest, too?”

Togami shrugged. “I’m hardly going to leave you to your own devices.”

“Okay,” Naegi said. “Then… we can look at the biology lab later. For now, you’re right. We should try to go downstairs.”
Chapter 198

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi start to go down the stairs... but they don't make it far.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As Togami led Naegi out of the dojo towards the stairs, he couldn’t help but wish that he knew he was making the right decision. Until being trapped in Monokuma’s killing game, he’d always been certain of his path. He’d spent his life hurtling unstoppably forward towards personal and public success, his every action a measured step on the road towards proving himself to be the best that his family had ever produced. He’d never questioned what he was doing — until Hope’s Peak, he’d never even had anything to question.

No, not until Hope’s Peak — until Naegi. The mere fact of being trapped here hadn’t been enough to do it, not when the game had such a clearly defined path to victory. He could have won if he’d tried… right up until the moment he’d realized that he couldn’t. Naegi had derailed his life from its steady progress to the top of whatever social order he’d found himself in, miring him in gut-churning swamps of uncertainty. With the other boy to consider, every decision seemed poised on the knife-edge of fear, with the threat of a future too terrible to contemplate if he chose wrong. The Togami heir might not be a person who could lose… but Naegi could, all too easily.

In fact, Naegi seemed to lose constantly, every encounter with another student leaving him worse off than before until he could barely walk down the stairs even leaning most of his weight on the music stand pole and relying on Togami’s arm to steady him. Togami kept a close eye on the other boy as they descended step by snail-paced step, all too aware that any whisper of pain Naegi might make would never make its way through the rush of silence wrapped around him. He didn’t see any new or sharp movements that suggested Naegi was near collapse again, but he did note the line of tension in Naegi’s clenched jaw and the faint tremors the music stand pole made every time it hit the ground.

By the time they passed the halfway point between the fifth and fourth floors, Naegi’s shoulders shook a little more with every breath, and the weight where he leaned against Togami’s arm seemed just a little heavier. In spite of his best efforts, Togami could feel himself sway as they descended — unless that was just exhaustion roiling through his head and twisting his perceptions. He reached for the stair railing with his free hand, trying to anchor himself to something he knew was solid. But even with the polished railing firmly in his grasp, every new step sent fresh dizziness to assault his sense of balance.

When they finally neared the bottom of this first flight of stairs, Togami eyed the entrance to the fourth floor with a relief that he’d never expected to associate with any area of Hope’s Peak. If he and Naegi kept trying to force themselves down the stairs in this state, sooner or later one of them would misjudge a step or lose their grip on the fragile balance they’d achieved… and he knew that neither of them was in any shape to stop a fall once it had started. Prevention was the only viable option.

When they passed through the door and entered the fourth floor, Togami stopped, rather than
steering Naegi immediately across the hall to the entrance to the next flight of stairs. Naegi hesitated for a moment at this unexpected pause, starting to take another slow step in the direction of the next set of stairs — but when Togami didn’t continue along with him, he stopped moving forward and edged back towards Togami’s side. Maybe the extent of his injuries was finally sinking into his awareness, and he’d realized that he would need another rest before they tried to climb down another flight of stairs.

“Do you want to find a place to sit down?” Naegi asked, tilting his head up so that Togami could have an unobstructed view of his mouth. “We could go in one of the classrooms.”

Togami had to approve of this evidence of a sense of self-preservation, even if he didn’t think much of the idea of going into one of the classrooms, with Monokuma’s infantile scribblings leering down at them from the chalkboards. The chairs would be better than sitting on the floor, yes, but helping Naegi back onto his feet after sitting was difficult enough without trying to deal with a tangle of desks getting in the way.

“The music room would be better,” he said after a moment’s thought, remembering the room’s cushioned benches. Then he frowned. “If you think you can make it that far.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Naegi said, giving him a determined nod.

Togami did his best to swallow back his skeptical laugh at the ridiculousness of that idea, but judging by the surprise and confusion that flickered across Naegi’s face, he didn’t quite manage as well as he should have. He wasn’t sure if it was the exhaustion or the inability to hear his own words that had stolen his usual iron control from him — or maybe it was just that it was getting harder and harder to hide his true thoughts from Naegi.

He took a deep breath, gathering as much energy as he had left, and began walking with Naegi across the fourth floor. It was the same long stretch of hallway they would have had to travel across to continue downstairs, and every step of it seemed to take an eternity. He had no idea why the people who had built Hope’s Peak had decided to scatter their staircases across the building instead of putting them all in a single sensible column. If he’d ever been presented with a building design like this, he would have fired the architect on the spot.

Togami slowed as they reached the fork in the path that would lead them down to the music room, the world around him feeling cottony and gray. With no sound reaching his ears, everything seemed a little too distant, a little further off than it should — especially the music room door, such a long way down the offset hallway. Intellectually, he knew that it was no more than a few yards, little more than the length of a room… but with the way he felt, it might as well have been an impassable desert. He stopped at the corner across from the hall, bracing one hand against the wall of the central area.

Naegi paused as well, blinking up at him. Togami had to force himself to focus on the other boy’s face, trying to see the movements of his lips instead of pale blurs. By the time he was able to read the words, “Are you all right?” from Naegi’s mouth, he knew it couldn’t be the first time the boy had asked the question. Naegi’s eyes were too worried, with fear deepening the lines of his already drawn face.

Fear for him. The knowledge seared its way through the gray fog that had been encroaching on his awareness, burning it away for just a moment longer. He refused to be an object of pity for Naegi, something that would only weigh him further down in his already-injured state. He had to present the other boy with an image of strength, something he could rely on — even if it was false. Naegi needed him too much for him to be anything else.
“I’m fine,” Togami said, willing his words to remain steady and unshaken as they left his tongue. “I just stopped to think.”

Naegi didn’t appear convinced. “Are you sure? Because if you need to rest, I’m sure I can walk by myself now.” He started trying to pull away from Togami’s side.

“Don’t!” The word tore itself from Togami’s throat before he could think about what he was saying. He couldn’t lose physical contact with Naegi, not now, not when he’d already been stripped of one of the ways he could keep track of the other boy. He wouldn’t hear if Naegi called out for help… but as long as he could feel the other boy solid beneath his touch, at least he knew for certain that Naegi was safe.

But even though Naegi stopped trying to move away, Togami could tell that his exclamation had only made things worse. Naegi’s eyebrows knit together in an anxious frown, and he was clearly spending far too much energy worrying over things that shouldn’t concern him. Togami had to stop him, had to convince him that this wasn’t the problem he seemed to believe. He glanced around, trying to find some hint of inspiration… and he realized that they were standing mere feet from the locked door of the data center.

“I didn’t stop here because anything is wrong,” Togami said, pouring conviction into his words. “I thought that before we head to the music room, we ought to check the new key in the data center lock.”

Naegi eyed him for several long seconds, and for a moment Togami thought the other boy might object… but eventually, Naegi’s lips huffed out in a small sigh. “Okay. If that’s what you want.”

Togami gave a sharp nod, which he immediately regretted as it sent another rush of dizziness aching through his skull. To cover up the pain, he pulled the key from his pocket, took a single step forward to the door. He would give the key a quick try, and then they could move on to the music room and rest enough to make it down the stairs to the dorms. Trying to make it look as if this had been his plan all along, he pressed the key gently to the keyhole.

It slid in perfectly.

Chapter End Notes

Scheduling update: Starting next week, there will be a new posting schedule. There will definitely be a new chapter on Sunday, and the new schedule will begin from there. I haven't decided what exactly it will be yet, but I should have it pinned down by then.

The reason behind this change is that I need more time to edit these chapters before I post them. We're probably looking at a little more space between each update, but on balance, the chapters themselves should be higher quality. You'll get the story a little more slowly, but what you get will move at a faster pace. Hopefully this trade off will work out for everyone!
Chapter 199

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Togami investigate the unlocked data center.

Chapter Notes

Scheduling Update: As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I will be making some drastic revisions to my writing schedule in the hopes that I will have more time to edit and keep the story moving forward steadily.

The new schedule will be only two posts per week, on Sunday and Thursday.

These chapters will cover the same amount of story I usually try to cover in a week, but in a more polished way. They will also be longer than my usual chapters, so you won't be missing out! But if this doesn't work the way I'm hoping for some reason, I'll revisit the schedule again in a couple weeks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Naegi almost wished that he hadn’t gone along with Togami’s attempt to pretend that he’d just wanted to try the mystery key in the data center door. He’d known that arguing with Togami about his real reason for stopping in the middle of the fourth floor would only make the proud heir dig in his heels and insist that he wasn’t exhausted in the least — but maybe it would have been worth the fight if he could have convinced Togami to sit down and rest. Even a few minutes could have helped with the way he swayed on his feet like a spindly tree tossed by the wind, or brought more focus to his scattered, fuzzy gaze.

But now, with the key sliding into the lock so perfectly, the situation had changed. Togami’s hand had gone still, frozen around the key with so little movement that it almost seemed as though it hadn’t fit the lock after all — but that only put off the inevitable. Putting off an investigation of the locked doors until they’d had a chance to rest was one thing… but turning aside from such an obvious clue, a genuine lead about the mastermind’s secrets, was something else entirely. How could they justify walking away from this?

But even with all those thoughts running through his head, Naegi bumped his shoulder against Togami’s arm to get the other boy’s attention before he could finally turn the key. Togami blinked for just a heartbeat too long, looking down at Naegi as he returned from whatever whirl of thoughts had been occupying him. His expression seemed to have all its usual sharpness, but Naegi knew him well enough to see beyond the mask of strength. He knew Togami would despise the vulnerability lurking there… and that knowledge drew words from his lips that he hadn’t meant to say.
“We can still leave. This doesn’t have to change our plan — we can rest in the music room, go downstairs, and come back to open the door after we’ve had a chance to recover. We don’t have to go in right now.”

Naegi hated the words even as they poured from his mouth. He didn’t want to be saying something like this, turning his back on their investigation and abandoning a brilliant clue — but he didn’t want to stand by and watch a boy he cared so much about drive himself to collapse, either.

Togami stared at him with blank disbelief written plain across his face. “I don’t think I read that clearly,” he said at last. “Say it again.”

Naegi opened his mouth — but now that he had to summon them deliberately, the shameful words clogged his throat like garbage shoved into a drain. How could he say something like that, when he knew deep in his soul that to stop moving forward would be the same as allowing the mastermind to destroy them? But… when he looked up at Togami, so drained that even walking made him tremble, how could he not repeat his plea to put their investigation on hold? Togami needed rest so very badly, and Naegi just wanted to help him…

But he wasn’t the only one who needed help. Kirigiri had gone missing, supposedly trapped behind one of the school’s locked doors — and now they had the opportunity to search one of those locked areas. If she wasn’t lying cold and mutilated in the classroom upstairs — and she wasn’t, he knew she wasn’t, she couldn’t be — then she could be here, mere feet away, separated from rescue only by the locked door. How could he walk away from this, knowing that he might have had a chance to help a friend in trouble?

The chance to help Kirigiri, or the chance to protect Togami… how could he choose between the two? Naegi shook his head slowly, dropping his gaze away from his boyfriend’s. He couldn’t make a choice like this.

But apparently the refusal to choose wasn’t an option. Before he had a chance to decide what he wanted to do next, Naegi heard the telltale click of a lock. His head shot up again — and he saw that the key had been turned to a ninety-degree angle, the doorknob twisting along with it. Togami stared at his hand blankly, almost as though some other force than him was pushing at the door, opening it just a few inches. Of course, that was ridiculous — it wasn’t as though there was any other way the door could have opened. Togami must have been even more tired than Naegi had realized, if he was acting without deliberately planning out his moves.

But now, whatever else the open door might mean about Togami’s state of mind, they didn’t have time to deal with it. If anyone really was sealed away in the data center, now they knew that someone outside had a key to their door. They’d lost the chance to walk away and pretend they had never tried the key at all.

Naegi tilted the music stand pole forward until the top rested against the door just above Togami’s frozen hand, and he pushed. He couldn’t muster much pressure, but that didn’t matter. As soon as the door moved again, Togami’s hand fell away, leaving the door to swing open under its own weight. Naegi hastily resettled the music stand pole, doing his best to brace himself for whatever lurked behind the door. He pressed a step closer to the other boy, not sure if he meant to protect or be protected, only knowing that he wanted the warm presence of his boyfriend at his side as they peered into the data center for the first time. He looked through the door…

And all of Hope’s Peak Academy blazed back at him.

Naegi’s breath caught in his throat as he stared at the walls of monitors lining the room, showing different views of every room in the school. He could see the tidy piles of food stored in the
kitchen, the rippling water of the swimming pool, the half-played game of billiards abandoned in
the game room. And the angles of the views — after weeks of being all too aware of how closely
they’d been observed, he recognized those angles.

“I think we’ve just found out how the mastermind is keeping track of us,” Togami said softly.

The sound of the other boy’s voice tore Naegi’s eyes away from the room, and he twisted as much
as he could to look up at the boy beside him. Togami’s voice had been sharper than it had been
since this explosion, with less slurring and a great deal more interest, but Naegi wasn’t at all sure
that he could trust the change. It wasn’t as though Togami had suddenly realized he was more
rested than he had been a few minutes ago — he’d just gotten a burst of adrenaline that was letting
him fake it. And Naegi had a terrible suspicion that it would run out sooner rather than later.

But when Togami glanced down at Naegi to see his response, Naegi couldn’t quite bring himself to
say so. Drawing attention to the illusion might shatter it, and even false energy was better than
none at all. Instead, he nodded at Togami’s conclusion about the screens.

“This must’ve been how Ikusaba stayed out of our way for so long,” Naegi said, glancing back into
the room without turning his head away from Togami’s gaze. “She could have stayed locked in
here watching us the whole time.” His gaze skittered away from the rows on rows of monitors,
taking in the large chair sitting empty in the center of the room. “But she isn’t here now.”

“So we should take advantage of her absence,” Togami declared, striding forward into the room
with so much confidence that it almost masked the way he swayed with every step.

Naegi followed after him, wishing that he could come up with a good reason that they didn’t have
to do so. Something about this room felt wrong, out of place, and he didn’t think that it was just the
blatant reminder of how very empty the school had become. As he looked around the room,
studying the way the desk was set up to observe the screens and the arrangement of the screens to
show the entire building, he couldn’t help but think that this room didn’t look the way that it
should.

Which was a weird thing to think, of course. He’d been vaguely aware that the mastermind had to
have a room like this, showing all the camera feeds, since they were keeping pretty close watch on
all the students. He hadn’t thought that he’d developed such clear expectations of the room that he
could look at it and feel as though it didn’t match what he thought he knew. But even so, he
couldn’t shake the feeling that this room ought to be different.

He was probably just imagining things, Naegi decided. He’d had lots of shocks, and even if he was
sure he couldn’t be as exhausted as Togami, he knew he was still pretty tired, too. He did his best
to push the unfounded worries out of his mind and tried to turn his attention to investigating the
mastermind’s apparently unguarded stronghold.

Naegi looked across the room to where Togami had gone — and alarm jolted through him as a
familiar black and white face grinned back at him. Naegi took a stumbling step backward before he
realized that no, it wasn’t Monokuma himself — it was just a strangely painted door. Togami stood
in front of it with the key they’d found, but it looked as though the door to the data center’s inner
sanctum didn’t share a lock with its outer door. Naegi couldn’t quite suppress a fond smile at the
glare of pure outrage Togami wore when it was clear the door was refusing to open for him.

Naegi left him to it, looking back up at the rows of screens. As long as they were here, able the
view the entire school at once… there was something he had to do. Slowly, one monitor at a time,
he searched every room for any trace of Kirigiri, Jill, or an unidentified girl who might be Mukuro
Ikusaba. With the school sealed off from the outside world, they had to be on one of the screens.
They couldn’t have simply disappeared.

Except that as far as he could tell, that was exactly what they’d done. The only signs of other humans in the school that showed on any of the screens were Ogami, still slumped in her chair in Togami’s dorm room, and the dead body lying in the fifth floor classroom. Regardless of which girl that body belonged to, two students were still missing.

Naegi’s shoulders slumped as he reached the end of the row of monitors, the final screen confirming that the school’s front entrance remained as tightly closed as ever. Nothing. Kirigiri hadn’t shown up on a single screen. It had been one thing when he’d been unable to locate her on the map in his upgraded e-handbook no matter how many times he’d checked it — but that was just a basic picture of locations. These screens showed actual images of the different areas of the school. If he couldn’t find Kirigiri on any of them… then where was she?

Before Naegi could consider this question any further, a clatter from the other side of the room drew his attention. He turned, only to see Togami bending over yet another monitor, just like the others — except that this one wasn’t on. And it seemed to have some kind of antenna on it, that Togami seemed to be trying to adjust.

That wasn’t another camera monitor, Naegi realized, crossing the room towards it as quickly as he could. That was a television.

Chapter End Notes

Scheduling note: Again, the next chapter will be posted on Thursday, 9/8. See you all then.
Chapter 200

Chapter Summary

Togami and Naegi search the data center and find answers they never wanted to uncover.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bursts of static flickered across the empty television screen as Naegi approached it, white noise crackling through the air as Togami moved the pieces of the antenna. It looked as though the other boy was having some trouble adjusting the antenna and seeing the screen at the same time, and of course he wouldn’t be able to hear the changes in the intensity of the static. After every change, he had to circle a few steps around the edge of the television so he could see the screen, scowling down at it when the blank image hadn’t changed.

Naegi reached him in the middle of one of those circuits, stepping directly into Togami’s line of vision before he could return to make another adjustment to the antenna. “Can I help?”

Togami blinked down at him for a moment, then gave a sharp nod. “Watch the screen and tell me if anything changes.” He paused, a scowl crossing his face as he seemed to realize the obvious flaw in that plan. “Or… tap my shoulder.” He looked from the sling holding Naegi’s left hand to the music stand pole in his right, and he sighed. “I’ll try to watch you as I make the changes.”

Naegi nodded, and Togami headed around to the back of the television to begin fiddling with the antenna again. From what Naegi could see, it looked like the sort of old-fashioned device he’d seen in the old movies his parents watched sometimes. Cords connected the central blue and white box to the television and an outlet in the wall, and two small prongs at the base stuck in the air in either direction. And Togami seemed to be doing more than just changing the direction of the prongs — he was also picking the box up and moving it to different locations within reach of the cords.

The screen seemed to stay fairly well covered in static, though. Togami inched the box slowly along the bottom of the television stand, moving the antenna with every change in position, but every time he looked up, Naegi had to shake his head to say that no, there was still no difference.

“What are you hoping to see?” Naegi asked, before Togami could turn back to the antenna for a fifth adjustment.

“Some news of the world outside,” Togami said, moving the antenna again without looking away from Naegi this time. “Even technology this out of date should still be able to pick up a basic over-the-air news broadcast. I want to know what they’re saying about us.”

Naegi shivered as the realization hit home. “I guess they probably would be talking about us, wouldn’t they? I mean, it would show up on the news if just one or two teenagers went missing, let alone sixteen of us.”

“And we’re hardly an ordinary group of students,” Togami pointed out, moving the antenna around to the opposite side of the television. “I have a presence in the international business world — one
that I had intended to maintain while attending school here. My disappearance will have been noticed by people worldwide.”

“That’s true…” Naegi said slowly as Togami’s words sank in. With the horror of the killing game overtaking every other emotion he’d felt at his admittance to Hope’s Peak, he had almost stopped thinking about the fact that his fellow classmates were widely acclaimed as the best and brightest of their generation. It wasn’t that he’d forgotten that Maizono had been a famous idol with hordes of fans or that Fukawa’s brilliant novels had won international praise — it was that those labels had felt less important as they’d all gotten to know one another. The people here in this school weren’t important to him because they were all Ultimates of one sort or another — they mattered because they were his friends.

A sudden shift in the fuzzy white noise jolted Naegi from his memories of his dead friends, and he looked up sharply to see a few white lines scrolling across the screen.

“That’s doing something,” Naegi said, looking over at Togami. To his relief, the other boy was looking his way, eyebrows raised questioningly at Naegi’s unexpected movement. “It’s not a picture yet, but it’s starting to change.”

Togami nodded, reaching back to make another minute adjustment, and then another. The screen flickered more and more with every change, until finally, finally, the white lines and crackling static blinked apart into an image.

“Stop!” Naegi blurted out before he could even get a good look at what he was seeing, freezing Togami’s hands in place on the antenna and locking the image in place.

And then the image registered. Disappointment sank low and sour through his stomach as he realized that he wasn’t looking at a news broadcast or a sitcom or a silly commercial — he was looking at an image of himself watching the television. And not even a recording — it seemed to be a live image, since the other figure on the screen circled around the television just as Togami moved away from the antenna to join him.

“It’s not working right,” Naegi said, tilting his head up to give the other boy a clear view of his lips. “It’s just showing another security feed.”

“What?” Togami looked at the screen, and his face went pale with indignation as he understood what Naegi meant. “But — but that’s absurd! Why would the mastermind need to have a security feed monitoring the room they use to observe us? And even if they did want it for some reason, why run it through a television instead of another wall monitor?”

Naegi blinked, recalling his examination of each of the screens as he’d searched for Kirigiri. He twisted around to peer up at the rows of screens on the walls around them, and once he’d found what he was looking for, he looked back at Togami. “It’s not just this television. Look up there — third row from the top.” He did his best to indicate the screen he meant with a nod.

Togami followed his gaze with a frown, until he saw the screen Naegi had referred to — and the duplicate image that mirrored the one on the television in front of them. “So there is a screen up there that shows this room.” He looked from the wall screen back to the television. “But why would they need two views of this room, of all places?”

“Maybe it shows other views, too?” Naegi suggested. “This might just be one setting.”

Togami reached out and jabbed a finger at the channel button several times — but after each press, the screen still resolved into the same image of the two of them peering at the television screen in
confusion.

After several tries, he shook his head, letting his hand fall away from the screen. “Whatever this is, it’s on every channel.” He glowered down at the antenna. “That thing must be faulty. It’s picking up the camera frequencies instead of the airwaves.”

“Can you fix it?” Naegi asked, looking down at the box dubiously. It looked as though the central piece might open along its middle, but he wouldn’t have known what to do with its insides any more than its outsides.

Togami paused, remaining silent for such a long moment that Naegi started to wonder if maybe the other boy hadn’t read his question. He was about to ask it again when Togami sighed heavily. “I would want to research how these things are meant to operate before trying anything,” he said at last. It wasn’t quite an admission that he didn’t know how to alter the antenna to do what they needed, but Naegi could understand what the proud boy had meant without forcing him to utter words that would make him unhappy.

Naegi matched Togami’s sigh with one of his own. “And I guess the mastermind isn’t going to give us the time to do that.”

“You’ll never know if you don’t ask!”

“Yeah, but it’s not like they’re around to…” Naegi’s voice died in his throat as he looked up into Togami’s pale, frozen face. Naegi had been looking right at him when he’d heard that last sentence, but… Togami’s mouth hadn’t moved. And… that voice…

Slowly, praying that he’d misunderstood what he was about to see, but with the horrible knowledge that he hadn’t, Naegi turned around.

Monokuma stood just a few feet behind him, head tilted in a position of polite inquiry.

Naegi stumbled backwards until he bumped into the television, but he hardly noticed as it rocked on the table. Monokuma… was here? But how was that possible? He was gone, Togami had said he was gone, deactivated and taken to pieces downstairs in the library. And it had to be true, because Naegi knew there was no way that the Monokuma who had spent weeks taking gleeful pleasure in their misery could have sat back and watched the events of the last twenty-four hours without popping up to make things even worse. He hadn’t even come when they’d found the body, even though a corpse usually brought him running. It hadn’t made sense, but it had all been enough that Naegi had just been starting to believe that maybe, maybe the awful bear really might be gone for good.

Monokuma threw his head back and laughed wildly, the sound screeching down Naegi’s spine. “Aw, look at those faces — I knew you’d miss me! I guess absence really does make the heart grow fonder — I can just hear your little hearts going pitter-patter at the fresh sight of my gorgeous self!”

Naegi grimaced. He hadn’t missed Monokuma’s ramblings at all. “What are you doing here?” he asked, then frowned. That wasn’t the right question. “Why were you gone?”

“Gone? Who was gone?” Monokuma asked, rolling his eyes with uncharacteristic exasperation. “You ain’t makin’ no sense, fool!”

His voice twisted into something rough and harsh, nearly unrecognizable in its difference from his usual bright and cheery attitude — an about-face of demeanor so dramatic that Naegi found
himself shaking his head. “Another new personality already? It’s only been a few seconds!”

Monokuma looked back at Naegi, his head tilting ever so slightly to one side. For a moment, Naegi almost thought that the bear really had gotten deactivated again… except that the red blaze of his lightning bolt eye never so much as dimmed, glaring out at Naegi like the relentless beam of a searchlight. Naegi blinked, wishing the table wasn’t behind him so that he could back up a little further. He didn’t like having so much of Monokuma’s attention focused on him, especially when he wasn’t sure what he’d done to make it happen.

At last, Monokuma grinned at him, bright and beaming. “What can I say? I just couldn’t bear the strain anymore!” He laughed at his ridiculous pun, as cheerful as if that long moment had never happened.

That only made Naegi more worried about it. What had Monokuma been trying to do? Had he just wanted to freak Naegi out, or…

A familiar hand settled lightly on his good shoulder, the warm pressure drawing his mind away from his fears. Naegi glanced up to see that Togami had circled around the television to join him, his jaw tight with suppressed rage as he glared across at Monokuma. Naegi frowned at that. Togami had never liked Monokuma any more than the rest of them, but he’d never been shy about demanding the bear provide them with information or assistance — and it had worked just often enough that he hadn’t been discouraged from doing so. He should have been peppering Monokuma with a flurry of questions about his disappearance, the robot in the library, the corpse upstairs… but instead…

“What has he been saying?” Togami gritted out through clenched teeth, tearing his eyes away from the bear so that he could get a clear view of Naegi’s mouth as he answered.

His mouth… so that he could read the words from Naegi’s lips.

Naegi got it then, finally, and felt a little slow that it had taken him so long. Of course Togami wouldn’t be able to read a robot’s lips — he must not have had any idea what was happening. No wonder he was getting angry.

“He hasn’t said much,” Naegi said, keeping his voice low even though he was pretty sure the cameras would pick it up no matter how quietly he spoke. “Just that he’s back, and… I guess he wasn’t ever really gone.”

Togami’s eyes darted back to Monokuma for a moment. “I see. So he was only playing dead.”

“Playing dead?” Monokuma made a good pretense of looking shocked. “What a terrible thing to say right to someone’s face! Man, it’s like you think I can’t hear you or something!” He laughed again.

Togami glanced back at Naegi, eyebrows raised.

Naegi hastily shook his head. “Nothing important.”

“Wow, Naegi darling, you sure know how to hit a bear where it hurts!” Monokuma’s grin turned sharp and dangerous. “All right, if you’re so impatient to get right to the important stuff… let’s talk about that television!” He gestured at the TV behind the boys, silver claws flashing out from his paw. “After all, it’s central to understanding your school life here!”

Naegi looked back at the television in case it had started showing something else when Monokuma had appeared — but no, it still showed the same scene of the three of them in the data center.
“But… the antenna isn’t working. It’s just showing the security camera feed.”

“Wrong!” Monokuma sang out. “Turns out your asshole boyfriend really is more than a pretty face — good thing for him, since he’s not looking too pretty now!” The bear took a step closer, the fur on his cheeks flushing bright pink and his shoulders heaving as if he’d begun breathing heavily. “But if you are looking for the prettiest person in the school…”

“The television!” Naegi blurted out, before Monokuma could get any further with that horrifying train of thought. “You were going to tell us about the television!”

“Was I?” Monokuma tilted his head thoughtfully, all trace of his earlier manner evaporating. “Oh, that. Well, it turns out that Togami did manage to get the antenna hooked up right so it could pick up the airwaves. That’s all.”

Naegi stared at the bear in bewilderment for a moment, ignoring the faintly impatient fingers tapping at his shoulder. He couldn’t translate Monokuma’s words for Togami if he didn’t understand what the bear was talking about. “That can’t be right. If it’s working, why is it showing this picture?”

“And here I was starting to think you were smart!” Monokuma huffed. “Fine, I’ll spell it out — but pay attention, because I’m only saying it once.” He grinned up at Naegi, red eye narrowing with anticipated glee. “Everything all you students have done since the killing game began has been broadcast live to the entire world!”

Chapter End Notes

So... Monokuma is back just in time to celebrate the 200th chapter! I'm sure that terrifying and murderous robots are exactly how everyone likes to mark anniversaries! :D

I do want to thank everyone who has been reading the story up to this point -- both those of you who have stuck with me from the start and those who joined in later. This story is fun to write, but part of what makes it so enjoyable is knowing that you're having fun along with me. I really appreciate all of you!
Naegi realizes the implications of Monokuma's revelation about the security cameras.

Naegi stared at Monokuma, feeling as though the bear had just hit him across the back of the head. He understood the words Monokuma had said to him, but when he tried to put them all together and look at their meaning… they didn’t make sense.

“What do you mean?” he asked, clinging to the brittle hope that maybe if Monokuma would just take a few moments to explain himself more clearly, it would all start to fit together.

“This whole game from start to finish has been the ultimate reality show!” Monokuma announced with his brightest smile. “Genuine despair programming delivered live to every television in the world!”

The screens on the walls surrounding them seemed to blaze across Naegi’s vision, and it was all too easy to imagine those images lighting up the televisions out in the rest of the world. He could see the boys’ locker room where Owada would have stood blood-splattered and panic-stricken over Fujisaki’s corpse. And there was the physics equipment room where Celeste’s machinations had caused Yamada to turn on Ishimaru. And there, in the cluster of screens showing the dorms, he could see Ogami’s bed, where Fukawa’s poisoned needles had misfired to take Hagakure’s life instead of Togami’s. And just a few screens down from it… he could see his own room, with the camera pointing directly into the empty bathroom where Kuwata had turned Maizono’s murder plot around on her.

So much death had happened in those rooms, under the unrelenting gaze of the security cameras. It had been bad enough to know that the mastermind had been watching them, observing the horror for some inexplicable reason of their own… but now, Monokuma was telling him that it had been even worse? People across the world had been watching as the mastermind’s despair drove them apart and dragged them into darkness?

Naegi frowned at Monokuma, trying to get as much of a measure of the robot’s sincerity as he ever could. “Are you telling the truth?”

“Of course!” Monokuma didn’t gloat or laugh or make it into a joke. With any of that, Naegi almost might have been able to dismiss the words. But this statement, as matter-of-fact as Monokuma ever said anything… there was no way around the bald truth. Naegi didn’t want to believe it, didn’t want to accept that it could be true… but however many horrible things Monokuma had done, he had never outright lied to them. The painful truth had always been his favorite weapon, withheld until the moment when it could do the most damage.

“What is he saying to you?”

With a start, Naegi’s gaze jumped away from Monokuma’s horrible smile and towards a much friendlier face. Togami looked down at him through narrowed eyes, his mouth a thin line that barely split enough to let his words escape. He clearly knew that Monokuma had been saying something terrible, but that was just a reasonable guess when it came to the bear. Togami couldn’t
possibly suspect just how horrifying this particular revelation was.

But no matter how bad it was, Naegi knew he had to tell the other boy. The look in Togami’s eyes was more than mere curiosity, a fierce and desperate hunger for the knowledge he was being denied. He would want to know the truth, no matter how painful the knowledge would be. And that meant that somehow, Naegi had to find a way to put this horrifying, unthinkable new reality into words.

“Oh no, what’s this?” Monokuma’s sing-song words cut through Naegi’s thoughts, a nasty current of mockery running through them. “Don’t tell me you’ve caught a bad case of stage fright now that you know you’re being broadcast live! After all, it’s not like you care about getting filmed anymore, right? Right?”

Naegi blinked, a little puzzled by the way Monokuma had emphasized those last few words. He didn’t especially enjoy the constant scrutiny of the cameras, but he supposed it was true that he didn’t find it quite as upsetting in and of itself as some of the others had. He’d never exactly been able to forget they were all under observation, but outside of the times when he’d had to try to communicate without being overheard, it hadn’t really impacted him that much. The only time being filmed had really bothered him was —

Heat flooded through Naegi’s face, burning his cheeks to a painful scarlet as the memory of Monokuma’s awful film screening assembly came rushing back to him. The mastermind had aired the recordings of the two times he and Togami had slept together, putting those first fragile moments at the start of their relationship on display where all their friends had been forced to watch — recordings that had been captured by the security feeds on the screens around them now.

The same screens that Monokuma just revealed had been broadcast to the world.

“Naegi?” Togami’s eyes widened with alarm, and his grip tightened a little on Naegi’s shoulder, though not enough to hurt. “What’s wrong? What is he trying to tell you?”

Naegi tried to answer, but only a strangled noise twisted its way from his throat. The revelation that the killing game was being broadcast would have been horrible enough — but this, on top of it? Togami had been mortified to know that fewer than a dozen of their friends had seen those recordings, for the few minutes they’d played before Naegi had torn down Monokuma’s projection. How could he tell the proud boy that the whole world had been watching the moments that should have been so intensely private?

“Oh my, am I about to witness a genuine case of translation error?” Monokuma’s red eye sparkled as he watched Naegi. “Or maybe… it won’t be so much of an error after all! It’s not like he’d know the difference if you decided to make a few little alterations to the truth.”

That hadn’t even occurred to Naegi until Monokuma suggested it. He couldn’t lie to Togami, of course, that would be unthinkable… but maybe he didn’t have to explain right now. He could wait for a better moment, one when they weren’t face to face with the mastermind’s puppet. It would be so much easier to find the words he needed if he didn’t have the security monitors surrounding him and Monokuma leering up at him. If he just put the explanation off…

Then it would be the same thing as lying by omission. Looking up into Togami’s eyes, Naegi could see worry, anger, frustration… but not so much as a shred of doubt. The other boy had been stricken deaf — *temporarily* deaf, it had to be temporary, he couldn’t let himself believe anything else — because Naegi had insisted that they investigate the corpse immediately. He’d lost the use of one of his senses in the worst possible situation to be at a disadvantage, but he’d never so much as suggested that Naegi was at fault for the injury, even though he would have been perfectly
justified in believing that.

No, all he’d asked for was an accurate explanation of the words he couldn’t currently hear — and he’d trusted Naegi to tell him the truth. Naegi had asked for Togami’s trust, back when they’d fumbled towards the start of a romance, and now Togami had kept on giving it past the point when Naegi would have expected anything. He couldn’t betray a trust that deep by misrepresenting the facts, even in so minor a way as delaying a piece of information.

“Aw, too shy to talk with your headmaster right in front of you? Should I give you some privacy?” Monokuma laughed. “I mean, seven billion people minus one have to be better than having the whole world watching, right?”

Naegi tried to swallow, but his throat had gone dry and scratchy at the thought of so many people listening in on his conversation. He’d never considered himself to be too self-conscious, at least not until he’d been invited to join Hope’s Peak and its cadre of Ultimates — but now, with the security camera blazing down at him like the lens of a microscope, all the words he could have said seemed to drain away.

“And it’s not like you have anything to complain about!” Monokuma went on, grin widening. “After all, you and your sweetie-pie get to be the romantic subplot on the world’s highest rated show! Even arrogant corporate hotshots can’t pay for this kind of exposure! Just imagine all those people glued to their screens, cheering you on at every moment!”

Naegi’s stomach lurched at the thought of the moments people would have been watching the most closely. He would have liked to think that people would have been kind enough to look away or turn off their televisions to give an unknowing couple some small scrap of privacy — but even if everyone had the best of intentions, that wouldn’t have been possible.

A horrible vision flashed before his eyes — row after row of huge demo units in electronics stores all plastered with the frantic passion of their first kiss, the surround-sound speakers filling the air with gasps and moans that had never been meant for anyone else’s ears. The sounds would have drawn people from all directions to turn towards the screens, to watch with horror and morbid curiosity as he’d pushed Togami onto his back and thrust between the other boy’s legs. And — he’d screamed, Naegi remembered, sour humiliation rising through the back of his throat as the sounds echoed through his head. Even people who might have tried their best not to listen would have heard how Togami had fallen apart on the library floor. He bit his lip, his face twisting with the effort to hold back tears.

“Whatever you’re saying to him, stop it immediately!” Togami snarled, spinning to face Monokuma. “You have no right to talk like this when I can’t understand you!”

“Oh my! It looks like the cold-hearted ice prince has completed his evolution into a knight in shining armor! Could this be the work of True Love?” Monokuma clasped his paws together in a pose of dreamy delight. “Man, I sure hope nothing could happen to make him change his mind!”

A wave of dizzying nausea shuddered through Naegi at that idea, and he had to look away from the pair in front of him so that he wouldn’t be sick. He knew Togami cared about him, but… how could a romance of barely two weeks be strong enough to withstand this kind of international shame? Once he knew what the rest of the world had seen of the two of them together, how would Togami ever stand to look at him again?

Suddenly, a shadow fell across his vision, muting the too-bright glare of the screens surrounding them. Naegi looked back up to see Togami standing directly in front of him, blocking his view of the horrible screens and everything their images implied.
“Don’t listen to him,” Togami ordered, his voice too loud for the room — loud enough to drown out everything else around them. “Nothing that comes out of his mouth could be worth this. Trust me, Naegi, you can ignore whatever nonsense he’s been telling you.”

*Trust me.*

Naegi gulped, staring up into his boyfriend’s furious eyes — full of anger directed not at Naegi himself, but at everything in the world that had brought him to this point. Time after time, Togami had said that he cared, that Naegi’s wellbeing mattered to him, and he’d never done a thing to make Naegi doubt his word. When Naegi had asked the other boy for trust, he’d gotten it. Now… it was his turn to do the same.

“The security camera feeds are being broadcast to the whole world.”

After he blurted out the words, Naegi’s fingers clamped painfully tight on the music stand pole, knuckles going white as he watched Togami’s face go ashen.

“They’re — what?” Togami’s eyes darted to the television behind Naegi, and then up to the images on the walls. “But — no, that’s not possible. To do that, you’d have to take over the airwaves — and not just in Japan, but all over the planet!”

Monokuma’s laughter sliced through the fragile bubble of peace Togami had briefly created. “Someone sure thinks he’s smart! But hijacking the airwaves is Easy Mode — if you’ve got the resources to pull it off!”

Togami’s eyes narrowed at the shift in Naegi’s attention. “Is he talking to you again?”

“Uh — yeah,” Naegi said. “He says that you’re right, he did take over the airwaves.”

Togami considered him a moment longer. “This can’t be all he said. You’re too upset. What else is there?”

Naegi’s stomach dropped as he realized what the other boy meant. Togami hadn’t figured it out yet.

“Naegi!” Togami glared at him impatiently. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Naegi opened his mouth, then snapped it closed without forming any words. Telling Togami the truth about the cameras had been bad enough — did he really have to spell out the humiliating implications? Surely Togami would work it out on his own, any second now. He didn’t have to force himself to say it.

And then with a loud crackle, the television behind him changed. Naegi stiffened with dread, not quite able to bring himself to turn around and look — but he didn’t need to be facing the screen to recognize the sound of his boyfriend crying his name.

Togami jerked backwards, his hand jolting away from Naegi’s shoulder like he’d been scalded, and Naegi looked up to see the other boy’s eyes filling with the horrified shame of full comprehension. His face flooded with painfully bright crimson, and every emotion Naegi had feared scorched its way across his features.

It was too much, especially with Monokuma’s mocking laughter echoing through the room. Naegi turned around and found the power button on the side of the television, jamming it off with all the strength he could muster. The terrible images disappeared… but it didn’t make him feel any better.
“That…” Togami’s eyes were still locked on the blank television screen. “That… that can’t be legal!” He spun to face Monokuma again. “Distributing sexually explicit content involving minors violates the laws of every civilized country!”

“Huh? Civilized?” Monokuma tilted his head inquisitively. “What do you think makes a country civilized? Is it when everyone sits down quietly and does what they’re told, just because it’s the law? But if that were true, then there wouldn’t be any criminals who try to find sneaky little ways to avoid following rules.” A nasty smile crossed his face. “Maybe the rest of the world isn’t as civilized as you think!”

Togami’s rage only became more obvious as Monokuma made a lengthy speech he couldn’t understand. “Why would you do something like this?” He spun towards Naegi. “Why?”

“Oh…” Naegi looked past his furious boyfriend to the cheerful bear. “I don’t know…”

“Aw, you don’t? Are you sure about that?” Monokuma heaved a heavy sigh. “Well, I guess it’s a headmaster’s duty to give remedial lessons to the slow kids.” His red eye gleamed. “There is a reason for all this, you know. Everything has a meaning. All those tantalizing little tidbits I’ve been giving you about this school’s mysteries, even luring you here… why would I do anything like that without a reason?” He brandished a paw, claws flashing through the air. “It was all for my captive audience — to show them true despair like they’ve never seen it before!” He threw back his head and laughed wildly.

Naegi’s gaze darted from Monokuma to Togami, who was waiting for a translation with gritted teeth. “Um… he says he did it to cause despair.”

“What? That’s all you have to say about my plan?” Monokuma’s face fell like his feelings had been genuinely hurt. “I know you can’t capture the true beauty of my adorable voice, but you could at least make the effort! If that’s the best you can do, maybe I won’t bother giving you any more hints!”

He started to bounce out of sight — then paused. “Oh, right — I guess there is one more thing I have to do before I go, huh? I mean, I’ve put it off too long as it is!” He waved a negligent paw.

*Ding dong, ding dong.*

The yellow security monitor, the only blank screen left in the room, flickered to life, revealing Monokuma’s grinning face. “A body has been discovered! After a certain amount of time, which you may use however you like, the class trial will begin!”
Chapter 202

Chapter Summary

The investigation for the fifth class trial begins... and Togami and Naegi have no more answers than before.

Naegi froze as the familiar sounds of the body discovery announcement echoed through the data center. The announcement hadn’t sounded when he and Togami had first entered the ruined classroom, and with the way events had played out since, he’d stopped expecting to hear it. After all, the body discovery announcement couldn’t be automated, not with the incredibly specific criteria that went into determining when it ought to air — and they’d believed that Monokuma was out of action. How could the mastermind trigger an announcement if they couldn’t operate Monokuma himself?

Except that apparently, Monokuma had never been genuinely out of the way at all. It had all been a trick… just so the mastermind could watch them suffer at this specific moment. And not just the mastermind. Naegi could feel the security camera trained on the three of them, burning against his skin like a sunbeam through a magnifying glass. The mastermind was frying them like ants on the sidewalk, without any real explanation why.

When the screen faded to static, Naegi finally felt able to jerk his eyes away. He turned towards Togami, preparing to explain — but he found the other boy scowling up at the empty screen instead. It stung a little to realize that Togami hadn’t been looking at him — but of course he wouldn’t need Naegi to explain the body discovery announcement, not when they’d already seen the same recorded message so many times. Naegi knew he ought to feel happy that Togami had managed to understand on his own… but he couldn’t help the hollow feeling of a missed connection somewhere deep in his heart.

“I’ll leave the next Monokuma File here,” Monokuma announced, tossing the files onto the television stand beside Naegi. “You two give it all you’ve got, okay?”

“But — wait!” Naegi did his best to pull himself together before Monokuma could disappear again. “We — we can’t have a trial now! None of the girls are here. They’re all missing, or unconscious, or —” He couldn’t bring himself to say the other possibility, even though the glaring question of the unidentified corpse loomed first and foremost in his mind. “We all have to be here for the investigation, don’t we?”

“Huh?” Monokuma tilted his head, looking puzzled. “Are you making up your own rules now? Because if you’re looking to take over the role of headmaster from yours truly, you ought to know that this highly prized title can only be passed on through a glorious mano-a-urso fight to the death!” He grinned, raising his unsheathed claws. “Interested?”

Naegi wished he had a free hand to rub at his temples. He was too tired to try to pick apart one of Monokuma’s confusing rants. “What are you talking about?”

“Such a cruel rejection!” Monokuma drew back in a mockery of hurt feelings. “Well, if all you wanted was to know the rules, you could’ve just looked in your e-handbook. Every rule in there is still just as much in effect now as it has been from the beginning! And not a single one of them
says that any of you slackers are required to participate in the investigation if you don’t want to.”

“But — how can we have a trial if no one else has a chance to look at the evidence?” Naegi protested. “Togami and I are the only ones who can investigate right now!”

“Huh? You’re gonna keep looking?” Monokuma asked, tilting his head. “But aren’t you nearly done? It sounded to me like you guys got bored of investigating and wanted to go back for a nap!”

Naegi flinched at the reminder. Even the thought of walking down another flight of stairs made his knees tremble with exhaustion — how would he ever manage to endure the grueling hours of another class trial? And then there was Togami — he knew the other boy had only insisted they check the data center to hide the fact that he’d been too tired to take another step. Even if they managed to make it down to the first floor without collapsing, how could either of them expect to make a coherent contribution to the debate?

“We can’t do that anymore,” Naegi said, more in an attempt to calm the fears whispering through his mind than in a real response to Monokuma’s words. “If there’s going to be a trial, then — then we just have to keep going.” He gulped. “There isn’t anyone else.”

“Well, suit yourself!” Monokuma said brightly. “But it doesn’t sound like a very good reason to change your mind about something important like that! After all, the countdown to the trial started when you two found the body!”

“What?” Naegi frowned. “But — the announcement —”

“Got delayed, like I said!” Monokuma said. “How can you possibly expect a beautifully proportioned bear like me to operate one of your outrageously human-centric keyboards? It’s like none of them were designed with the ursine paw in mind! You’ve been spoiled till now, but you can’t expect up to the minute news all the time!”

Naegi blinked, trying to parse Monokuma’s rambling into a real answer. So if the announcement had been delayed from when he and Togami had found the body… that meant that all the time they’d spent in the ruined classroom hadn’t been the leisurely investigation they’d thought. The clock had been ticking the whole time, even though they hadn’t been aware of it. And if they hadn’t stopped to check the data center… if they’d gone to the music room to rest, or made it all the way down to the dorms to sleep…

“Were you even going to tell us?” he asked, the question popping out in spite of the fact that he knew the futility of questioning Monokuma. “Or were you just going to let us waste all the time until the trial?”

“Oh, I wasn’t worried,” Monokuma said blithely, giving Naegi a bright smile. “I have faith that my star pupils will figure everything out on just the right schedule!”

“But I thought you said we were slow and needed remedial lessons,” Naegi said, frowning.

“Argh, it’s always details, details, details with you!” Monokuma flung his arms in the air with a snarl. “Can a bear really survive on an all-honey diet? How many picnic baskets would it take to sustain the local wildlife? Why don’t you stop getting hung up on the little questions and start looking at the big picture, huh?”

And with that, he disappeared again, leaving the boys alone in the data center.

Or as alone as they could be, anyway. Naegi glanced up at the security camera again and shuddered at the thought of all the people watching from the outside world. What had all of them
thought about the conversation he’d just had with Monokuma? Had they been supporting him, encouraging him to press on and try to find a solution that would get everyone through the class trial alive… or had they just been frustrated at his inability to find the right words? After all… if the camera feeds were all being broadcast, then that meant the murder must have been shown, too. Anyone watching him right now already knew the answer he needed.

That thought was too awful to dwell on for long. Doing his best to push away the images of a murder playing out on the screens around him, Naegi turned towards Togami, seeking the comfort of his boyfriend’s gaze.

But Togami didn’t notice him. The other boy had flipped open one of the Monokuma Files, glowering determinedly down at it with an expression that proclaimed his deliberate disinterest in everything else in the room — and most especially with the security camera pointed at him.

Naegi started to take a step towards him, to try to get his attention and start discussing what they needed to do… but as he moved towards Togami, the pressure of a billion eyes slowed his feet, dragging them to the ground before he could cross the short distance. People were watching him now, forced into being voyeurs by the mastermind’s constant broadcast whether they would have chosen to observe or not… and they knew everything that had passed between the couple. Even reaching out to touch Togami’s shoulder would be a blazing reminder of the more intimate touches they’d shared.

But even that might not have been so bad, if Togami would just look up at him. Naegi knew he could have found the strength to cross the rest of that distance, audience or not, if only he’d been sure Togami wanted him there. But he’d realized almost from the start that the humiliation of being observed would hit Togami much more painfully, with his deep pride in his status and his investment in appearing emotionally untouchable. But even so… he’d hoped that Togami wouldn’t shut him out entirely.

Naegi took a deep breath and looked away from the other boy, giving him the space he obviously seemed to want. They didn’t have time to deal with this now, not with the countdown to the trial already running. He ought to follow Togami’s example and at least try to make some progress on their investigation. He turned his attention to the other Monokuma File lying on the television stand, trying to work out how to get the folder open without a free hand.

Leaning against the television stand gave him a little extra steadiness, although from the way the stand creaked, he wouldn’t want to rest all of his weight on it. But it was just enough for the few brief moments he needed to let the music stand pole fall into the crook of his elbow, freeing his good hand to flip the file open and leave the single page inside clearly visible. He shrugged the pole back into his hand again, a little pleased that he managed the maneuver without losing his grip. He might not have the use of his left hand back, but at least he was starting to get a little more adept at managing one-handed.

Once he felt steady enough to shift his weight away from the television stand, Naegi looked down at the file and began reading through the information Monokuma had provided for them.

**Monokuma File #5**

_Due to severe injuries suffered during an explosion, the body’s identity is unclear. The explosion occurred after the victim’s death._

_Two knife wounds in the chest area extend all the way to the victim’s back. The second wound occurred after the victim’s death._
There are also signs that the victim was exposed to a fatal dose of airborne poison.

There are also signs of many other wounds on the body. However, these are old wounds that were not inflicted in the last few days.

Naegi read through the words several times, but they seemed to make less and less sense with every repetition. He hadn’t really expected to find a definite identification of the body in the file, not after someone had gone through so much trouble to hide the victim’s identity — but he hadn’t thought there would be quite so little information, either. No time of death… no cause of death… none of the details that had been in any of the earlier files.

“Is there more on the back of the sheet?” he muttered to himself, considering whether it might be worth it to try to go through all the trouble it would take to flip the paper over.

“No, there’s not.”

Naegi looked up sharply to see Togami scowling at him. He must have looked up just in time to read the words Naegi had mumbled, even though they’d been soft enough that he probably couldn’t have heard them at the distance he was standing.

“And there isn’t another page, either,” he went on, snapping his folder closed with a disgusted flick of his wrist. “This is all the information we get this time — not that we should have expected anything more. Whatever else happened, this murder is obviously connected to the mastermind in some way.”

“So they’d want to give away as little information as possible,” Naegi said, seeing all too clearly where Togami was going with it. “Especially if it’s something that we’re not supposed to know.”

“Precisely,” Togami said. He tilted his head and frowned down at Naegi for a moment, and Naegi couldn’t quite work out what the other boy was thinking from his expression. “And you must know that whatever secret the mastermind is so determined to keep probably has to do with this Mukuro Ikusaba.”

“I guess,” Naegi said, his one mobile shoulder hunching a little under the other boy’s scrutiny. He didn’t mind Togami looking at him… but something about this particular gaze made him feel a little like he was the subject of Togami’s inquiry, rather than his partner. “But we already know she’s involved.”

“But not how,” Togami countered. “She could be the victim… or she could be an accomplice, or the murderer herself. We don’t know enough about her to judge — what she’s been doing in hiding all these weeks, or why she chose now to reveal herself to Kirigiri. We don’t even know if that was her operating Monokuma now, or if someone else has taken over in her absence.”

“That’s true,” Naegi said, thinking back to what Kirigiri had said. “Ikusaba did operate Monokuma… but she might not have been the only one doing it.”

Togami snorted. “Multiple operatives would certainly explain a lot of the drivel that came out of that thing’s mouth.”

But Naegi shook his head. “No — I don’t think it would. I mean, it’s not like a lot of people talk the way Monokuma does. He might not make sense, but… he always doesn’t make sense in the same way.”

Togami grimaced. “I suppose. I try not to think too hard about his nonsense. So it was just more of the same today?”
“Yeah… pretty much,” Naegi said slowly, trying to remember everything Monokuma had said. There had been that one odd moment when Monokuma had first appeared, when he’d almost seemed to have an entirely different personality… but it had been gone in the blink of an eye, replaced with the same bear Naegi had come to know too well over the past few weeks. Maybe that had just been some bizarre joke that he hadn’t understood. “Most of what he said was the same as usual.”

“Meaning that either Ikusaba is still alive and at the helm, or that whoever is in her place already has experience talking through Monokuma,” Togami said, crossing his arms. “That’s no help for figuring out who that body is.”

Naegi hesitated, not quite wanting to ask the next question, but not seeing a way to avoid it. “Then… do we need to go back upstairs and look at the body again?”

Even as he said the words, he knew how impossible it was. Walking down the stairs had been enough of a challenge… how could they possibly expect to make it up? And even if by some miracle they succeeded, that would just be one more staircase in their way when the investigation period ended and they had to climb down for the trial.

Togami shook his head slowly. “It wouldn’t be worth the time or effort,” he said. “Identifying the body has to be the priority, if we’re going to work out who killed her — and if we could have figured that out from examining the scene, we would have managed it already.”

Naegi frowned. He couldn’t help but feel like there had to be some piece of information in that room that could tell them whether or not that body had belonged to Kirigiri, something that he’d missed… but Togami was right. They couldn’t just go back upstairs and hope for an epiphany. “Then… should we try to get back down to the first floor to wake Ogami up?”

“Why, so she can stand guard over the body?” Togami rolled his eyes. “She’s never been much help in any of the other investigations, I doubt she’d start being useful now. We’ll go let her out before the trial — and we can question her about whether she saw anything. But we should focus on the upper floors first.”

He didn’t add because we won’t be able to get back up here if we leave… but Naegi heard the words clearly anyway. “Then… where else do you want to look?”

Togami scowled. “To identify that body, we’ll need more information on either Kirigiri or Ikusaba. Some sort of personal records would be ideal, but I doubt those are stored anywhere we could get at them. I know there are books about the Fenrir group in the library. If we’re done here, I suggest we head downstairs to see if there are any clues there.”

“But… are you sure we’re finished looking around this floor?” Naegi asked dubiously.

“I suppose we could check the chemistry lab to confirm our conclusions about the poison and the reagent, if you really feel it’s necessary,” Togami said, shrugging. “But the point of the trial isn’t to solve every single mystery associated with the murder — it’s to vote on the killer. If we don’t know who the victim was, it won’t matter how the poison worked, because we’ll still have the same set of possibilities. And the library is the only room in the school that might have information related to Ikusaba.”

Naegi blinked. “Wait — no, it wouldn’t be the only room, would it? I mean… Kirigiri and Ogami both said Ikusaba was the sixteenth student, right? So if she was a student… wouldn’t she have a student record?”
“Presumably,” Togami said, not sounding terribly interested in this possibility. “But information like that would be locked up somewhere.”

“Somewhere like the headmaster’s office?” An idea was starting to grow in the back of Naegi’s mind. “Because if it’s there… then it’s not actually locked away, right? Ogami said she broke that lock.”

“Yes, but it’s still barricaded,” Togami said. “And I tried to break through earlier, before — well, before any of this, and I couldn’t make a dent.”

“You won’t need to.” Naegi thought of the e-handbook in his pocket… and the two remaining trip tickets tucked in the back of it. “I have an idea.”
Chapter 203

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Togami try to use a trip ticket to get into the headmaster's office.

Naegi couldn’t help but shudder as he and Togami stepped out of the data center. That place had been bad enough when he’d thought that it was just the way the mastermind had been keeping tabs on them… but now that he knew its real purpose, he couldn’t put the place behind him fast enough. It wouldn’t change the fact that they were still being broadcast worldwide, for reasons that made no sense — but maybe without the evidence directly in front of them, he and Togami could find some way to start getting past the horror of it.

Because like it or not, they were going to have to deal with it. The security cameras were already trained on them as they stepped out into the hall, letting the data center door swing shut behind them. At the sound of the lock catching, Naegi glanced back behind him — but it was probably just one of those doors that locked automatically. And it didn’t matter if that awful room was locked, anyway, not when Togami still had the key safely in his pocket. Not that Naegi ever wanted to set foot in there again.

As they started back towards the headmaster’s office, Togami moved to put a supportive arm around Naegi — but Naegi ducked aside before he could. Togami was too exhausted to try to take someone else’s weight — he needed to focus on keeping himself upright. Naegi at least had the music stand pole to help him.

“I think I can make it on my own,” he said, looking up into Togami’s startled eyes. That had to be better than pointing out the truth. Naegi knew Togami would hate to be told how obviously tired he was — but this way, he could keep his pride without wasting more of his precious energy. “It isn’t far.”

Togami stared down at him for a moment, then stepped away with a sharp nod. “If that’s what you want.”

Naegi wished he could say that it wasn’t — of course it wasn’t. What he wanted was to burrow safe and snug in Togami’s embrace, letting the other boy’s arms wrap around him in a barrier against the horrors of this school. He wanted to curl up in bed together and sleep and sleep and sleep until neither of them could remember what it felt like to fight to hold their eyes open. He wanted to be in a room where they could lock the door and be entirely alone, where the only person watching him would be the boy at his side.

But he knew he couldn’t have any of that. He didn’t dare let himself get distracted by a dream of it, not with a class trial looming ahead of them. Naegi pushed the thoughts away and determinedly thought of nothing but the floor in front of him until they made it to the headmaster’s office door.

Togami reached out to try the handle. It turned easily enough, but the door itself didn’t budge. He turned back to Naegi with a raised eyebrow. “Well? What’s this great idea of yours?”

Naegi stepped close to the wall and leaned against it, just enough to let go of the pole for a few moments. With his hand free, he was able to reach into his pocket and tug one of the trip tickets
out from the back of his e-handbook. Dried brown blood crinkled one length of it, but the text still looked readable. “Here — I think this should get us in.”

“What is it?” Not waiting for an answer, Togami plucked the ticket from Naegi’s fingers and peered down at it for a moment. “What the —” His head jerked up towards Naegi, eyes wide. “Is this real? Where the hell did you get it?”

“Monokuma gave it to me before he disappeared,” Naegi said.

“He just gave it to you?” Togami repeated, his disbelief plain.

“Well, he said I owe him a million Mono-coins for it.”

“So all it took was fake money that you can pay on credit?” Togami narrowed his eyes. “What’s the catch?”

“He’ll lock us in whatever room I use to visit,” Naegi said with a sigh. “That’s — uh, that’s why Jill and I ended up stuck in the library yesterday. Monokuma didn’t tell me he was going to lock us in till after I used one.” Seeing Togami’s face begin to darken at the reference to his injury the previous day, Naegi hurried onward. “So I’m pretty sure this will get us through the door, but I don’t know how much of our time we’ll lose.”

“But it would be a chance to go through a room that the mastermind has tried very hard to keep us out of,” Togami said. He glanced up at the cameras. “And now that you’ve talked about your plan, I think it’s now or never. Otherwise, Monokuma will come up with some reason why the headmaster’s office isn’t included.” He handed the ticket back to Naegi. “You ‘paid’ for the thing — you use it. I don’t want him to have any excuse to invalidate it.”

Naegi nodded. “Yeah. Even if we lose the rest of our chance to investigate, I think this is worth it.”

“Aw, you miss me already?”

Naegi jumped as the words came almost immediately after he’d finished speaking. When he looked away from the camera, Monokuma was already standing in the hallway just a few steps away, grinning brightly. The mastermind must have been listening already — although that wasn’t much of a surprise, not when Naegi and Togami had been talking about them.

Naegi took a deep breath and extended the trip ticket towards Monokuma, as much as his injuries would allow. “I’d like to use this.”

“Huh? Now?” Monokuma tilted his head.

“Yes,” Naegi said. “Togami and I want to take a trip to the headmaster’s office.”

“What? You mean you want to take the lovingly crafted gift I gave you so that you could better enjoy your precious school days and turn it against me?” Monokuma drew back, eyes wide with false hurt. “I never thought you could be so cruel!”

“It says I can use it on any area of the school that isn’t locked,” Naegi persisted. It was possible that Monokuma might come up with some reason not to honor the ticket — but he wasn’t going to get put off by a distraction. “And the headmaster’s office isn’t locked anymore. We want to go in there.”

“But are you sure you want to waste a ticket on the boring old administrative rooms?” Monokuma
asked, leaning forward. “Just imagine the other heart-throbbing destinations you could go — like the fabulously romantic possibilities of the physics lab! Who knows what could happen in the shadow of the air purifier…” He leered at Naegi. “Or maybe you’re only asking this because you’re too shy to admit that you really want to take a trip to the sauna! You know it’s a good first date when you both end up hot and sweaty, right?” He threw his head back and laughed.

Naegi gritted his teeth, trying to ignore the hot blush flooding his cheeks. “This isn’t a date, and we don’t want to go any of those other places. We want to go into the headmaster’s office.”

Monokuma sighed heavily. “I’m starting to think you aren’t even trying to give my audience a good romantic subplot anymore,” he grumbled. “What will your hordes of adoring fans think?”

Naegi swallowed hard at the reminder of the audience — but he couldn’t let Monokuma use embarrassment to deter him, either. “I don’t care what they think,” he said firmly, hoping that he at least sounded as though that was true. “Are you going to let me use this ticket or not?”

“So stubborn! You must really want to get in there, huh?” Monokuma gasped. “I see, I see — it’s the thrill of doing something naughty, isn’t it? You started out in the library, but now you need something even more extreme!” He cackled. “Well, if sneaking into my office is the only thing that’ll get you going, who am I to tell you no?” He snatched the ticket from Naegi’s hand. “Remember to smile for the cameras!”

He disappeared with a last wild laugh. Naegi grimaced, shrugging the music stand pole back into his hand. “Well, that could have gone better.”

“Did he refuse?” Togami looked over at the door, still oppressively closed.

“No… I’m pretty sure he agreed, actually,” Naegi said. “But — well, he kept acting like we were going on a date, not investigating.” He figured it was better to leave it at that — repeating all Monokuma’s ramblings would just make Togami angrier.

Togami rolled his eyes. “Typical. But… he said he’d do it?” Without waiting for an answer, he reached out to try the door. It turned easily, just as it had a few minutes ago — but this time, it swung open without obstruction, giving them their first look into the headmaster’s office.

The room looked like a tornado had blown through it, leaving disaster in its wake. Naegi’s jaw dropped at the sight of scattered papers, emptied shelves, and overturned drawers. After all the fuss Monokuma had made about how this was the headmaster’s private office, he’d been expecting… well, a working space, tidy and productive. Or at the very least, he’d thought it might be cold and abandoned, like the forgotten corners of the library where the dust had piled up. Why would the mastermind want to lock away a mess like this? Was it another scene of some long-ago horror, like classroom 5-C… or was this more recent?

Naegi started to enter, ready to begin his investigation — but Togami held out a hand in front of him before he could.

“Not yet.” Togami looked into the room for a moment, then back at Naegi. “Stay here and hold the door.”

“Uh… if you want?” Naegi wasn’t quite sure what Togami was getting at, but he stepped into the path of the door anyway, using his good shoulder to stop it from closing.

Togami nodded sharply, then crossed the room to the shelves and tried to lift one of the thick, heavy volumes that had fallen to the floor. Naegi bit his lip when it took the other boy a couple
attempts to get it, but it wasn’t as though he could offer to help, not with his hands out of commission. Eventually, Togami managed to get the book back to the entrance, staggering slightly with the weight, and dropped it by the edge of the door frame.

Comprehension dawned, and Naegi edged out of the way so that Togami could position the book as a doorstop. When it was in place, Naegi stepped away from the door, letting it swing shut — until the book prevented it from closing entirely. If Monokuma had wanted to keep them stuck in the office, this ought to give them at least a little protection against it.

Naegi smiled at Togami as he looked up from the door. “That was a good idea.”

The smirk he got in response made his breath catch, both comfortingly familiar and strikingly new. Naegi knew he’d never seen that particular expression on Togami’s face before, and yet… he knew without even pausing to think that this was a distinctly showing off smirk, the one Togami wore when he’d done something he considered especially clever. And without quite understanding what he was doing, Naegi took a step forward, falling easily into the next step of a well-worn pattern as he tilted his head up for a kiss.

But before he could finish the movement, the shadow of a security camera in the corner of the room stopped him short. He felt the blood drain from his face, unable to tear his gaze away from the camera and everything it represented. Were people watching him at this very moment? Had they recognized the way he’d started to move into a kiss, laughing at how easily he’d forgotten the ticking clock and his endangered friends?

Guilt burned at the back of his throat, and he had to clamp his lips shut tight to hold it back. He must look like the biggest hypocrite in the world. He’d talked so much about investigating and helping his friends, and then what was the first thing he did when they finally got the chance to search one of the mysterious locked rooms? He should have known that they didn’t have time to waste on kisses.

Togami obviously knew it without being told. By the time Naegi managed to look away from the security camera, the other boy had already turned to begin studying the closest bookshelf, his mouth a grim line as he glared at the titles. He remembered why they were really here… and he probably would’ve been annoyed if Naegi had gone through with the kiss instead of doing something useful.

Naegi did his best to swallow back his regret, turning away from Togami to begin inspecting some of the papers that had been thrown across the floor. He couldn’t worry about what the audience might be thinking now. He had a search to begin.
Chapter 204

Chapter Summary

Naegi and Togami uncover a secret in the headmaster's office.

Chapter Notes

**Note about this story and Danganronpa 3:** As I'm sure most of you are aware, the Danganronpa 3 anime has been airing this summer, meaning that canon is now different than it was when I planned out this story. I haven't actually watched the anime, so I don't know exactly what the changes are, but I wanted to take a moment to spell out a few things so there's no confusion. I'll keep it spoiler free, for those of you who also haven't seen the anime yet.

Affected is not DR3 compliant. That isn't as relevant for the future events, since this is a first game AU, but as I understand it, the flashback sequences reveal a lot of details about despair, the Tragedy, characters, and motivations. These details *do not apply* to my AU. Anything that was new information as of DR3, no matter how critical or game-changing it is, does not exist in the world of Affected.

Since that is the case, I may end up referring to things that are explained in DR3, or contradicting new facts, or making characters behave in a way that no longer makes sense. I probably won’t realize it if I do, because as I said, I haven't watched the anime yet. I don't plan to do so until I'm done writing Affected. If any of that ends up happening, I hope you'll try to suspend your disbelief. I’m too far into this plot to change things now! Hopefully you all still enjoy the ride. And now, back to your regularly scheduled update...

Junko Enoshima leaned back in her chair and propped her feet up on the desk in front of her, tilting her head back to look up at the security feed from the headmaster’s office. Naegi and Togami had been way more determined to get in there than she’d thought they would be — even the sauna hadn’t tempted them! She’d figured that would be a surefire distraction, handsy as they’d been back in the day. Maybe she ought to give them a prize for sticking with her schedule so beautifully — she did like to reward her friends for showing initiative, after all!

But on the other hand… maybe she’d been a little too indulgent already. Junko tracked Naegi’s progress as he worked his way across the room, scanning through each of the files she’d left scattered across the floor. She didn’t think the facts in those papers were especially revealing, since her predecessor had kept most of the juicy stuff in his private quarters… but with the way Naegi had been acting lately, he might just take some insignificant detail and run with it.

Of course, Naegi remembering a few things about those erased years wasn’t necessarily a bad thing — it might even be fun! But the timing was pretty awful. If he managed to remember *her* before the trial ended, well, that would just mess up all kinds of things! And back in the data
center, he’d gotten a little too close for comfort.

What would Naegi have done, if that chance remark had triggered an epiphany in his poor overworked brain? Would he have been happy to recognize her? After all, they’d all been such good friends once! Maybe he would have run to embrace her with tears of joy on his sad little face — that would’ve been a great shot for the audience to enjoy! The only thing that hooked fans more than a romance was a love triangle. That might be something to keep in mind for later… especially if the lovely little wrench the cameras had thrown between the boys stuck.

On the screen, Naegi seemed to have finished whatever he was doing with all those papers and began making his way over to the headmaster’s desk. Finally! She’d been starting to think she’d have to hurry those boys along a little. But no, her unexpectedly sharp little friend was going to be in the right place at the right time once again.

Junko laughed to herself, leaning forward to keep track of this part a little more closely. And here she’d thought this trial would be a snore! But dangerous or not, things were definitely looking way more interesting than she’d planned.

Naegi couldn’t shake the uncomfortable feeling of eyes crawling along the back of his neck as he approached the headmaster’s desk. Part of it was his heightened awareness of the security cameras, still recording their every move as they searched the torn-apart office… but that wasn’t everything. He couldn’t help but feel like searching this room was some sort of violation, almost as though he really was prying into his headmaster’s secrets… but that was ridiculous. He’d never once felt any kind of respect for Monokuma as the headmaster of Hope’s Peak Academy, whatever the bear might call himself.

He did his best to keep that thought firmly in the front of his mind as he looked down at the upended contents of the desk. Rummaging through the mastermind’s possessions shouldn’t bother him at all — not that he could do much rummaging, with his only free hand occupied with the music stand pole. But maybe if he could lean on the corner of the desk, or… he turned to look at the imposing leather chair behind the desk. Normally, he wouldn’t have even considered it, but in these circumstances, he didn’t see another option.

Naegi gingerly lowered himself onto the smooth, cool expanse of the headmaster’s chair, half expecting some kind of trap to go off the moment he sank into its depths… but nothing happened. Maybe whoever had torn the office apart had already triggered any traps left here — or maybe the destruction was the result of it.

He set the music stand pole down in front of him, carefully resting one foot against it to keep it from rolling out of reach, and then turned back to the desk. It looked as though whoever had been here before him had dumped the contents of half the drawers haphazardly on the ground around the desk, scattering pens and paper clips and other normal office debris. The other drawers stood open, leaving files full of papers exposed. He glanced at the nearest one — it looked like some kind of inventory for the storeroom, pretty typical for a headmaster’s desk. Shuffling through the rest of the drawer, it looked as though all the rest of the papers in it were more of the same. Maybe Togami had the better idea, searching through the contents of the bookshelves for some kind of student records.

But he couldn’t be sure, not without checking everywhere. Naegi forced himself to soldier grimly
on, working his way through all the drawers on the left side of the desk, looking for some hint of a clue about the students. He couldn’t just shrug his shoulders and give up because there might not be anything to find. After all, he told himself as he turned to begin the right hand side, a clue could be hiding in any of these documents. It wasn’t as though he could expect to open the top drawer and see —

A bright blue notebook clearly labeled *78th Class Student Roster*.

Naegi blinked down at the book. 78th class… that sounded awfully familiar. How many classes of students had been through Hope’s Peak Academy — had he ever known that? He reached out to flip the book open.

Asahina’s face smiled back up at him.

He caught his breath, staring blankly down at the page. He had thought that he’d never see her again after her execution, but… here she was, as happy and full of life as she’d been when they first met. She’d tried her best to stay cheerful through everything, but looking down at this picture, he could see the absence of shadows in her eyes all too clearly. Seeing her this way made his chest clench up, tight and painful… but it was better than having his last sight of her as a body crumpled in a pool of blood.

And… maybe he wasn’t the only one who needed to see it. Naegi remembered the morning after the fourth trial, when he and Kirigiri had found Ogami alone and grieving in a darkened room. She’d forced herself past the paralysis, but… he knew the sadness couldn’t have disappeared so quickly. He tore the profile page from the notebook, careful not to rip the image, and tucked it into his pocket to give to Ogami later, when they finally went down to wake her for the trial.

He paged through the rest of the book at random, flipping through record after record of the students he’d met here at Hope’s Peak — the students who would have been his classmates, if their lives hadn’t gone so terribly wrong. They all looked lighter somehow, not yet touched by the darkness waiting in their future. It was amazing how much of a difference that stress and fear had made, now that he looked at pictures of the way they’d been before being imprisoned here — as though the experience had aged them years, instead of weeks.

He paused, frowning down at Celeste’s image without really seeing the girl’s faint smile. For a moment there, he’d thought… he’d almost thought… that there was something he’d forgotten. Something… he ought to remember…

“Did you find something?”

Naegi’s head snapped up at Togami’s words, and he saw the other boy peering over at him from the other side of the desk. He’d braced one hand against the desk corner in an attempt to look casual, but Naegi could see how heavily the other boy had to lean against it to stay upright.

“I think so,” Naegi said, lifting the front of the notebook enough to make the cover visible.

Togami’s eyebrows shot up. “78th class — yes, that’s our year. Did you find Kirigiri or Ikusaba?”

“I hadn’t gotten that far yet,” Naegi admitted.

Togami crossed around the desk and reached in front of Naegi, paging rapidly back towards the front of the book. He didn’t so much as pause at the sight of the dead students’ pictures, and Naegi bit his lip as he watched the pages turn past Yamada… Owada… Maizono… gradually going forward through the alphabet. He knew they’d come here specifically to investigate student
records, but… there was something a little creepy about reading about his friends’ pasts, instead of hearing it straight from them. If searching the headmaster’s desk had felt like an invasion of privacy, surely this was much worse.

Finally Togami turned past Kuwata’s profile and stopped short, glaring down at the image of Kirigiri on the next page. “So she is in here.”

“Of course she is,” Naegi said, when Togami looked back up at him. “She’s a member of the class, right?”

“Assuming these profiles are real,” Togami said, frowning. He looked back down at the page, apparently reading it this time instead of just glaring — and his eyebrows shot up. “Well, well… now that is interesting!”

Naegi grimaced, slowly leaning forward to look for himself. The back of his neck crawled with as much guilt as if he was peering into her underwear drawer, not just reading her student record. Kirigiri hadn’t told him anything about herself, even when he’d asked… even when he’d told her about himself, hoping to forge some kind of deeper bond with her. She hadn’t wanted him to know the information recorded here… but if they were going to identify the body upstairs, what other option did they have? He took a deep breath and began to read the first line of her profile.

**Name: Kyoko Kirigiri, Ultimate Detective**

Naegi’s eyes widened, and he reread the line again — but no, it said the same thing a second time, plain as day. Kirigiri’s talent that had earned her a place at Hope’s Peak, the secret she’d refused to reveal to any of them, was that she was the *Ultimate Detective*… and it made all too much sense.

He thought back to all the mysteries they’d solved, remembering how Kirigiri had been a step ahead of him every time. Even back in the first trial, when the rest of the students had still been figuring out what they were doing, she’d seen through the confusing situation between Maizono and Kuwata almost immediately, though she’d refused to explain it. She’d known how to examine dead bodies and identify their wounds in more detail than the Monokuma Files had provided. And in their search for a way out of the school, she’d been the one to uncover almost all of the critical clues. Of course she had to be a detective.

Slowly, he looked down to the rest of the page, where the other profiles had listed information about the students’ history prior to Hope’s Peak.

*Kyoko Kirigiri is a descendant of an ancient line of detectives, respected for their neutrality and discretion in addition to their considerable skills. She was trained in the art of detection from a young age.*

*While it is rare for members of the Kirigiri family to be known as detectives, she came to the attention of Hope’s Peak Academy by solving several high-profile cases during the recruitment of the 78th class. She has not provided any stated reasons for breaking the conventions of her family regarding international acclaim in this manner.*

After reading the short profile, Naegi looked back up at Kirigiri’s picture. She stared back, as stoic and blank as she had ever looked, without any hint of an answer. Even with information about her right in front of him, she was still an enigma.

“Quite a secret she’s been keeping from us.”

Naegi turned away from the profile to see Togami scowling back at him. “I’m sure she had a good
“Oh, really? A good reason not to tell us that we have an expert detective in our midst while we’ve been forced through a series of murder investigations?” Togami said skeptically. “The mastermind clearly knew exactly what she is, so the only people she could have intended to deceive were us, her supposed allies.”

“She wanted us to figure things out ourselves,” Naegi countered, recalling the way she’d treated him during that first trial. “If we’d known she was a detective, then… wouldn’t we just have depended on her to find the answer instead of trying to investigate on our own?”

“I wouldn’t have,” Togami said flatly. “Nor would you. And it’s not as though she was hiding her abilities — she still acted like a detective. She just didn’t use the title. She didn’t want us to know just how good at this she is.” He frowned. “And if this is referring to the family I think they mean, then she would be very good indeed.”

“You know them?” Naegi asked, startled.

“Not personally,” Togami said, shrugging. “I’ve never needed to employ a detective, myself. But in high enough circles, you learn about the resources to call on if necessary. Not much is known about the family, not even the name — just how to reach them. They prefer to stay out of the public eye as much as possible.” He crossed his arms. “Which means that she must have had quite a compelling reason to agree to be publicly known as part of an incoming class at Hope’s Peak.”

“I guess whoever wrote the profile must have thought so, too,” Naegi agreed cautiously, glancing back down at the paper. “It doesn’t say why, though.”

“Maybe not, but I think we can hazard a guess,” Togami said. “Or do you think this was all a big coincidence — that the class the mastermind chose to imprison in this game of theirs just happened to have the Ultimate Detective in our ranks?” He shook his head. “No, this looks like she wanted to be here — because she knew what was going to happen.”
Naegi and Togami find more information in the student records.

Naegi shook his head, looking down at Kirigiri’s picture like it could answer all the questions he wanted to ask her. Why hadn’t she told him any of the information from her profile? He knew she didn’t like to talk about herself, that she held all her information close until she had a good reason to reveal it… but as smart as she was, she must have known that keeping her own past a secret only made her look more suspicious. If she’d told him the truth, or even dropped a hint of it, then he would have had some way to counter the painful accusations Togami kept making in her absence.

“That isn’t the only explanation,” Naegi said, looking back up into Togami’s stony face. “It… it could make sense, what you’re saying — but so could other things. Maybe the mastermind decided to put our class through this instead of one of the other years because we’ve got the Ultimate Detective — that’s just as likely. I mean, if none of us had turned out to be any good at investigating, it would’ve ended with the first trial… and they wouldn’t have had anything to broadcast.”

“But that doesn’t explain why she didn’t tell anyone,” Togami countered at once. “She wouldn’t have been able to get away with that if we’d simply attended the academy as we all expected — she would have had no choice but to identify herself and her talent. Something about this situation changed her mind — and don’t say it was the killing game. The rest of us all identified ourselves when we met in the entrance hall, before we ever saw Monokuma — all of us but her.”

That was true, Naegi realized, thinking back to that first day. He’d known most of his classmates already, from the information he’d found online, but they’d all introduced themselves anyway. But Kirigiri, the only one he hadn’t heard of from his research, had refused to share anything beyond her name. He’d thought at the time that maybe she was just shy and not comfortable being confronted with a big group of strangers… but after a few weeks in her company, the thought that she would allow her actions to be dictated by shyness seemed absurd. She was always controlled, her face a blank mask because she chose to keep it that way — so whatever her reasons, Togami was right. Kirigiri had deliberately chosen not to share her past.

“I guess,” Naegi said reluctantly. “But being cautious doesn’t mean she knew anything for sure, or that she was in on the mastermind’s plan.” He shook his head. “And… it doesn’t help us now, either. We can’t use any of that to identify her. And the picture’s just an ordinary school portrait, only her head and shoulders.” He glanced at it again, then at the text beside it. “It lists her measurements —”

“But we already had those in our e-handbooks,” Togami cut him off. “And with the state of the body, I doubt we could get close enough measurements for an accurate comparison.”

Naegi winced at the thought of going back upstairs armed with tape measures, and trying to look closely enough at that wreck of a body to figure out what shape it had been when alive. “No,” he agreed, his voice barely rasping in his throat. “That… that wouldn’t work.”

“And that biography is hardly worthy of the name,” Togami went on, scowling down at it. “She
must have spent the majority of her life in detective training — but there are no details about precisely what that involved. I doubt she’d have been an active fighter, but a talented detective would certainly have had skills that would be of value to Fenrir. Without any specifics on her life, there’s no way to rule it out.”

“But being recruited into a dangerous mercenary organization seems like a pretty big thing to leave out of someone’s history, right?” Naegi asked.

“Not if the Hope’s Peak administrators were unaware of her affiliation,” Togami said. “Fenrir’s membership roster isn’t exactly common knowledge, even among elites.”

Naegi frowned. “Well… what about Ikusaba? I mean, we know she’s a member of Fenrir, right? She admitted it to Kirigiri, and showed her the tattoo and everything. Does it mention Fenrir in her profile?”

“If it says anything at all.” Without bothering to explain that cryptic remark, Togami began flipping back through the pages again, passing Ishimaru — and stopping on a page with a slender, dark-haired girl staring into the distance with all the intensity of a rifle’s scope focusing on its target.

“Mukuro Ikusaba,” Naegi murmured, staring down at the picture. She looked cool and collected, even more of a blank slate than Kirigiri — and yet the strongest flash of her personality echoed through his head at the sight. He knew just how she was about to tilt her head to avoid the camera flash, or the way she’d balanced on her feet to spring into action at a moment’s notice. He almost expected her to look over the photographer’s shoulder and catch his eye and —

He shook his head sharply. With the class trial getting closer with every passing second, he didn’t have time to let his imagination run away with him like this. He forced his gaze away from the disconcerting picture and began skimming the profile.

*Mukuro Ikusaba returned suddenly to Japan, and in the background an entity floats, close but just out of reach. The entity known as … the Ultimate Despair. Right now, I can’t be sure if this is a single person or some kind of group. But there is no question that Mukuro Ikusaba has some sort of connection to it.*

Naegi blinked. “What is this supposed to be? It’s not like the other profiles.” He reread the first sentence, pausing to consider the word *returned*. It seemed like a strange way to begin the very first sentence in someone’s profile… And as he frowned down at it, a few spare scraps of paper tangled with the spiral spine of the notebook caught his eye. He reached out to tug one out for a closer look, unthreading it from the curling wire.

Togami looked up at the movement. “What exactly are you trying to do?”

Naegi held up the thin scrap of paper. “Look at this — it’s like there used to be another page right before this one that got torn out. And isn’t there something strange about Ikusaba’s profile?”

“Yes, it starts in the middle,” Togami said, nodding. “So you think this is actually the second page of her profile? I suppose it’s possible…” He frowned. “But why would anyone bother to tear out just one page?”

“To hide information about her?” Naegi wondered.

“From who? This room was locked, remember?” Togami said. “And even if they removed it as a precaution, why not take both pages and keep hiding her existence entirely?”
“Maybe they hoped no one would notice the difference?” Naegi flipped a page backward, comparing Ikusaba’s profile to Ishimaru’s. “I mean, if you’re just going through the book quickly, they look pretty much the same. You wouldn’t necessarily think that this one profile had two pages.”

“Except that they left the picture,” Togami said. “Anyone looking through this would stop and read more about a person they didn’t recognize — and once you start looking more closely, it’s not too difficult to figure out that part of it is missing.”

“Then… maybe it doesn’t matter if we know the profile exists, as long as we don’t know what’s on the missing page?” Naegi asked, trying to think it through. “I mean, Ikusaba actually introduced herself to Kirigiri, so there’s not much point in trying to hide her existence. We already know she’s involved somehow.”

“Wow, you guys are really studying ahead, aren’t you!” Naegi jolted upright in the chair at the sound of the cheerful voice, looking up to find Monokuma grinning up at him from right beside the chair.

“I mean, here I was all ready to come tell you something super interesting,” the bear went on, “but it turns out you know it already!”

“Something interesting?” Naegi repeated, watching Monokuma warily. “You mean… about Mukuro Ikusaba?”

“Aw, and here I thought she was going to be my best trump card!” Monokuma sighed sadly. “Well, even so, I guess I’d better make sure. I don’t want any of you to start complaining about how unfair it all is later on!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Naegi saw Togami taking a few steps away from the desk, moving to a place where he’d be able to read Naegi’s lips while still keeping an eye on Monokuma. He would have liked to have his boyfriend closer, in arm’s reach in case either of them needed the comfort of a touch… but it was probably more important for Togami to be able to follow at least Naegi’s half of the conversation.

“I don’t think I ever told you how many participants there actually were in this game, did I?” Monokuma said. “When you first gathered in the entrance hall, there were only fifteen of you. I think that might’ve led you to a little misunderstanding.”

“Because there are really sixteen students in our class, not fifteen,” Naegi said, nodding. “Mukuro Ikusaba is one of us.”

“You won’t even let me be the one to say it?” Monokuma shrunk back, looking hurt. “How cruel! Maybe the game participant making the rules should add a new one about not stealing the headmaster’s thunder!”

“What’s he going on about now?” Togami asked, in what he might have intended as a lowered voice.

Naegi looked from Monokuma to Togami. “Uh — he’s just confirming that Ikusaba really is here in the school.”

“You aren’t even paying attention!” Monokuma raised his arms in a simulation of anger. “It’s not like she’s been sneaking around playing hooky while the rest of you stayed in class like good little students — she’s the sixteenth participant in the killing game!”
“Okay, fine.” Naegi figured it was better not to argue, even if the two things sounded pretty similar to him. “Ikusaba’s also the sixteenth participant in the killing game.”

Togami frowned. “But we already knew that.” He turned to Monokuma. “Why bother showing up to tell us something we already know?”

Monokuma shrugged. “I told you, this game is desperately popular. With so many viewers, I wanted to be sure everyone was on the same page. Just imagine all the hate mail I’d get if I didn’t play fair with you all!”

“He wants to make sure everyone watching knows, too,” Naegi said, when Togami looked at him. “So that it’s all fair.”

Togami clenched his fists and glared at Monokuma. “You expect us to believe that you care about fair play? After everything you’ve done?”

“Of course I am!” Monokuma retorted. “I’ll have you know that a proper school life is built on dedication to organization and order! Which is why even I, as the school’s headmaster, have to follow the regulations myself!”

“Wait… you have to follow the rules, too?” Naegi blinked. “And… a minute ago, you said that the person making the rules is another participant in the game…”

“Whoops! I guess you really are smarter than you look!” Monokuma clapped his paws over his mouth, but that did nothing to hide his toothy grin. “That’s enough for now, huh? I mean, I’ve been giving you two an awful lot of hints these past few days, even if you’ve ignored some of the important ones — any more and the audience might start to think I’m playing favorites!”

“Ignored…?” Naegi echoed, puzzled.

“Well, you can’t expect me to give you all the answers!” Monokuma said. “And speaking of answers…”

Before Naegi could move an inch, Monokuma sprang forward and snatched the student roster off the desk.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Togami demanded, taking a furious step forward. “We weren’t done with that!”

“Sorry, but you haven’t leveled up your security clearance anywhere near enough to get access to this kind of material!” Monokuma laughed, holding the notebook close. “Who knows what you might try to do if I left it here — you might even stoop to stealing it! There’s no rule against robbery, you know, so I wouldn’t even be able to punish a thief!”

“What if we promise not to take it out of the room?” Naegi suggested.

“Hmm…” Monokuma tilted his head. “Sorry, no can do! You don’t have a very good track record with promises.”

Naegi couldn’t stop himself from flinching back at the reminder of how he’d ended up breaking his promise to Togami. He’d entered the hidden room even though he’d said he’d tell Togami first… and even if he’d done it to try to protect Alter Ego, that didn’t make it all right. Promises had to mean more than that, because…

… *Promise you’ll stay*…
The words echoed through Naegi’s head so clearly that for a moment, he thought Togami had actually spoken them. But no, Togami was glaring at Monokuma, silent and outraged at his inability to participate in the conversation, not asking Naegi for a promise he didn’t know how to keep. And it couldn’t be a memory, because when had he ever heard Togami speaking that way, broken and pleading? It hadn’t been a real promise, he knew that… and yet… the words wouldn’t leave him alone.

“Promise you’ll stay,” he repeated to himself, staring beyond the office around him into a world he couldn’t comprehend.

“Huh? You want me to stay by your side?”

Monokuma’s bright response yanked Naegi out of his tangled inner thoughts.

“No — no, that’s not it,” Naegi said hastily, flushing at the realization that he’d inadvertently spoken the strange words loud enough for the bear to hear.

“I see how it is — you were so devastated by my disappearance that you can’t stand it when I leave your sight, even in the middle of your very first date!” Monokuma laughed gleefully. “Sorry, but I’m gonna have to let you down gently — an honest headmaster couldn’t possibly let a student go on pining for him! You’ll just have to settle for the boyfriend you’ve got — I’m sure he won’t mind being second best!”

Naegi’s ears burned at Monokuma’s leering grin. “That’s not what I meant!”

“Oh? It’s not?” Monokuma tilted his head, red eye burning into Naegi’s gaze. “Then what did you mean?”

“I meant… well…” Naegi found himself pressing back into the chair, trying to put more distance between Monokuma and himself. “I don’t know…”

“Hmm…” Monokuma’s usual bright smile broke across his face, and the sense of pressure disappeared. “I guess it’s true, ignorance really is bliss!” He laughed. “And if that’s the case — how about I give you one last little tidbit for the road?”

“What?” Naegi blinked, feeling a little like he was starting to get whiplash. “I thought you said we’d gotten too many hints.”

“That’s true — but this one isn’t exactly a hint,” Monokuma said cheerfully. “It’s more like… revenge.”

“What do you mean?” Naegi asked cautiously, not liking the sound of that at all.

Monokuma grinned at him. “You used up one of your precious trip tickets just so you could search for more information on that shifty Kirigiri, right? Well, I can’t let it be said that anyone leaves one of my trips feeling unsatisfied!” He snickered to himself. “You know how she wears those stupid gloves day in, day out, all the time?”

“Y-yes?” Naegi said, his mouth going suddenly dry with dread.

“Well, she wears them to cover something really nasty that she doesn’t want anyone else to see!” Monokuma threw back his head and laughed wildly. “Now that really is all you get! Enjoy the rest of your date!” And with that, he disappeared.
Naegi tells Togami about his conversation with Monokuma, and the boys try to figure out what these new hints could mean.

Naegi sank back against the headmaster’s chair, Monokuma’s final words ringing in his ears. Kirigiri wore her gloves to cover up something on her hands? The image of the corpse’s tattooed hand burned in front of his eyes — that would definitely be nasty. Togami had brought up the possibility once already, but that had just been speculation, one idea among many. Now that Monokuma had confirmed Kirigiri did have something to hide on her hands, he couldn’t dismiss it quite so easily.

“Well?”

Naegi looked up, startled, to see Togami frowning at him, arms crossed. Of course… Togami hadn’t heard any of Monokuma’s hints, had he? The only clues he would have gotten were the few details he could have picked up from Naegi’s responses. Annoyed though he looked, the other boy had actually been waiting pretty patiently, all things considered — he could easily have demanded that Naegi repeat every sentence so that he could follow along as the conversation happened. But instead, he’d waited, trusting Naegi to repeat the conversation after it ended… so Naegi supposed he’d better follow through, no matter how difficult it would be to go through some of it again.

“It got kind of complicated,” Naegi said slowly. “He told us about Ikusaba —“

“Yes, you told me that part.”

“Right, and you said he didn’t play fair,” Naegi agreed. “But he said yes he does, because he has to follow the rules, too — and that the person making the rules is a participant in the game.”

“A participant?” Togami blinked. “That’s the word he insisted you use to describe Ikusaba. Is he implying that she’s the one making the rules? Or does that mean that the actual rules of the game are being decided by someone other than the mastermind?”

“I don’t know,” Naegi said, sighing. “But it’s got to be Ikusaba making the rules, if it’s a participant doing it. He said for sure that there are only sixteen people in the game, and…”

“And most of them are dead,” Togami finished, when Naegi didn’t want to say it. “That does limit the options.” He frowned. “Is that why he took the student roster — to stop us from learning too much about Ikusaba?”

“Maybe, but he didn’t say so,” Naegi said. “He said it had too much information in it… but we were looking through it for a while, and he didn’t bother us until we got to Ikusaba’s page.” He looked down at the desk where the roster had been, wishing he’d tried to read it a little faster. Maybe if he’d turned to her page immediately instead of getting distracted by the other students, he would have had the chance to learn more.

“Well, at least we managed to confirm her membership in Fenrir,” Togami said.
Naegi stared at him blankly. “What?”

“Ikusaba’s profile.” Togami gave him an odd look. “The headmaster wrote that he was concerned about her interactions with the other students because of her time with Fenrir.”

“I didn’t get to that part.” Naegi frowned. “So… it said that she really is a member of Fenrir? With a tattoo and everything?”

“Presumably,” Togami said. “We already knew it — but I suppose that does confirm that the Hope’s Peak administration were aware of it, as well. We don’t know what Kirigiri had on her hands, but it doesn’t seem likely that they would have known about one student’s role in Fenrir and not another.”

Naegi bit his lip. He didn’t want to repeat Monokuma’s parting hint, not when he wasn’t sure what exactly it meant… but letting a comment like that pass without explaining would be just as bad as lying outright.

“Actually… we do know something,” he said at last. “Monokuma said she had something on her hands that she wanted to hide, and that’s why she wore the gloves all the time.”

“Is that so?” Togami blinked, processing the new information. “Well, a Fenrir tattoo would certainly qualify. But… if that’s what he meant, why would he give you information that can identify the body now, after making such a point of leaving it out of the Monokuma File a few minutes ago? The situation hasn’t changed. And if he wanted us to figure out that the body is Kirigiri’s, why do it in such a vague way?”

Naegi could see where he was going with that line of reasoning. “He didn’t give me this clue so that it would be easier to identify the body — he wanted to make it harder.”

“It looks that way,” Togami agreed. “We’d just found the page that confirmed Ikusaba’s membership in Fenrir, and it wasn’t mentioned in Kirigiri’s profile at all. If Monokuma hadn’t intervened, we might have been close to making an identification — but now we’re back at square one. That corpse has to be Mukuro Ikusaba or Kyoko Kirigiri, and with Monokuma’s new hint, we have no way of telling which.”

Kirigiri or Ikusaba… right from the moment they’d found the corpse, those had been the only options. Between the mask and the bomb, the culprit had clearly gone to a lot of trouble to make sure they couldn’t figure out which girl was which… and the mastermind seemed to be all too willing to help them out. Of course, Monokuma never made the trials easier if there was a way to make them more painful, but he’d never gone so far as to obstruct their investigations, either. Was this just his usual attempts to drive them into despair, or was there something else going on? After all, Togami had said the girl had been labeled a traitor, before the bomb had gone off… who had she betrayed?

There was no way to know, not until they’d figured out who had died. Togami had been right — they had to focus on identifying the body before they could answer any other questions. Wondering about the possibilities with no way to determine the truth would only drain his energy.

But the problem with that approach was that they didn’t have a way to determine the truth at all. Ikusaba was definitely a member of Fenrir, according to both the student roster and her own words. Naegi tried to think back to the conversation he’d had with Kirigiri about it. He’d been so tired after a full day of climbing up and down the stairs, but he was pretty sure that Kirigiri had said Ikusaba had lifted her shirt or her sleeve or something — and she’d actually seen the tattoo. With the roster’s confirmation, there was no reason to disbelieve it.
But on the other hand… Monokuma had said that Kirigiri wore those gloves to cover up something on her hands. It could have been a lie, but… cruel as he could be, Monokuma had never actually lied to them that Naegi could remember. And what kind of secret could Kirigiri possibly have on her hands that could make her want to wear gloves constantly? He couldn’t recall a single moment when he’d seen her bare hands, not even during meals.

He thought back to the tattoo on the corpse’s hand. It had been pretty large, hadn’t it? Could it have been low enough on her wrist that the gloves wouldn’t cover it entirely? He frowned, trying to envision the scene as clearly as he could. The body’s hand had been near the data center key, curling palm down away from like she’d reached out to catch herself against the floor when she’d fallen. The explosion had scorched her hand badly, not so much as to obscure the tattoo, but enough that her long fake nails had begun to melt from her fingers.

Her nails…

Naegi sat bolt upright. “It isn’t her!”

Togami stared at him. “What — you mean the body? It isn’t who?”

“Kirigiri! It isn’t her, it can’t be!” Naegi nearly laughed as giddy relief flooded through him. “She wears gloves all the time, we’ve all seen them — and the girl upstairs couldn’t have! She had long nails, didn’t you notice? If Kirigiri really does have something she wants to hide on her hands, then she would never have worn nails like that. The gloves wouldn’t fit over them!”

Naegi grinned at Togami… but the other boy didn’t so much as crack a smile. Staring at Togami’s stony expression, Naegi felt his joy drain away, leaving only a small, tight knot in the middle of his stomach. “Did — did you not catch that? I said —”

“I understood,” Togami cut him off. “And I see what you mean. But if you’re so sure that body belongs to Ikusaba… then how exactly do you think she ended up that way?”

“Well… we talked about it upstairs, right?” Naegi said. “The headmaster has to be the mastermind, and he’d probably here in the school somewhere. If that’s Ikusaba upstairs, then I guess she must have been telling Kirigiri the truth about trying to help us. The headmaster found out about it and killed her as a traitor.”

“That’s one possibility,” Togami said, but he didn’t look as though he considered it a convincing one. “But do you really think we can jump to that conclusion so easily?”

“I don’t know if I’d call it easy,” Naegi said, thinking back to their terrifying experiences in classroom 5-C with a shiver. “We’ve been trying to work it out for ages.”

“Because our information was limited,” Togami said. “We haven’t been uncovering these clues ourselves — Monokuma just appeared out of the blue and started giving us hints. He’s never done anything like that with the other trials — why would he start now?” He shook his head. “There’s some kind of trap being set here, that much is obvious.”

“A… trap?” Naegi blinked. That didn’t sound obvious to him at all. “You think Monokuma is trying to trap us into… what, making the wrong choice during the trial?”

“That’s probably part of it,” Togami said. “But that doesn’t explain everything Monokuma’s been telling you. He just went to a lot of trouble to make sure that we understood exactly what role Mukuro Ikusaba had, stating unequivocally that she’s one of the sixteen participants in the killing game. Why would he bother to do that if she’s dead?”
“He told me he didn’t want any of us to complain later that things were unfair,” Naegi said. “You and I knew about Ikusaba, but… well, that’s only because of what Kirigiri told me. No one else knew about her… so I guess no one but us could have identified her as the victim. He would have had to make sure everyone had the same information before the trial starts.”

“Yes… so that the trial can be fair,” Togami said. “But it’s only possible to have a fair trial if the rules are in effect in the first place.”

Naegi blinked. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

Togami shot him a scathing look. “Don’t act stupid — it doesn’t suit you. The rules are only in effect if this murder is part of the killing game, and the game only has sixteen participants — the fifteen we met in the entrance hall and Ikusaba herself. If it was just a case of the headmaster killing a subordinate, that wouldn’t qualify.”

“So the rules wouldn’t matter… because that kind of death wouldn’t be part of the game in the first place,” Naegi said slowly. “We wouldn’t even need to have a class trial for something like that.”

“But instead, we are having a trial,” Togami said. “And that means that the victim and the culprit both have to be participants in the killing game.”

“But that would mean —” Naegi stopped short, the words freezing on his tongue. But it didn’t matter if he said it aloud… he knew what Togami was trying to say. There had never been all that many possibilities for this murder… and if Ikusaba had been murdered by another one of the students, then the only person who could have done it was Kirigiri.

“It can’t be that simple,” Naegi said at last. “She wouldn’t have done something like this just to win the game, not after she fought the hardest of any of us to find a way out of here.”

To Naegi’s surprise, Togami nodded. “I agree with that much, at least. Whatever happened between those girls is much, much more complicated than the mastermind would like us to believe. There’s something they don’t want us to find out — that’s why they’ve been influencing this investigation so much.”

A little bit of the tension in Naegi’s shoulders eased at those words. The situation was still horrible… but at least Togami hadn’t made up his mind completely yet. He wasn’t going to start losing all rationality about Kirigiri, not this time. He’d help Naegi look for the truth. And if the truth turned out to be something terrible… well, at least Naegi knew he wouldn’t be facing it alone.

“Is that everything Monokuma said to you?” Togami asked. “If he’s trying to trick us into something, even the smallest clue could be important.”

“Um… yeah, I think that was all of it,” Naegi said, frowning as he thought back through the conversation.

“You’re sure?” Togami pressed. “He did talk for a while.”

“But most of it was just his usual talk,” Naegi said. “Insulting us, pretending to be a real headmaster, making stupid jokes about how this is our first date… I don’t think it meant anything.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “As if there’s anywhere in this hellhole worth going for a date. And a first date needs to be properly impressive — a five star restaurant, or a private theater box, or —”

“Ice cream in the park,” Naegi said, the words popping out of his mouth before he could stop them.
“Excuse me?” Togami’s eyebrows shot up. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing, sorry,” Naegi said hastily. “It just occurred to me all of a sudden that it would be a nice first date.”

He’d almost seen it, just for a moment — a long expanse of fresh grass surrounded by vibrant flowers, graceful trees stretching out to meet their twins in a rippling reflecting pool, and a cool wrought iron bench tucked at the edge just out of the way.

“It sounds boring.”

Naegi blinked, something in him drooping sadly at Togami’s abrupt dismissal. “Well… maybe a little, next to all that stuff you were talking about. I’m sure that’s all really nice, but… I’ve never really wanted to go to theaters or fancy restaurants or anything like that. I’d go if you wanted to take me, but it would be a little intimidating. But I like ice cream and parks. That’s where I would want to take you.”

“They’re full of people,” Togami pointed out, his lip curling in distaste. “I’ve had enough of being in public.”

“But no one would pay any attention if we were just out like a normal couple,” Naegi said. “We’d be part of the crowd, not faces on a television screen. No one would give us a second glance. We could sit together for as long as we liked without worrying, and… watch the sky until the sun set and the stars came out…”

He trailed off, the heavy office walls pressing in on his awareness like a tightening vise. What was he doing, rambling like this? There was no way for them to watch the sunset, not when they were still trapped inside the school. If they couldn’t figure out a way to outsmart the mastermind, they would probably never see the sky again.

“Sorry.” Naegi closed his eyes, not quite about to look Togami in the eye after that flash of what he wished could have been. “It was just a silly daydream, I shouldn’t have brought it up —”

“I accept.”

“What?” Naegi looked up sharply to find Togami scowling at him.

“You heard me,” Togami said shortly. “I accept your invitation for a real first date. Be warned — I expect to be impressed.”

Naegi couldn’t help it — a small smile lifted the corners of his lips in response to that, in spite of everything horrible happened around them. “I’ll do my best.”
Naegi and Togami come to a drastic conclusion about the best way to continue their investigation.

Naegi would have liked to cross the room and go to Togami’s side… but even if he’d been able to move freely without leaning on the music stand pole, the glare of the cameras still hadn’t lifted. How could he ever reach out to his boyfriend now, knowing that the entire world would have front row seats for every kiss or touch? And even if he found the courage… he knew Togami wouldn’t appreciate it. The other boy’s expression stayed cold and dark, in spite of the soft content of his words, and he’d positioned himself so that he would be able to keep track of the room’s security camera in the corner of his eye. He never forgot, not for a second.

But maybe that made the moment of kindness he’d offered to Naegi mean more. He could have tried to preserve his icy facade for the cameras and let Naegi trail off into embarrassed silence — but instead, he’d said something gentler, something that referenced the vulnerabilities he wanted to hide. It was a gift that he hadn’t needed to offer… but he’d done it anyway.

As the silence stretched on, a couple faint spots of pink appeared high on Togami’s cheekbones. “All right, we have what we came here for,” he declared, voice too loud and commanding, like he meant it to carry through the cameras to give orders to the viewers outside. “We need to start answering as many of the other questions as we can before the trial begins.”

Naegi knew Togami was only saying so to draw attention away from their conversation about dates and romance — but he still had a point. They had too many questions left to waste time here. Naegi gave him a nod, then bent to pick up the music stand pole from the floor. His head swam and tilted for a few moments after he straightened up, but not too badly. He was sure he was getting better — he had to be.

Leaning on the pole for balance and sliding slowly forward on the chair, Naegi managed to lever himself upright. He only swayed for a moment as his weight landed on his feet, but he managed to knock his hip against the edge of the desk and steady himself before he fell. Once the room had nearly stopped spinning around him, he began making his way over towards the door.

Togami was already waiting there, leaning against the door frame and surveying the room, a deep line creasing through his forehead. Naegi could see his gaze flickering over the mess, lingering on the papers scattered across the floor and the stacks of books from the emptied shelves. As Naegi approached, he glanced over, but the tense line of his body didn’t ease.

“We’re not going to get another chance at investigating all this, you know,” he said flatly. “Once we walk out this door, the mastermind is going to do whatever they can to make sure we can’t get back in. We’ve barely scratched the surface — there could be any number of clues about the mastermind’s plan in here that we missed because we had to focus on looking for student information.”

“Well… it’s not like we could have done anything else,” Naegi pointed out. “We need to worry about getting through the trial right now, and we needed the student records for that.”
“I know.” Togami clenched his fists. “And Monokuma must have known it, too, when he agreed to let us in. We never had a chance to find anything truly important.”

“We could try to get back in later,” Naegi suggested, thinking of the final trip ticket in his pocket.

Togami shook his head. “No… we’ve shown our hand now. You saw how fast Monokuma snatched that roster before we could even finish reading it. The mastermind will be sure to get rid of anything damning before we have a chance to get back in here.”

Naegi blinked. “Then… do you want to stay here? You could keep searching —”

“No. Absolutely not.” Togami’s eyes blazed with outrage before Naegi could even finish the suggestion. “That is a terrible idea!”

“But… wouldn’t it make sense to cover more ground?” Naegi bit his lip, giving the idea a little more thought. “I mean… we’re the only ones who are free to investigate right now, aren’t we? So if we both search the same places, we’re limiting the amount of evidence we can find even more.”

“Are you actually making a serious suggestion?” Togami stared at him in disbelief. “Have you forgotten that there’s a murderer on the loose?”

“Of course not!” Naegi said. “But… is this really like the other times someone has been killed? Monokuma never gave us a new motive that could change someone’s mind about killing, and the victim was part of the mastermind’s team, even if she was also a participant in the game.”

“I don’t see how that changes anything,” Togami said, crossing his arms. “The killer obviously wants to hide what they’re doing, and they’ve still got one death before they hit the maximum. They could decide to take one of us out to stop us from investigating too much.”

Naegi hesitated. He knew Togami would hate what he was about to say… but he didn’t think they could leave it unsaid. “They could still do that even if we’re together.” He took a deep breath, looking Togami dead in the eyes. “You lost more of your hearing than you let me think, didn’t you?”

Togami froze, blood draining from his face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Are you sure?” Naegi turned his head to the side so that Togami couldn’t get a clear view of his lips. “I don’t really think anyone is going to come after either of us. I think staying in here will be safer for you.” He looked back at Togami again. “Well? What did I say?”

Togami didn’t say anything, staring at Naegi with his lips pressed together in a thin, tight line.

“If your hearing really is that bad, then someone could sneak up and separate us pretty easily,” Naegi said. “I mean, whoever it is got into your dorm room and drugged Ogami without her noticing, right? So they must be pretty good at it. And if you had to spend all your time looking around for someone to sneak up on us, you wouldn’t be able to do very much investigating at all. At least if you stay here, you’d just have to keep an eye on the door, not every direction.”

“So you’re saying I should just stay behind because I’m useless to you,” Togami said icily.

“No, I’m saying that staying together isn’t going to be any safer than splitting up,” Naegi said. “If it were just about what I want, of course I’d stay with you — but that’s not the only thing we need to think about. We don’t have any perfect choices, and nothing we do will be free from risk or keep us perfectly safe. If we stay together, maybe we’ll avoid a potential attack — but maybe we’ll miss a critical clue and end up without enough information to finish the trial. We can’t know for sure.”
Some of the ice in Togami’s eyes thawed a bit, though he still looked unconvinced. “And what exactly would you be doing while I keep searching here?”

Naegi thought for a moment. “I could go back down to the dorms and try to wake up Ogami. We need to find out what happened when she got attacked — and it would be hard for you to help with that.”

“So you’d go straight there?” Togami pressed. “As quickly as you can? No detours?”

“I don’t know how fast it’ll be,” Naegi said, giving a one-shouldered shrug. “But yeah, I can’t think of anywhere other than the dorms that we really need to check right now. I’m definitely not going to try to make it back up to the fifth floor again.”

Togami scowled like he was facing down the culprit themselves. “I don’t like this.”

“I know.”

“I think it could go terribly wrong.”

“So could anything we try.”

Togami rubbed at the spot where his glasses pressed on the bridge of his nose. “You’re that determined to do this? You really believe it’s the best option?”

Naegi hesitated, seeing the unhappiness in Togami’s eyes — and also seeing just how close the other boy was to giving in. Did he really want to press this when he knew Togami didn’t want to do it? Was he taking advantage of the other boy’s affection for him to encourage a choice he wouldn’t make otherwise? Was that unfair?

But… he remembered the way Togami had been knocked out by the bomb, his exhaustion on the stairs, how he’d nearly collapsed outside the data center. He could see how tired the other boy was, clawing his way to consciousness by adrenaline and willpower… and they still had such a long way to go before they could rest. Togami would never admit how badly he needed to stay put for a while, for fear of appearing vulnerable… and letting him go on thinking something so dangerous wouldn’t be right, either, not when it could hurt him.

“Yes,” Naegi said at last, trying to sound more confident about it than he felt. “I think we should split up.”

Togami nodded slowly. “All right, then. But you have to promise you’ll be careful. Pay attention to your surroundings, and get back to Ogami as soon as you can.”

“Sure,” Naegi agreed. “But you have to do the same. Keep an eye on the door — and the television, too. Monokuma will call us all to the trial at some point, you can’t miss that.”

“I won’t,” Togami said. “I heard the bell for the body discovery announcement, so I’ll notice when the bell for the next announcement sounds, too. I might not catch whatever gibberish Monokuma spews along with it, but that’s probably for the best.” One corner of his mouth twisted up in what was almost a smile. “At least he can’t do much to distract me from searching by chattering away at me if I can’t hear him.”

“I don’t think he’d do that anyway,” Naegi said, recalling his confusing conversation with Monokuma. “It sounded like he’s already told us everything he wants us to know.” He rolled his eyes. “He actually said that with all the hints he’s given us over the past few days, it looks like playing favorites.”
“He — wait.” Togami frowned. “The last few days? Meaning… before he disappeared, too?”

“I guess,” Naegi said. “But — you’re right, no one had even been killed yet at that point. What kind of hints would he have given us? Or… did he mean when he gave me the trip tickets and —”

“No — that’s not it,” Togami cut him off sharply, concentration lining his face. “Monokuma gave me a hint, the morning you and I argued. I came up here to see if I could get in, and when I found the barricade, he showed up. Most of what he said was the usual nonsense, but… he also said that something had been stolen from this office before he got the barricade up.”

“Stolen?” Naegi’s eyes widened. “What was it?”

“A weapon,” Togami said grimly. “According to him, it was the most dangerous one in the school.”

“But…” Naegi’s thoughts flickered through the different weapons used in Ikusaba’s murder. “But the poison came from the chemistry lab, didn’t it? And the knife didn’t look any more dangerous than any other knife, just a little bigger. Could it have been the bomb?”

“I doubt it,” Togami said. “Monokuma said it would let the wielder secretly kill everyone, and while that blast was no joke, I don’t think it could’ve taken out all five of us without some careful planning and very good luck.”

“And I guess a bomb wouldn’t exactly count as secret,” Naegi agreed. “So… someone still has this weapon, and we don’t know about it?”

“It sounds that way.” Togami shook his head. “And a dangerous new weapon is floating around the school, possibly in possession of a murderer, then it means we definitely can’t split up.”

“No — it means that we have to!” Naegi countered, grip tightening around the music stand pole. “Remember the Monokuma File? It didn’t say what killed Ikusaba, not for sure.”

“Which usually means there’s something important attached to the information he left out,” Togami agreed reluctantly.

“And anything that could kill Ikusaba would have to be pretty dangerous,” Naegi went on. “She wouldn’t be taken down by just a normal person with a knife, or even just by poison.”

“Not if she’s a member of Fenrir, I suppose,” Togami said. “Then… it does seem plausible that this mystery weapon might have been involved. We certainly shouldn’t rule it out.” He sighed. “All right. I’ll stay here and look for any clues as to what it might have been.”

“And I’ll go straight back to the dorms and ask Ogami about what she remembers,” Naegi said, nodding.

“In that case, you’ll need this.” Togami pulled his dorm room key out of his pocket and started to hand it over — then stopped, frowning as he realized Naegi didn’t have a free hand to take it.

“Just stick it in the right side pocket of my hoodie,” Naegi told him. “I’ll be able to get it out when I get to the door.”

Togami tried to stuff it beside Naegi’s own dorm key and e-handbook, but it wouldn’t quite fit. He looked up with an irritated huff of a sigh. “Can you reach any of your other pockets?”

“Not with the sling on,” Naegi had to admit. “That’s why everything’s in that one.”
“All right, then.” Togami pulled the dorm key out of Naegi’s pocket and replaced it with his. “We can switch back later.”

“Sure.” Naegi glanced at the door, biting his lip. “Then… I guess I should go.”

“Yes.” Togami glanced back up at the camera… then squared his shoulders and bent down to press his lips softly against Naegi’s. “Be safe,” he murmured, so softly Naegi could barely hear. He wasn’t entirely sure he’d been meant to. “You have to stay safe.”

Naegi knew Togami wouldn’t be able to see any answer, so he didn’t reply with words. He leaned forward as much as he could, tilting his head up and letting the kiss melt between them like the lingering sweetness of the last taste of dessert. Everything he felt for Togami, the complicated mess of affection and respect and worry and desire and everything else that tangled through his heart, he poured all of it into the kiss, hoping that the other boy would somehow manage to understand. He felt so much for Togami, far more deeply than he’d ever known he could… but that was something to think about when he had more time.

Slowly, reluctantly, Naegi drew back, knowing that if he didn’t break off the kiss now, he never would. He looked up into Togami’s eyes, softer than they’d been since the body had been discovered, and said, “I’ll see you again soon.”
Chapter 208

Chapter Summary

Separated from Togami, Naegi continues his search alone... only to find a new avenue of investigation.

Naegi couldn’t let himself look back as he walked down the hall, away from the headmaster’s office. He could feel the pressure of eyes watching his back, steady and firm, and he knew it wasn’t just the impersonal glare of the security cameras. If he turned around and saw Togami standing in the doorway, watching as he walked away... he wasn’t sure he’d have the nerve to follow through with this plan, in spite of all the reasons he’d given about why it was their best choice. He didn’t want to leave, almost as much as he knew Togami didn’t want him to go.

But what they wanted didn’t matter, not held up against everything else they had to do. The class trial was on its way, like it or not, and they had to get through it. And if that meant he couldn’t keep Togami safe by his side... then that was just how things would have to be. Turning the corner that would lead him across the fourth floor to the stairs, Naegi heard the faint click of the door closing behind him. He shut his eyes for a moment, allowing himself the span of a single shuddering breath to hope desperately that he’d made the right choice — and then he pushed the fears away and carried grimly on.

The stairs going down to the third floor were a challenge, but he found that as long as he took each step carefully and didn’t make any sudden movements, he could manage better than he’d thought. The biggest danger came from the sudden bouts of dizziness and his skewed sense of balance... but he was pretty sure he could keep those under control. Making it down an entire floor without mishap only fueled his confidence.

Of course, then he had to trek all the way around the entire loop of the third floor to get to the next flight of stairs down. Naegi couldn’t help the way his feet slowed even further as he rounded the corner by the art room. It was such a long way back... and he didn’t dare stop to rest, not when they were so short on time already. He had to keep pressing on.

But by the time he got halfway down the stairs to the second floor, he was starting to rethink that plan. His head ached from clenching his jaw, and the music stand pole had begun to feel like it was trembling in his grip. He should have given himself at least a few minutes to rest before attempting another flight of stairs, no matter how much he believed he could do it... but realizing that too late didn’t help him.

But as tired as he was, trying to rest on the stairs had to be even riskier than trying to continue downward. The steps were so narrow, and it would be so very easy to lose track of himself and tilt just a little too far into the empty air. Naegi swallowed hard, readjusted his fist around the pole, and forced himself to take that last handful of steps until he emerged from the stairs onto the relatively solid ground of the second floor.

He sagged against the nearest wall, soaking in the relief of having another forced carry some of his weight for a few seconds. The mere act of breathing consumed his attention for a few minutes, air hissing in and out between his lips as he tried to catch his breath. Pushing himself so hard had been stupid, he could see that now. He had to be more careful now that he couldn’t rely on having
Togami at his side.

His nerves drummed at him, a constant litany of keep moving, keep moving ringing through his head — but he knew he didn’t dare attempt the last flight of stairs until he felt steadier on his feet. He had to stay put on the second floor for at least a few more minutes.

And if he had to wait around here anyway… Naegi’s gaze drifted towards the hall that led to the library. That was where Togami had been working all through the night, disassembling a Monokuma robot to search for answers about the mastermind. It didn’t seem directly related to the murder… but it was awfully strange that the mastermind’s tool would deactivate like that so close to the same time when someone linked to the mastermind had been killed. Naegi couldn’t quite put his finger on the connection, but maybe if he saw the actual scene…

No. He couldn’t do that. He’d told Togami that he’d go straight back to the dorms, not wander off in all directions to investigate anything that caught his eye. Maybe if it were on the way, he might have been able to justify it… but the robot pieces were in the library, in the opposite direction that he’d have to go to get downstairs. Even aside from what he’d promised Togami, he couldn’t spare the energy, not when he wasn’t sure there was anything useful to be found. They would just have to rely on Togami’s knowledge of what had been in the library if it came up in the trial.

But maybe there was something else useful he could do with this time. With his back pressed firmly against the wall, Naegi knew he was steady enough to let go of the music stand pole for a moment. He let it rest in the crook of his arm while he twisted his hand into the only pocket he could reach, pulling out his e-handbook and flipping it on. It was a little awkward to manage the device one-handed without dropping it, but fortunately, the map was one of the easier options to operate.

Slowly, Naegi flipped through the maps of the different floors, noting the icons indicating Togami in the headmaster’s office and Ogami in the dorms. The fifth floor looked empty, even the ruined classroom — but he supposed it made sense that a dead body wouldn’t be marked. But if that was how this upgraded map operated… then what did that mean about Genocide Jill and Kirigiri?

Of course, if Togami was right and this murder really did fall under the killing game’s rules, then both girls couldn’t be dead. The rules clearly said that every culprit was limited to a maximum of two deaths, and Ikusaba already counted as one. Even if this culprit had done something terrible that hadn’t yet been uncovered, they could only have taken out one other girl at the most — which meant that there should be at least one other icon appearing somewhere on this map.

The only exception Naegi could think of would be if the missing girls had ended up in one of the areas of the school where the mastermind’s cameras couldn’t reach. He’d hoped the headmaster’s office might be one — but it had been filmed just as thoroughly as anywhere else, as Togami’s icon in that room showed. The same went for the data center, although they’d never actually gotten a chance to investigate that other room behind the strange Monokuma door. They hadn’t made it into the biology lab or the stairs leading upward from the dorms, but there was no real reason to think that those areas would have any fewer cameras than the rest of the school. The only places they’d found that had no cameras at all were the bathhouse and —

Naegi nearly lost his grip on his handbook as the realization hit him. The other place in the school that he knew had no cameras was the hidden room, right here on the second floor. Yes, the mastermind could obviously track who went in or out using the hallway cameras, but once someone went inside… wouldn’t that take them off the grid?

He scrolled through the maps again until he made it back to the second floor. His own icon stared back at him from beside the staircase to the third floor… just around the corner from the hidden
room. He could actually see the space where it had to be, an unlabeled outline connected to the boys’ bathroom that could easily have been mistaken for the cleaning supply closet if he hadn’t known otherwise. Had that always been visible on his map, or was it something new from that bizarre upgrade? He couldn’t be sure — he’d never thought to check his map much before Monokuma had messed with it.

According to the map, the room looked like it was empty — but what exactly did that mean? It didn’t seem very likely that the mastermind would go around manually updating the map with new locations for all the students, just for Naegi’s benefit. However this upgrade worked, it had to be automatic, and that had to mean relying on the cameras. And if there were no cameras in the place where a student was… then she wouldn’t show up.

The wall seemed to tremble at Naegi’s back, alive with the potential of what could be mere feet away from him on the other side. He was so close to the hidden room — he even had to walk past the entrance on his way to the final set of stairs. He could stop and check it out, just for a moment, long enough to see if one of the missing girls might be back there.

But that would mean breaking two promises to Togami. Not only would he have to go back in the hidden room without telling Togami what he intended first, he’d also have to deviate from his word to go straight back.

Of course… it wasn’t like he’d be going out of his way or anything, not when he had to walk past the bathroom anyway. It wasn’t quite going straight back, and Naegi was pretty sure that Togami wouldn’t approve of this particular detour… but it wasn’t like he was just going off to look for clues or something. One of their friends could be in that room — that was important. And as for the other promise… maybe there was a way to check out the room without actually going inside it.

Naegi slid the handbook back into his pocket and gripped the music stand pole again. With slow, careful footsteps, he began making his way back down the hall, turning right at the corner. The stairs down to the first floor loomed ahead of him, just a few yards off… and the two bathroom doors were immediately to his right. He looked up at the sign for a moment, then took a deep breath and used his good shoulder to push the door open.

Most of the bathroom looked the same as usual, more or less identical to the ones on the other floors. The only difference was the supply closet at the back, where the door stood open to let a slew of cleaning products spill out across the floor. It almost seemed like someone had been rooting through it without much care for tidiness. Naegi blinked at the mess, a little puzzled. He was positive that it hadn’t been like this the last time he’d been in here — the closet had at least been contained, if not terribly organized.

He inched closer to the closet door, listening carefully for any hint that someone might be approaching. He hadn’t noticed when someone had sneaked up on him last time he’d been in the hidden room — but he’d been pretty distracted at the time. Surely he’d be able to keep his wits about him now that he was prepared. As far as he could tell, the only sounds in the room were the one he was making himself. It wasn’t as reassuring as it should have been.

He wasn’t actually going to try to enter the hidden room, he decided. He was stretching his promises pretty badly — he didn’t want to break them entirely, not if he didn’t have to. So he’d just open the door and look inside — it wasn’t like the room was very big or had any hiding spots. If either of the girls was in there, he ought to know right away.

With that decision made, Naegi stepped into the supply closet, preparing to open the hidden door — only to find it jammed closed, a pair of thick metal mops holding it in place.
He stared at the heavy barrier in disbelief. Whoever had done this had known exactly what they were doing, wedging the mops in a huge X through the handle so that the door couldn’t move in the opposite direction to open. It wasn’t a complicated obstacle, but taking it apart would definitely require two hands, not to mention a good few more inches of height than Naegi himself had. There was no way he could get it open.

But… that was strange, wasn’t it? The room had been stripped bare after the first time he’d tried to investigate it — why would someone go to all the trouble of sealing off an empty room? Could something have been moved back inside? That might explain the barricade, since it didn’t look like this door had a lock. But surely there were other, more secure places to keep things…

Naegi nudged at the door with one foot, rattling the mops a little more than he’d intended. A series of loud clangs filled the air, and he winced. If the mastermind hadn’t noticed what he was doing here already, they sure must have caught it now. He probably ought to leave before he did something to attract even more of their attention, especially since he knew he couldn’t get through the door now. He turned to go —

Just as something crashed against the door from the other side. The clash of strained metal exploded through the air as the mops rattled furiously in their places. Naegi stumbled a step backward in shock before he realized exactly what was happening. He hadn’t caused that to happen — something inside the room had. And that meant there was someone on the other side of the door — someone alive.

“Hello?” he called, raising his voice as loudly as he could to try to be heard over the metallic din. “Uh — can you hear me?”

The crashing stopped abruptly, the rattling metal screeching to silence. Through the last echoes, he could almost catch the sound of something that sounded like a voice.

“Is someone in there?” he shouted again, stepping closer to the door.

He pressed as close to the door as he could get, straining to hear through it — and a few words finally made it to him.

“Is that you, Makyutie? What the hell has been going on?”
Chapter 209

Chapter Summary

Naegi reunites with a missing classmate.

A wave of relief washed through Naegi as he recognized Genocide Jill’s voice through the door. She was still alive — barricaded inside the hidden room, sure, but at least well enough to be able to talk to him.

“Are you okay?” he called, trying to raise his voice enough that she could hear him through the door. “You’ve been missing all night — we were really worried about you!”

“I’m locked in an empty room — how do you think I’m doing?” Jill’s furious scream came through loud and clear, even through the door. “And on top of that, all I keep hearing are bells, bells, bells, like you’re trying to train me to kill on command! Want me to start slicing every time I hear another one ring?”

The bells? Naegi frowned. A bell did usually ring to alert them to one of Monokuma’s announcements, but why would Jill focus on that and not the actual content of the messages?

And then he realized — she wouldn’t have heard the announcements. The hidden room was free from both the security cameras and the televisions Monokuma used to communicate with them. If Jill had been stuck there since she’d gone missing last night, then she would have been cut off from everything other than the bells, which rang loudly enough to get anyone’s attention no matter how distracted they might be. She really didn’t know anything that had been happening.

“It’s not just random bells,” he told her. “One of them was a body discovery announcement.”

“And I missed it?” Jill said, sounding outraged. “Sounds like grounds for a do-over to me!”

“No, we haven’t had a trial,” Naegi said, hoping that she’d been referring to the investigation and not the murder itself. “We’re still trying to figure out what happened.”

“Well, it’s not like it can be all that exciting,” Jill said. “I mean, you’re alive and kicking, and no way my White Knight would give it up for anything but the best killer out there! So that just leaves girl-on-girl action, and that’s only good for a cheap ratings boost!”

Naegi cringed at the reference to ratings. It was only Jill’s usual way of speaking, but still — she had no idea how right she was. “Actually, about that —”

“So which one was it?” Jill barreled on before he could find the words to explain the horror of the broadcast. “Only two of ‘em left now, right? So did the Ogre finally go all the way off the deep end, or did Nancy Drew stick her nose in one place too many?”

“Uh… neither, actually,” Naegi said. “There was actually a sixteenth student here working on the mastermind’s side, and she’s the one who got killed.”

“An enemy, huh? Well, sounds like a win to me!” Jill said brightly, and Naegi could hear the grin in her voice. “Whose hand do I need to shake? I’ll give ‘em an extra special thank you, Genocider
Naegi hated to think about exactly what that might mean. “No, it’s not a good thing,” he said. “She counted as a part of the game, so we’ve still got to have a trial for her. And we haven’t figured out much yet.”

“Oh, so we’re talking cover ups?” A spark of interest entered Jill’s voice at that. “Well, I always like to admire a fellow master’s work! Get me the hell out of here and I’ll see what I can find!”

“Sorry, but I don’t think I can,” Naegi said regretfully. “The door isn’t actually locked — it’s barricaded shut, and I can’t get it open by myself.”

“What, my White Knight isn’t there with you?” Jill sounded genuinely shocked to hear that. “How big a crowbar did it take to pry him away?”

“We had to split up to investigate,” Naegi said, figuring that Togami probably wouldn’t want him to tell Jill about his physical vulnerabilities. “I was going downstairs to find Ogami.” An idea occurred to him. “Oh — but I bet she could get the door open pretty easily! I can ask her to do it once I wake her up.”

“She’s napping on the job? Sounds suspicious to me!”

“No, she was drugged.” Naegi paused, his voice dropping lower as he considered that thought. “And that would have happened last night... at close to the same time you were locked up... taking both of you out of the investigation...”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you to project from the diaphragm, Big Mac?” Jill demanded. “Speak up!”

“Sorry!” Naegi did his best to speak up again, though the effort of talking so loudly was starting to wear on him. “I just thought maybe the culprit is the one who locked you in here. Did you see anything?”

“If I saw them coming, you think I’d’ve let them touch me?” Jill snapped. “One minute I was looking for cleaning supplies, the next — *wham*, right through here! And not even my White Knight came running to help when I screamed.”

“He probably couldn’t hear you through the door,” Naegi pointed out. He knew Togami didn’t appreciate Jill’s stalking, but still, he was sure the other boy wouldn’t really have ignored her cries of distress if he’d actually been able to notice them. “I think at first he figured you just went to bed or something.”

“And miss the once in a lifetime chance to watch him get all down and dirty with the electronics?” Jill snorted. “Did he find anything good?”

“Uh... he didn’t say,” Naegi said. “The investigation pretty much took priority once he found the corpse upstairs. We’re pretty short on time.”

“Then what are you wasting it here for?” Jill demanded. “Go on, run find the Ogre so I can finally get out of this place!”

“Right,” Naegi said, nodding sharply before realizing Jill couldn’t see him. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Not like I’m going anywhere,” was the last thing he heard from Jill as he moved away from the door.
Exiting the bathroom, Naegi looked down the hall towards the final set of stairs. Had he rested enough to chance them? Telling Jill about the situation had only reaffirmed its urgency for him - he didn’t want to sit around the second floor, not when there was so much left to do. Besides, it didn’t seem right to leave Jill stuck in the hidden room… and with the limited amount of investigation time they had, it could only help to have another pair of eyes looking for clues.

Carefully, Naegi decided to begin his final descent, pausing after every slow step to make sure he still had his balance. He’d never spent so long on a single flight of stairs, and he couldn’t help but think wistfully of the days when he’d only viewed these steps as a minor inconvenience. He was never going up the stairs again after this, not if he could help it. He was going to stay on the first floor as long as he possibly could.

Finally, after far too many hair-raising moments, Naegi stumbled off the last step of the staircase onto the blessedly solid ground of the first floor. He never thought he’d be so glad to be back in these first hallways, where it had hit him for the first time just how badly his world had been turned upside down. But now, after the creepy chill of the fifth floor, the horrifying revelations of the fourth floor, and the terrors of the staircases in between, coming back to the familiar layout of the gym, the nurse’s office, and the school store seemed almost comforting.

But as he turned the corner that led to the first floor dorms, the sight of the glaring red door to the trial chamber snapped Naegi out of that mindset. What had he been thinking? Sure, the first floor might be a little less upsetting than the higher floors, but that didn’t make it a good place to be. Walking through the dormitory gates shouldn’t feel like he was returning to a safe haven. The entire school was a prison, even if some areas were worse than others. There was nowhere safe here.

Half expecting Monokuma’s announcement to summon them all back to the trial with every step, Naegi kept moving doggedly onward towards the dorm rooms on the far end of the first floor. His steps only faltered once, as he passed Kirigiri’s room… but he knew that even if he stopped to ring the bell, there was no one inside to answer. His handbook had shown him that much when he’d checked it a few minutes ago. Wherever she’d gone, it would take more than a doorbell to find her.

He tore his eyes away from Kirigiri’s name plate and took the last few steps to reach Togami’s room. Leaning against the edge of the door frame, he managed to wrestle Togami’s key from his pocket. He gave the doorbell a good long press so that he wouldn’t take Ogami by surprise, then slid the key into the lock. It turned easily enough, but when he tried to turn the doorknob, moving the heavy door even a few inches made the whole length of his arm tremble from the effort.

Naegi relaxed his grip on the knob, the door slamming shut in his face. How was he supposed to get it open one-handed? Maybe if he braced himself really well and tried to kick it, he’d manage better…?

And then the door knob twisted sharply beneath his fingers. Naegi only just had time to let go before the door wrenched open to reveal Ogami standing in front of him, eyes wild and a palpable aura of threat radiating out from her. When she focused on Naegi, the menaced drained from her expression, though she still looked tense enough to spring into action at a moment’s notice.

“You’re awake!” Naegi smiled up at her in relief.

“Only for a few minutes,” Ogami said, craning her head to scan the hall around Naegi. She frowned. “Are you alone?”

“Oh — yeah, Togami had to stay upstairs,” Naegi explained. “It’s kind of a long story —”
“Then you should sit before you tell it,” she said at once, stepping aside to usher him into the room.

Naegi felt a little guilty for not immediately insisting that Ogami run upstairs to let Jill out of the hidden room… but the thought of finally getting a chance to sit and rest his shaky legs after all those stairs was too much to ignore. He let Ogami help him across the room until he could collapse gratefully down onto the edge of the bed, his iron grip on the music stand pole going slack at last as his hand cramped from the tension.

Ogami’s eyes widened as the pole clattered to the ground. “Have you been using that thing to walk around? You mentioned stairs?”

“Well… I didn’t have much choice,” Naegi said. “You read the note Togami left for you, right?”

“I did,” she said grimly. “Not that it had much of an explanation. It simply said that you’d discovered another body and went to investigate. But if that is what happened, why didn’t you wake me? I know I failed in my responsibility to you by dozing off, but —”

“No, you didn’t just fall asleep!” Naegi interrupted, alarmed by the guilt surging across Ogami’s face. “I guess he didn’t have time to write everything, but we did try to wake you up — and we couldn’t. We think someone must have drugged you somehow.”

“What?” Ogami stared at him. “But — no, I was paying close attention to the door. No one could have gotten in.”

“I know you were being really careful, but… could you really have paid attention every moment, all night?” Naegi asked. “It would only have taken a few seconds.”

But Ogami was already shaking her head. “No. Even if I were not looking directly at the door, I would have noticed one of the other students entering. After observing you how you all move for the last few weeks, I know none of you possess the skill to evade my awareness.”

“Not even Kirigiri?” Naegi asked, her profile flashing back through his mind. Surely the Ultimate Detective would have had some training in stealth…

“But… I thought you two were friends,” Ogami said, her eyes wide with shock. “Are you saying that the genocider was the one you found — and that Kirigiri —”

“No!” The word burst out of Naegi’s mouth with more vehemence than he’d meant. “No, I was just thinking about — well, something else.” He wasn’t sure if it would be right to spread Kirigiri’s talent around without her permission… not when he couldn’t even ask her why she’d been hiding it in the first place. “It doesn’t matter right now.”

“Then… it was Kirigiri you found?” Ogami asked, confused. “Togami didn’t specify whose body you discovered.”

“Because he didn’t know at the time,” Naegi said. “But we figured it out, and it wasn’t Kirigiri or Jill. You were right when you told us there was a sixteenth student here in the school with us. Her name was Mukuro Ikusaba — and she’s the one who got killed.”

“The mastermind’s trump card,” Ogami breathed. “That’s what Monokuma called her. And she’s dead?”

“Very dead,” Naegi said, his stomach twisting as he recalled the wreckage of a corpse. “And I guess you missed the body discovery announcement, too, but the trial will be starting soon.”
“A trial?” Ogami frowned. “But… how could one of us have killed one of the mastermind’s agents?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Naegi said. “Look… you were the first one to mention a sixteenth student, when you told us about how the mastermind blackmailed you. You knew she existed before any of the rest of us.” He took a deep breath, looking her straight in the eye. “Can you tell me anything about her that might help?”
Naegi watched Ogami regretfully as her face twisted with painful recollection. Guilt twisted through his stomach at forcing her to think back to the times the mastermind had threatened her, especially when he knew how much her betrayal of her friends haunted her… but what else could he do? This murder hinged on the mastermind and Ikusaba, that much was clear, and Ogami had been the first one to get a glimpse of what was happening behind the scenes of the mastermind’s plan. With so little to go on, even the smallest scrap of information that she could offer would help. But that didn’t make it any easier to see the pain on his friend’s face. The circles beneath Ogami’s eyes seemed to darken, and lines of tension carved their way around her mouth as she pried her lips apart. “All right. I’ll tell you what I remember.”

“Thank you,” Naegi said, offering her an encouraging smile. “And whatever happened when you were talking with the mastermind, I won’t get mad at you about any of it, I promise.”

A grim sort of smile twisted Ogami’s lips. “I know. You won’t think the worst of any of us, even when you should.”

Naegi shifted uncomfortably at this assessment of his personality. “Look, I’m not sure how long we have before the trial starts… so we probably shouldn’t waste too much time.”

The glimmer of a smile vanished as Ogami nodded. “Of course.”

She started to move towards the chair beside the bed — then stopped short and reversed herself, choosing to sit on the far edge of the bed instead. Naegi supposed he couldn’t really blame her for not wanting to sit back down in the chair where she’d sat drugged into unconsciousness for hours on end… but it was a little weird to find himself sitting on the same bed as a girl. He was pretty sure the polite thing to do would be to stand up and take the chair instead, so that she wouldn’t feel awkward… but he didn’t think he was up to that kind of movement. And besides, Ogami clearly had much more on her mind than the normal sort of proprieties… so if it didn’t bother her, there was probably no point in worrying about it. Not when they had so much else that needed their attention.

Naegi waited for a moment as Ogami stared down at the floor in heavy silence. Did she not know where to begin? Or… was she sliding back into the flood of despair that had nearly overwhelmed her a few days ago, when Asahina had been killed? She’d been so horribly certain that they were all lost, that there was nothing any of them could do to defy the mastermind… Naegi couldn’t let her dwell on that again. Maybe it would help to get her started with a question, something specific that she could do to help.

“When did you first realize there was a sixteenth student?” he asked. “Was it the first time the mastermind approached you?”

Ogami blinked, as though the words had jolted her free of whatever downward spiral she’d found herself stuck in. “No… the first time was the night we arrived, when Monokuma appeared in my room to threaten me. He only talked about my family’s dojo, not about anyone here in the school.”

“And after that?” Naegi prompted, nudging her away from the dark path of those memories. “Did he say something the next time he appeared in your room?”

“No, he didn’t come back to my room again,” Ogami said. “After the first time, I had to go upstairs...
to report to him in the middle of the night. Even before we could reach the higher floors during the
day, the gates on the stairs would be gone whenever he wanted me to go up to the fourth floor.”

Naegi frowned. “The fourth floor? Wait — do you mean the data center?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Ogami said. “I shouldn’t be surprised that you worked it out. I believe that’s the
room the mastermind uses to keep tabs on us, with the feeds from the surveillance cameras.”

“It is,” Naegi confirmed, unable to avoid a nervous glance up at the security camera currently
filming them as he spoke. “Togami and I actually found the data center key, and… well, it’s a long
story that didn’t turn out to have very much to do with the murder.” This had to be the worst time to
delve into the horrors of the data center now, when he’d just reminded Ogami so vividly of all the
terrible acts she’d been forced to do under the cameras’ glare. It would be better to wait until later
to explain, maybe when he could tell both Jill and Ogami at the same time.

Ogami didn’t seem inclined to press the issue. “Well, that’s where Monokuma waited for me,
sitting in a big chair in the middle of the room with all the monitors around him. I knew I would see
all of you if I looked up at the screens that showed the dormitories… and after I got to know you
more, I couldn’t bear to watch.”

“So you looked somewhere else instead,” Naegi surmised. “Some of the other screens? Did you
see Ikusaba moving around while we were all asleep?”

“No… nothing so obvious,” Ogami said. “I wasn’t even sure of what I saw at first — I had to ask
Monokuma to confirm it meant what I thought.”

“What was it?” Naegi asked.

“A list of the student votes after the second trial,” Ogami said.

“The votes?” Naegi blinked. That hadn’t been what he’d expected her to say. “Monokuma showed
it to you?”

“No, but it was sitting on the desk beside him when he called me to report in that night,” Ogami
said. “I recognized it almost immediately — it had a list with the same portraits that are on our
dorm room nameplates. And next to each portrait, there was a mark noting how that person voted.”

“But… we’ve all agreed every time, haven’t we?” Naegi asked, puzzled. “I mean… we’ve always
worked out what happens, and the culprits have all admitted to it. What would anyone need to
count?”

“I couldn’t say what the mastermind’s reason was for keeping such a list,” Ogami said, shrugging.
“I only know that I saw it. But… the votes weren’t as unanimous as you believe.”

Naegi frowned. “Well, I guess it would be too much to expect someone to vote for their own
execution…”

“Owada did,” Ogami said. “Ishimaru was the one who couldn’t. He chose to vote for himself
instead of for his friend.”

“Really?” Naegi looked down at the ground, remembering the heartbroken look on Ishimaru’s face
after Owada had admitted his own guilt. So in the end, even knowing that being wrong would
condemn them all, he hadn’t been able to turn against his friend. There was something terrible in
the potential consequences of such a choice… but there was a kind of strength in it, too. Only a few
days, and their friendship had already grown so strong… Naegi swallowed in a too-tight throat,
wishing he could have seen what a connection like that could have become if they’d been allowed to explore it.

“There’s nothing preventing it,” Ogami said. “We’re required to vote, but there is no requirement that we must vote in accordance with any specific principle. Voting for oneself is the obvious choice to refuse to participate — I used the same method myself.”

“You voted for yourself in the second trial?” Naegi frowned. “Why? Did you think we were wrong when we all figured out that Owada was the culprit? But… you didn’t say anything, even when he admitted it.”

“I was convinced by your arguments,” Ogami said. “But I didn’t feel that I had the right to vote to condemn any of you during the trials, not when I was working against you. It would have been dishonorable to send someone to death, when I was conspiring with the mastermind to ensure the murders occurred. I have voted for myself in each of the trials so far.”

“Oh…” Naegi wasn’t sure what he should say to that. He didn’t blame Ogami for the way the mastermind had blackmailed her… but he knew she still blamed herself. If refusing to take part in the executions had helped her cope with her pain, then how could he tell her she shouldn’t have done it? The decision of how to vote was her own, and she’d clearly made it with her eyes open to the consequences.

But for himself, Naegi couldn’t imagine deciding to throw away his vote and let the others pick the culprit. He’d argued to uncover the truth in all the past trials, even when it had meant fighting against his friends. It felt as though that gave him a kind of responsibility to the people whose crimes he’d helped uncover — like he owed it to them to follow through with a vote proclaiming his beliefs. How could he ask the others to bear that burden if he couldn’t stand to vote for the culprit himself?

Vote for the culprit…

Naegi blinked. “Wait, the list of votes told you that there was a sixteenth student? Then are you saying that Ikusaba has been voting in the trials all along?”

“If she’s the sixteenth student, yes,” Ogami said. “That was what I noticed. The list of votes was laid out in a four by four grid, and with only fifteen students, the final space should have been blank — but instead, it had a question mark where the portrait should have been.”

“Well… I guess that if she really was just as much a participant in the killing game as the rest of us, she would have had to vote, too,” Naegi said, thinking it over. “But it seems strange that someone who could have watched the murder on the security cameras would be part of the vote. I mean, she’d know who the real culprit was.”

“If so, she didn’t use that knowledge.”

“You mean… she opted out, like you?” Naegi asked.

“Not in quite the same way,” Ogami said. “Both times, she chose the incorrect alternatives that came up during the trials. She voted for Genocide Jill in the second trial… and for you during the first.”

“So she wanted us to lose?” Naegi couldn’t keep the horror out of his voice. “Why would she have wanted that?”

“I can’t speak for what she thought,” Ogami said, shrugging. “Monokuma refused to provide me
with any information about her when I asked. All I know is what I saw on the list."

Naegi shivered at the thought of someone they’d never met adding a vote they didn’t know about to the list. He supposed it wouldn’t really have mattered in any of the cases so far, since they’d managed to pinpoint the culprits pretty definitively before beginning the vote. The rules said that all they needed was a majority, so even with Ogami opting out and Ikusaba apparently trying to sabotage them, they’d still been safe. But if they’d ever had a case where they’d been unable to come to a unanimous agreement… if the group had ended up evenly split…

He shook his head sharply, trying to knock the unsettling thoughts away. “I guess the way she voted doesn’t matter anymore. It’s not like she can vote in this trial. It’s just the five of us now.”

“I suppose it is.” Ogami stared forward at the wall, looking past it to a vision in her own mind. Asahina, Naegi realized — she had to be remembering Asahina.

“Sorry,” he said, cringing at his careless remark about how few of them remained. “I shouldn’t have reminded you of her.”

But Ogami shook her head slowly, as if moving under the pressure of a great weight. “You can hardly remind me when I never forget. Even when I don’t think about her consciously… even when she isn’t in the forefront of my mind… part of me always remembers. Even if I manage to stop thinking about the actual moment, the consequences linger. Loss can’t ever be entirely put aside.”

“But… I don’t think it’s the loss that you can’t forget,” Naegi said, frowning as he looked up into her shadowed eyes. “It’s the friendship you two had — that’s why the loss matters. Every time we connect with another person and start caring about them, it changes us into something a little different — a person we wouldn’t have been otherwise.”

“You think she contributed to the person I am now?” Ogami’s hands clenched around her knees like vises.

“Of course she did,” Naegi said. “And the part of you that’s different because you met her — that’s the part of you that can’t forget. I don’t think that’s something that can ever go away. Once someone has affected you that way, nothing can take that from you. Even when you stop remembering, it will always be there inside you.”

Naegi trailed off, thinking about the person Asahina had been by the end of the fourth trial… the girl who had been so determined to speak to her friend that she’d gambled with breaking one of the school rules. And then when she’d finally understood the consequences of her actions, she’d even argued that breaking the rule had been her crime, not Ogami’s, pleading for her best friend’s life while knowing the price of success would be her own death. That girl wasn’t the same person he’d met in the entrance hall, before any of them had gotten to know one another. Ogami had created that strength in her, from the friendship they’d forged.

“That is a far more positive way to think of it” Ogami said softly. “And… I think she would have liked it.” A sad smile brushed the corners of her lips. “Thank you. I know we don’t have time for this, not with a trial on the way… but thank you for remembering her with me.”

Naegi tried to smile back, though he couldn’t help the twist of sorrow that changed the expression into something else. “How could I forget?”
Naegi tries to figure out if Ogami knows anything else that could be related to the murder.

Naegi reviewed everything that Ogami had told him about her interactions with Monokuma. It was interesting to know how the mastermind had tallied the votes, especially knowing that Ikusaba had been voting against them every time — but no matter how he thought about it, he couldn’t see a way that it would have an impact on the murder. Maybe if the mastermind had been the one to kill her, it might have mattered… but if Togami was right about this death being part of the killing game, the question of votes wouldn’t even enter into it.

“Is that everything you learned about Ikusaba?” he asked Ogami one last time. “Are you sure the mastermind didn’t let any other hints slip?”

But Ogami shook her head. “They were very deliberate in everything they said to me. If not for the list of votes, I wouldn’t have had any reason to suspect another student’s existence.”

Naegi sighed… but it had been a long shot. Considering that Ikusaba had been the mastermind’s carefully concealed secret for weeks, they were lucky to have as much information about her as they did. After all, it wasn’t as though any of them would naturally think that there might be other hidden participants in the game. If Ikusaba hadn’t revealed herself to Kirigiri a few days ago, they would have been completely blindsided now.

“I’m sorry I can’t be of more help,” Ogami said quietly. Her gaze went back to the chair where she’d fallen unconscious. “I’ve been of no use in this investigation at all.”

“It’s not your fault you were drugged,” Naegi told her at once.

“Isn’t it?” A short, humorless laugh escaped Ogami’s lips. “This is the second murder in a row that has happened while I was incapacitated in such a way. My guard is clearly not what it ought to be if I can be dispatched without even noticing how it was done.”

Naegi frowned. “So… you didn’t see anything?”

“Not so much as a motion out of place,” she confirmed. “The last thing I remember is sitting at your bedside, watching to make sure you didn’t shift the sling too much while you slept. I had a clear view of the door from that chair, and even if someone had concealed themselves in the room, they couldn’t have approached without revealing themselves.”

“I don’t think they would have needed to,” Naegi said. “This wasn’t an injection like Fukawa used. I’m pretty sure this drug was in the coffee you were drinking. All someone would have had to do was get the drug into the coffee, and you would’ve dosed yourself.”

But Ogami shook her head. “That was bottled coffee, not something from a pot that could have been tampered with. The bottles were sealed when I got them, I checked before opening them. I only had one bottle open at once, and I always left it sitting on the table beside me.”
“Oh.” Naegi frowned. The coffee had made sense when he’d been talking with Togami about it… but Ogami’s explanation seemed to eliminate the possibility. “Did you eat or drink anything else?”

“No, I was concerned eating too heavily might make me sleepy,” Ogami said. “The coffee was the only thing I consumed in this room.”

Which meant that the coffee had to be the source of the drug… except that there was no way it could have been. Naegi frowned. He knew he had to be missing something, but he couldn’t quite see what.

“Is there anything you noticed that seemed strange?” he asked, trying for a less specific question. “The culprit was definitely in this room at some point. Has anything looked different or out of place?”

Ogami frowned, turning to scan the room. “The box I carried everything in has been moved.”

“Yeah, Togami did that when we were trying to figure out what happened,” Naegi said. “He needed something to stand on.”

“And he must have needed to move the thermoses to do it,” she said, nodding. “In that case, I don’t see anything unusual.”

“Wait… what thermoses?” Naegi asked, puzzled. He tried to think back to when he and Togami had searched the room — or rather, when Togami had searched while he’d been occupied with figuring out if he could manage to stand and walk on his own. He didn’t think he remembered seeing any thermoses, but then again, he hadn’t paid a lot of attention to what Togami was doing until the other boy had climbed up on the box to mess with the air vent.

“The ones that I used to bring water back from the kitchens,” Ogami said. The memory clicked — not searching the room, but earlier, when Ogami had brought back supplies before the kitchen had closed. “Right, because the water was going to be switched off overnight.”

“And after you lost so much blood, we needed to keep you hydrated,” Ogami said. “I’m glad you decided to continue drinking the rest of the water even without a reminder. If you hadn’t, you would be having even more severe problems with dizziness and fatigue.”

“Uh… actually, I didn’t remember,” Naegi admitted, grimacing at the memory of how the stairs had knocked all the wind out of him. “I haven’t drunk anything since Togami told me about the murder. There’s been so much else going on, I guess I just forgot.”

Ogami frowned. “Then what did you use all the water for?”

“Nothing — we didn’t touch it,” Naegi said. “Why?”

“It’s gone.” She gestured over to a jumble of empty thermoses near the table. “I brought as much as I could, far more than I expected you to drink, in case we needed it to clean your wounds again or something like that.”

“But you didn’t end up using all of it?” Naegi asked, staring at the thermoses. “No, I barely got through half of one thermos,” Ogami said.

“And Togami and I didn’t use it, either,” Naegi said slowly.
“Then… you have been wandering all over the school without hydrating properly?” Ogami sounded horrified by this idea. “You lost huge quantities of blood not twenty-four hours ago — you shouldn’t even be out of bed, let alone exerting yourself that much.”

“I know,” Naegi said. “But… I don’t know what else I could have done.”

After all, even if he’d managed to convince Togami to go up to investigate the fifth floor again on his own… that would have left Togami by himself when the bomb went off. Alone, deafened, covered by fallen debris, there was no way Togami would have managed to douse the bomb’s flames before they’d spread to the rest of the room. He supposed he could have given in to Togami’s suggestion that they wait for Ogami to wake up before investigating further… but if they’d waited, would they have lost even more of their limited time before the trial?

“I suppose not,” Ogami conceded with an unhappy frown. “But… are you still having problems with dizziness?”

“Well… yeah, a little,” Naegi said.

“Well… okay, thanks,” he said, smiling up at her.

Ogami nodded and headed into the bathroom, bringing an empty cup and straw. He watched as she began to fill them from the faucet — then paused, stared down at them for a long moment, and began scrubbing at them instead. In case any trace of drugs had gotten on them, Naegi realized. Well, after being drugged twice herself, it made sense that she would want to take additional precautions.

But even if water would help him, Naegi knew he didn’t really have time to waste waiting for Ogami. While she bent over the sink, concentrating on her work, he picked up the music stand pole again and levered himself off the bed. His knees and ankles seemed to creak as his weight landed back on them, and his toes wanted to curl up in exhausted protest at the thought of walking any further… but Naegi did his best to push those sensations to the back of his mind as he headed over to the table across the room.

A collection of medicine bottles, cans, and medical paraphernalia cluttered the table, wrinkling and obscuring the neat white tablecloth that had been draped over it, but since they didn’t look unusual, Naegi ignored most of them. Instead, he focused on the jumble of empty thermoses on the ground beside the table. There were about half a dozen of them, all fairly large, and they looked more like camping gear than just sealed mugs. If Ogami had filled them up completely, they must have held several gallons of water. What had happened to it?

“Naegi? Where are you?”

The sharp alarm in Ogami’s voiced jolted him out of his thoughts, and he looked up from the pile of thermoses just in time to see her step out of the bathroom, looking around frantically until she caught sight of him.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly, as she hurried over to help support him back over to the bed. “I just wanted a better look at those bottles. I didn’t mean to make you worry.”
“I didn’t expect to look up and find that you were no longer in my line of vision,” Ogami said, her lips thin. “I thought perhaps your injuries had finally overwhelmed you… or something worse.”

“I’m fine, though,” Naegi reassured her. “You don’t need to get upset about it.”

“I promised Togami that I would keep you safe in his stead,” Ogami said softly, her gaze piercing through Naegi as if she could see someone else in his place if she just stared long enough. “And… I have broken my word far too many times since coming to this school. I will not do so again.”

Naegi frowned. He couldn’t speak for anything that might have happened between her and Togami while he was unconscious… but he knew that he didn’t like that idea at all. Their time here at Hope’s Peak had been a long string of horrible events happening one after the other, even when they’d fought their hardest to stop it. His injuries might have left him needing more help than the others, but he didn’t want Ogami to feel like she had to take on the responsibility of protecting him.

“You know that it wouldn’t be your fault if something happens, right?” he said, looking up into her distant eyes and hoping his words would reach her. “The mastermind has been working against us from the start, trying to make us do horrible things to one another. If something happens in spite of everything… that’s their fault for making this game, not yours for being forced into playing it. You can’t blame yourself for doing your best in a situation where there was no right choice to begin with.”

Ogami stared down at him, and Naegi couldn’t tell if she was looking at him or some shadow of the friend that she could no longer see. “That only goes so far,” she said at last. “There may be no right choices… but there are wrong ones. Do you think that this was a choice I made once and could never take back? I could have told you all about the mastermind’s threats against me at any point… but day after day, minute after minute, I chose the coward’s path. I continued to play by the rules the mastermind set out for me as long as I could, until the decision was taken out of my hands.”

Naegi frowned. He’d never thought about things in quite that way. Everything that happened was ultimately the mastermind’s fault — he still believed that wholeheartedly. They’d manipulated his friends into doing terrible things by creating desperate circumstances… but maybe that was just another part of their trap. If he kept saying it was all the mastermind’s fault… then wasn’t he just accepting the situation was exactly the way they presented it? Did that mean he was closing his eyes to other options?

It was too difficult a question to answer, especially now. “I just don’t want you to feel guilty about me,” he told her after a long pause, since being honest could only help.

Ogami nodded slowly, and Naegi got the feeling that she was looking at him again instead of some ghost from her memories. “I hope that I never have to.”

The weight of her words was too much to bear. Naegi looked away, back at the rest of the room. “Well… we should probably keep investigating. There are still some things I want to check before the trial.”

“Very well,” Ogami said, squaring her shoulders. “Then I’ll assist you, if you wish. I doubt you’ll be able to investigate very effectively without two hands.”

Two hands… Naegi gasped. “Jill!”

How could he have forgotten that the genocider was still stuck upstairs in the hidden room? He’d told her that he’d get her out right away, but then he’d let himself get distracted.
“What about her?” Ogami asked, looking taken aback by the outburst.

“She’s trapped upstairs,” Naegi explained. “She’s… well…”

He paused, wondering what to say. He’d told Kirigiri that he wouldn’t reveal the hidden room to anyone… but that had been before they’d realized how much the mastermind knew about it. It wasn’t exactly a secret anymore, now that the mastermind had cleared out anything useful… and since Alter Ego hadn’t been safe there, despite their best efforts, they couldn’t even depend on the fact that it was a space without cameras that the mastermind couldn’t monitor.

At this point, the only people the room was hidden from were his classmates. And with Jill trapped inside and unable to free herself, the location couldn’t stay hidden much longer. Someone would have to let her out before the trial started, or she’d get in trouble for skipping. There really wasn’t a way around it.

Naegi took a deep breath and tried not to feel guilty for what he was about to say. “There’s a hidden room on the second floor, in the back of the supply closet in the boys’ bathroom, and Jill has been stuck there since last night. The door doesn’t have a lock, but someone barricaded her in. I couldn’t get the door open one-handed. Can you go upstairs and let her out?”

“From a hidden room in the boys’ bathroom?” Ogami said, looking confused. “I suppose I can do that… but will you be all right here by yourself?”

Naegi would have liked to say he’d go along with her — but he knew there was no chance, not when it meant approaching the stairs again. “I’ll be fine. I can even lock the door if you want.”

“Wait — you mean you have the key?” Ogami’s eyes widened. “Togami gave you his key?”

“Er… yeah,” Naegi said slowly, blinking up at her. “How did you think I got in?”

“I didn’t think about it.” Ogami shook her head slightly, a hint of a smile touching her lips. “Yes, lock the door behind me. I’ll return with Jill as quickly as I can.”

Before he could agree, another idea occurred to Naegi. “Actually… could you send her upstairs instead? Togami’s searching the headmaster’s office on the fourth floor, and I’d feel a lot better if he wasn’t by himself.”

He knew that Togami didn’t especially like having Jill follow him around… but the genocider would definitely keep a close eye on her beloved white knight. When the bell for the trial finally rang, she’d be able to help him down the stairs if he needed it — and Naegi was pretty sure she wouldn’t take no for an answer, whether Togami wanted help or not.

“All right,” Ogami agreed, heading for the door. Naegi stood, following her as she went. “I’m sure she won’t argue with that. Be careful until I return, and try to drink water as much as you can.”

With that, she walked out of the dorm room. Naegi locked the door behind her and turned back to the rest of the room. He had more investigating to do.
Chapter 212

Chapter Summary

Togami searches the headmaster's office for the mysterious weapon Monokuma mentioned.

Junko scowled up at the television monitors, kicking away from the desk and letting her chair skid back across the floor until she hit the door. The walls of monitors soared up around her, each of them giving her a perfect view of the school she controlled completely…

And each of them just as empty and boring as the last! Junko slumped down in her chair, drumming her fingers against the armrests as she watched Ogami climb the stairs to the second floor. She’d known things would start to get tedious once she hit the home stretch, but she hadn’t realized just how dull it would be with only a few students left to keep tabs on.

It was almost enough to make her wish she’d kept her disappointment of a sister around after all. Or at least her corpse — it wasn’t like there was much difference in how much Mukuro could’ve held her interest either way. And she did miss having someone around to talk to.

Junko looked up at the camera feed for classroom 5-C, checking on the scene again. That bomb had really done a number on the room, hadn’t it? And not just the room. A giggle burbled up as she looked at the ruined body of what had once been her sister.

No, this was better than she’d expected, so much better. Maybe Mukuro was actually going to be something other than a disappointment for once! Junko was sure her precious sister would have been so proud, if only she knew.

A flash of movement snagged her attention back to the second floor, just in time to see Genocide Jill explode out of the boys’ bathroom and take off at top speed for the stairs upward. Looked like Togami was about to get a nasty surprise coming his way! A nasty smile spread across her lips as she located Togami, sorting through all the useless dreck the headmaster had cluttered his office with.

And then she glanced back at the first floor, just to make sure no one was trying to sneak a bit of rule-breaking in on the sly… and another laugh choked its way out of her throat. So even in dire straits, her beloved friends weren’t going to let her down after all! She grinned up at the two different camera feeds and settled back to enjoy the show.

Togami sat on the couch in the headmaster’s office, words blurring before his eyes as he tried to sort through the most important-looking of the files that had been scattered across the floor. There had to be important clues hidden in these documents, he was sure of it… but how was he supposed
to uncover them when his eyes burned with exhaustion every time he tried to focus?

It had been so much easier when Naegi had been here with him. The other boy always seemed to
know what he was thinking, ready with the next step of his thought process as easily as reading his
mind. Togami had never believed he’d meet anyone who could understand the way his mind
worked so completely… but in a matter of days, he’d already found himself relying on Naegi’s
ability to do exactly that.

How had he ended up this way, so dependent on another person? It was a little disconcerting to
find that he couldn’t quite put his finger on the moment when it had occurred… and he wasn’t sure
he liked what that meant.

Caring for Naegi was one thing, he’d come to terms with that… but he’d let himself get used to
having someone to share his thoughts with. Instincts honed in the vicious corporate world the
Togami family operated in all told him that was dangerous… but when it came to Naegi, those
instincts felt blunted and far away.

But even if everything was better with Naegi around, that didn’t make it impossible with him gone.
Togami gritted his teeth as he glared down at the file in front of him, then flipped it violently aside
to start on the next one in the stack. But without the satisfying crack of paper snapping through the
air, tossing the file aside didn’t make him feel much better.

The words on the next file wove back and forth before his eyes as he tried to read them, distracted
by the empty rush of noise filling his ears. With one of his senses gone, the world seemed a little
more muted, a little more distant… and he didn’t need anything making the world harder to reach
right now. He scowled down at the paper until sheer force of will made at least the title of the
document weave itself back into tidy, understandable letters.

Hope’s Peak Academic Calendar. For a moment, Togami’s interest sparked — before he realized
that it was an older document, dated for an earlier class that must have long since graduated. It was
probably only kept around for reference — not a likely source of clues for whatever mysterious
weapon had been kept in the headmaster’s office.

In fact, he’d yet to see the slightest hint to support Monokuma’s revelation that there had ever been
a weapon in here. Everything he’d seen of the office seemed mundane enough, if scattered into a
huge mess. He was almost starting to wonder whether he shouldn’t have taken Monokuma’s hint
about a weapon seriously after all. Maybe it had just been meant to mock his inability to enter the
office. After all, what kind of weapon could be dangerous enough to take out every student in the
school? Why would something like that be kept in the headmaster’s office, of all places? It made
no sense!

Maybe he’d been approaching this wrong from the start. After all, if the weapon had been stolen
from the office, someone must have managed to find it in the first place — presumably the same
person who had torn the office part in a mad search, leaving every drawer upended every shelf
scattered in a stark contrast to his own more methodical investigation. He’d been as careful as he
could be, trying to ensure that he saw everything… but someone who would leave such wreckage
in their wake hadn’t cared about most of the materials in here. They’d been looking for one thing
in particular, and discarded everything that wasn’t that object… so maybe he ought to be trying to
figure out what the other searcher had been looking for.

He looked around the room, studying the mess with new eyes. Whatever it was must have been
something small enough to fit in one of the drawers, considering all the attention paid to them…
but it also must’ve been immediately recognizable, since the objects had been flung aside instead
of sorted into potentially meaningful categories.
With papers thrown every which way, he was almost tempted to believe that the mysterious intruder had been looking for an important document of some sort... but that didn’t make sense, because he could see dozens of places a completely flat piece of paper might have been hidden, like behind a picture in one of the portrait frames or between the pages of a book. But none of those hiding spots had been touched — only the drawers and shelves had been ripped apart. That seemed to point to a bulkier object than paper...

Assuming that the person who’d done the searching wasn’t a complete idiot, of course. If that was the case, then all his suppositions were useless, because who could judge what a stupid person would do? But... considering the limited possibilities of who might have searched the room, he doubted it. After all, there were really only three options — one of the two girls who had entered the office, Kirigiri and Ikusaba, or the mastermind themselves. And whatever he might think of those three, he didn’t believe any of them were stupid.

So if that was the case, if someone with a moderate amount of intelligence had searched this office looking for a small object... what had they found? Togami put the stack of files aside and levered himself to his feet, turning around in a slow circle to take the room in again. Glass cabinet of memorabilia, mostly untouched — the desk, he’d have to look at that more closely — bookcases, mostly emptied now — the door, ajar and... and shaking?

He only had a moment to freeze, eyebrows snapping together in confusion, before the door slammed open and Genocide Jill burst into the room, her face distending in a wild grin as she caught sight of him.

Togami stared at the girl in horror as she bounded over to his side. His crazy stalker was the absolute last person that he wanted to encounter now, badly exhausted and with one of his senses gone. His words had been his only real weapon against her in the past, and how was he supposed to use them if he didn’t know what she was saying?

She was certainly saying quite a bit now, her lips flying through a tangle of mad chatter, but he couldn’t make out more than a few words from the rapid-fire babbling. White knight, murder, adorable... based on those glimpses, maybe he didn’t actually want to know what she was saying.

What was she even doing here? With the way she’d disappeared off somewhere in the middle of the night, he’d been half-convinced that the murderer had taken her down as the second one of their allotted deaths. Even if she was alive, he certainly hadn’t expected her to turn up mid-investigation. Had it just been a coincidence after all, and she’d just spent the night asleep in her room until the morning announcement? But if so, how had she known where to find him? She’d shown a disturbing ability to know where he was at times, but surely the headmaster’s office would have been trickier to figure out...

And she was staring at him.

She’d asked him a question, he realized, inky dread curling through his stomach at the pressure of her expectant eyes burning against his skin. Somewhere buried in that rambling blather she’d been spewing since entering the room, she’d actually had a question that she was waiting for him to answer — and he had no idea what it was.

Could he bluff his way through a response that didn’t give away his inability to hear? Icy disinterest was generally a safe reaction to anything that came out of her mouth... but not always, not if he didn’t frame it right. And Jill had an almost uncanny understanding of him at times. If the tone of his answer was even a hair off, she’d catch the moment of weakness.

She was even starting to notice it now. He never hesitated like this when presented with the
opportunity to insult her, and now he could see the start of a puzzled crease between her eyes, the thoughtful tilt of her head to one side. He had to say *something*, but —

Her mouth started moving again, even faster than before, pouring out another torrent of rubbish that he was almost glad he couldn’t hear. Maybe with this new explosion of chatter, she’d lose track of whatever question she’d asked a moment ago — unless she asked another. Then he’d have the same problem, because her lips might as well have been a blur of motion. He could only catch occasional snatches of a word, nothing intelligible. He could recognize her demeaning nicknames for him littering her babble, along with a few other repeated syllables. What was she going on about that used the word *mac* so much —


At the realization of what she was really talking about, Togami’s gaze locked onto Jill’s lips in a way that would have nauseated him in any other circumstances. But no matter how desperately he tried to find some sense in her chatter, it didn’t help. Her words were too fast, too jumbled, too unpredictable for him to read.

Not like Naegi’s words had been. With the other boy, he’d been able to understand the words almost as clearly as if he’d heard them. He could see now how much Naegi had been trying to make things easier by speaking slowly, looking directly at him, and enunciating clearly. Reading Naegi’s lips had been so easy that it had lulled him into a false confidence in his skill, letting him believe this was no more than a mild inconvenience — but Jill’s incomprehensible speech hammered home the fact that it was worse. She was talking about *Naegi*... and he didn’t know what she was saying.

The need for that information burned through his skull, every nerve alive with the agonizing question of what it was she knew. Had she run into Naegi? Was something wrong? Had the exertion been too much for the injured boy, leaving him broken in a heap on one of the lower floors? He had to know. It was impossible to go on searching with this dreadful possibility that something had befallen his boyfriend.

But as far as Jill knew, she’d already told him the answers to those questions. Presumably that was the subject of the blather she’d been directing at him, interspersed with her usual inanities. How could he convince her to repeat the same information, slowly and clearly enough for him to understand, without giving away his vulnerability?

He couldn’t. Of course he couldn’t, there wasn’t a chance of making that work. He should just ignore her, turn aside and pretend he didn’t care, hide his weak point and protect himself. But…

Naegi’s face flashed before his eyes, slack and bloody and empty.

“Stop talking,” Togami said, hoping the words sounded sufficiently imperious even though he couldn’t hear them himself. “Now, tell me again what happened to Naegi. Speak *slowly.*”

Jill stared at him, a pair of scissors flashing into her hand as suspicion slowly dawned in her eyes. And it didn’t take an expert to read the word “Why?” on her lips.

She wasn’t stupid. He’d forgotten that behind the ridiculous demeanor and the off-putting instability, Jill actually possessed a sharp enough mind to get away with murder time and again. She knew how to make use of the brain that Fukawa had frittered away on useless fantasies... and given a few more seconds, she would work out the obvious answer.

Better to forestall that eventuality and at least put his own spin on matters.
“There was a bomb set to go off when we discovered the body, and I was caught in the blast.”
Togami took a deep breath. “And I’ve been having difficulty hearing things clearly ever since.”
Chapter 213

Chapter Summary

Togami and Jill search the headmaster's office.

Togami watched Jill carefully as she processed the information about the current state of his hearing, especially keeping an eye on the scissors twirling in her hand. Visual cues were all the warning he’d get if she decided to seize the opportunity to pounce, and he didn’t want to miss a critical clue.

But she didn’t look like attacking was foremost in her thoughts. Red eyes gleamed a little too sharply in his direction, raking him up and down so intently he nearly took a step backward, and the smile that curled across her lips sent a chill down his spine. A nasty sense of foreboding whispered the words she was about to say, clearly enough that he could read them despite the speed with which she spoke.

“So I can say whatever I want to you?”

The idea that she had worse thoughts running through her head that she didn’t speak, that the vile filth she spewed on a daily basis was what she considered fit for public speech, was too horrible to contemplate.

“I can still understand you,” he said, trying to make his tone sharp with disapproval. “I’m perfectly capable of reading lips.”

“But only if I look at you and speak slowly, right, baby?” There was something creepy about seeing Jill’s face contort with wild laughter while he heard only silence. “One step to the side and it’s an instant mute button! Man, no wonder Big Mac sent me your way!”

“You’ve seen him?” Togami demanded. “Where is he? Did he make it downstairs?”

“Safe and sound, so the Ogre says!” Jill said.

Togami felt some of the tension drain from his shoulders in relief. So Naegi had kept his word to go back and find Ogami, the remaining student most capable of keeping him safe. Not that he’d doubted Naegi’s intent to do so, but the other boy had a distressing tendency to find trouble no matter how good his intentions might be. A thousand things could have happened to the accident-prone boy between the fourth floor and the dorms — it was good to know they hadn’t. But there was one thing that still didn’t explain.

“Why did he send you to me?” Togami asked, crossing his arms and glowering at Jill.

She shrugged. “Sorry, baby, but that’s all she wrote! I didn’t even get to sneak a glimpse of your cutie — all I got was a great big eyeful of Ogre, which is not what a girl needs after a long hard night!”

“And Naegi wasn’t with her?” Togami frowned, not liking the sound of that. “Why did she leave him alone?”
“Who knows?” Jill said, with what appeared to be cheerful disregard for her failure to obtain useful information. “Why would I waste time asking the Ogre questions when I could be here at my White Knight’s side?”

Togami grimaced. He didn’t like having her around at the best of times… but now, unable to hear, having her around felt like a worse idea than ever. He shuddered to think what kind of horrible things she might get up to if he took his eyes off her for a second, now that she knew he couldn’t hear her. How was he supposed to keep track of his stalker and investigate at the same time? He was nearly of a mind to send her away again, no matter what Naegi had wanted…

But on the other hand, he had to admit that it wouldn’t hurt to have a second pair of eyes searching the room. And if he gave Jill a direct order to fulfill a clearly-defined task, he was fairly certain that she’d do it. With an inexcusable amount of disgusting chatter, of course, but he had plenty of practice ignoring anything that came out of her mouth, even when he’d been able to hear it. As long as she confined herself to words, that might be okay.

“All right, then,” he said, lifting his chin imperiously in the hopes that his attitude could override his grimy, exhausted appearance in the genocider’s eyes. “Since you’re here, you might as well make yourself useful. I have reason to suspect there may have been a weapon stored in this office at some point. Find me evidence that can either prove or disprove that theory.”

“A weapon, huh?” Jill spun her scissors, sending spots of reflected light dancing around the room. “Wouldn’t’ve thought he had anything like that stashed in here! What is it, something he snatched off a student who wasn’t playing by the rules?”

“If I knew exactly what it was, I wouldn’t need you to search for it,” Togami said impatiently. “The information I have suggests that it would be unusually dangerous, more than any of the others in the school.”

“More dangerous? What, when I’ve still got these beauties?” Jill grinned, flinging out her hands to display several more pairs of scissors. “Not a chance! Come on, baby, you know what counts is how you use what you’ve got!”

Togami refused to give her the satisfaction of reacting to her crude innuendos, instead doing his best to keep track of the scissors flashing through her hands. How she managed to hold that many without dropping them or stabbing herself was a mystery, but he’d yet to see her put a blade wrong no matter how manically she twirled them.

Much as he hated to admit it, she did have a point — what would be nothing more than ordinary blades for anyone else became infinitely more of a threat in her hands. He couldn’t envision any weapon the mastermind might have hidden in this office that could put him more on edge than Jill’s scissors. After all, the scissors themselves that were the threat — it was the intent behind them, the entire serial killing pattern that they represented, that made them so dangerous. Looking at the scissors apart from Jill’s crucifixions, no one would even think they were a weapon —

Togami froze as the thought fully sank in to his awareness. Jill’s scissors were a dangerous weapon only in her hands — because of the context in which she used them. He’d known from the start of the killing game that supposedly ordinary items could be used as weapons and that nothing in the school was truly safe… but he hadn’t considered the full implications of that idea for the weapon Monokuma claimed had been stolen from the headmaster’s office. No ordinary weapon would be as dangerous as Monokuma had described… but what if this wasn’t a traditional weapon? What if this was something utterly ordinary, that only became a weapon when used in the right way?

The glare of reflected lights darting through the room abruptly reduced, and Togami looked back
at Jill to see that she’d restored her scissors to wherever she usually kept them, except for a single pair that she twirled idly in one hand. It didn’t particularly make him feel better — she still had all those scissors on hand, even if he couldn’t see them at the moment. His gaze went automatically to her lips, to be sure that he’d catch anything she tried to say — so he had a horribly clear view of Jill’s tongue deliberately licking her wide grin.

“Stop wasting time and get on with it!” he snapped, glaring at her. She threw her head back and laughed before bounding away towards the headmaster’s desk, burrowing into the drawers and making an even worse mess than the intruder had left.

Togami left her to it. After all, it wasn’t like she could make things less organized. Besides, Naegi had already searched the desk, and he would have found anything vitally important. Whatever was left there, he doubted it would be hurt by Jill tossing it around.

He turned away to consider the rest of the room, trying to look at it with fresh eyes in light of his revelation. Was there anything that he would have expected to find in here that could be put to some alternate use? He scanned the bookcases, the display cases, the pictures on the walls… but no new ideas presented themselves. No matter how hard he looked, this room didn’t seem to be anything more than the ordinary office of a school headmaster, right down to the paperwork.

He glanced down at the stacks of files he’d abandoned on the sofa again. He’d been reading through them in search of any useful information about their imprisonment here… but was it possible that information itself could be the weapon? The mastermind had certainly used information to manipulate them all time and again, withholding details of the world outside or wielding buried skeletons from the students’ pasts. It was possible that the headmaster had kept proof hidden in his office of some secret terrible enough to use as a weapon…

Togami sank back onto the sofa and pulled over the last stack of files he’d been examining. Jill’s presence on the other side of the room sent spikes of adrenaline shooting through his system, making it just a little easier to fight back the exhaustion prickling behind his eyes. Reading the documents didn’t take quite so much concentration as it had before, though his vision still wavered if he let his gaze rest on any point for too long.

Not that there was much need for it. Even stretching the idea of weaponized information to its fullest extent, Togami couldn’t envision a way that an out of date academic calendar could be used against anyone. He didn’t even see why the headmaster had bothered to keep the useless paper instead of disposing of it once the students in question had graduated. It wasn’t even as though it had any connection to the students currently in the school —

And then he stopped short, his gaze falling on the entry for the first day of the new semester. *Inauguration and Presentation of Keys to Headmaster Jin Kirigiri.*

The name stared up at Togami, stark and unavoidable. Kirigiri… that couldn’t be a coincidence. It wasn’t exactly a common name — and even if it had been, with the lengths she’d gone to obscure her past, any possible connection had to be suspicious. This had to mean something.

But what? Did this calendar mean that Jin Kirigiri was the current headmaster? Togami thought back, trying to remember what he’d read about Hope’s Peak when he’d been invited to attend. Had he ever learned the name of the headmaster? If so, he couldn’t remember it. But this calendar wasn’t too far out of date. Assuming that Hope’s Peak didn’t go through a new headmaster with every graduating class, it was a safe bet that this Jin Kirigiri, whoever he was, still would have been in charge had they all attended the academy as planned.
But if that was the case... did that mean he was the headmaster that Alter Ego had said was hidden in the school somewhere? Was he the mastermind, or at least a trusted subordinate? But the student roster had said that Kyoko Kirigiri was from *that* family of detectives — a family dedicated to remaining neutral on the world stage. Taking on the role of Hope’s Peak headmaster and then forcing teenagers to murder one another certainly didn’t fit with that role. Did this mean that the family had finally decided to forsake their traditions and act publicly at last? Or was it a case of a few individual members being recruited into this twisted scheme, as Ikusaba had apparently been brought in from Fenrir?

Whatever the truth turned out to be, one thing was certain — there was no way that Kyoko Kirigiri would have been unaware that a member of her own family was the Hope’s Peak headmaster. And with Monokuma running around declaring himself the current headmaster, she had to have known that this information would be very relevant indeed. And yet she’d still chosen to conceal it... just as she’d hidden her background and her talent.

Only when Togami felt the paper crinkling sharply against his palm did he realize that he’d clenched his fist around the calendar, crumpling the edge in silent fury. Slowly, he forced his hand to relax, smoothing out the paper before he damaged it irreparably. Once he was sure it was intact, he folded it neatly and tucked it safely into his pocket. There was no way that he was letting something this damning out of his grasp for a moment.

He’d known since they were trapped here that Kyoko Kirigiri couldn’t be trusted... and now he finally had proof.
Chapter 214

Chapter Summary

Naegi has an unexpected encounter in Togami’s dorm room.

Naegi sat on the edge of Togami’s bed, doing his best to sort through the items Ogami had kept within arm’s reach while she’d kept vigil over him during the night. He’d thought that maybe he’d find some kind of alternate method that the culprit might have used to knock Ogami out, something that he and Togami might have missed in their initial search… but nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

With a sigh, he picked up the water Ogami had ordered him to drink before she’d left, the weight of the heavy cup trembling in his hand as he brought it to his lips. It rushed cool and fresh through his mouth, washing away the sticky dryness he’d hardly realized was there. He could have drunk the entire glass straight down, but after only a few gulps, he could feel the liquid sloshing as his hand shook. It was still barely half-full when he hastily set it back on the edge of the nightstand, before he could lose his grip and send it spilling across the floor.

At least Ogami would see that he’d made an effort when she came back. And maybe if she noticed that, she’d be willing to help him go elsewhere to investigate. Even the thought of approaching the stairs again made his vision blur with exhaustion — but there were other places he could check. The trash room or the nurse’s office might hold some clues, if he could manage the trek to look at them.

There had to be something that he was missing, some hidden crumb of information that he hadn’t found yet. He’d gone into every trial feeling unprepared, not sure who the culprit could be… but he’d always felt as though the truth was somewhere in reach, if only he and his friends could find their way to it. But now, with Ikusaba’s murder, nothing made sense. Every time he thought he’d figured something out, it only led to more questions, each harder than the last. And the answer, the horrible answer that kept staring him in the face, was so horrible that he didn’t know if he could bring himself to believe it. He dropped his head into his free hand, trying to fight off the ache throbbing from his temples at the unsolvable questions.

“Naegi? What are you doing?”

Naegi jumped at the sound of the last voice he’d expected to hear. He twisted sharply towards it — and saw Kirigiri standing there, just in front of the door.

He stared at her blankly, not quite able to process the sight. She looked exactly as she had the first time he’d seen her in the entrance hall, cool and unruffled and pristine. She’d been gone for so long, he’d been sure that something terrible must have happened... but here she stood, whole and well as if she’d never disappeared at all.

“You’re okay!” The words burst from him in a flood of relief. “You’re still alive!”

“Of course I am.” Her words were as brusque as ever, and not so much as a flicker of emotion passed over her face. The only thing that betrayed her state of mind was the way she crossed her arms, one finger tapping against her elbow, a minute reflection of the busy whirl of thoughts he
knew had to be running through her mind. “But from the look of things, I should be saying that to you. What have you done to yourself while I was gone?”

Naegi blinked, and then glanced down at himself, realizing what he must look like to her. Bloodstained clothes, arm in a makeshift sling, pale and shaky from blood loss — he was walking evidence that something terrible had happened after she’d disappeared. He’d only been tired and a little dizzy when she’d left, symptoms that would have gone away with time and rest — it must be a pretty big shock for her to come back to see him with fresh injuries.

“I got into some trouble in the library,” he said, hedging a little around the true cause of his wounds. He didn’t want to mention Jill or her scissors, not if he didn’t have to. “But it doesn’t matter — we dealt with it, and everyone’s okay now. More importantly, what happened to you? Where have you been?”

“What kind of trouble?” Kirigiri ignored his questions as thoroughly as if he’d never asked them.

“Well… a bookcase fell on me.” He hoped that would be enough. No good could come of pointing a finger at Jill right before they would all have to face another trial.

But Kirigiri seemed to know the rest anyway, her sharp gaze aimed directly at his arm without a trace of a smile. “It must have been a very sharp bookcase.”

“Something like that,” Naegi said uncomfortably. At least it didn’t seem like she was going to force the issue… so he decided to press before she changed her mind. “Will you tell me where you’ve been all this time now? Please, I was really worried about you!”

“No.”

Naegi probably shouldn’t have been shocked by the blunt response, but it still hit him like cold water to the face. He’d thought that he and Kirigiri had finally been working together again before she’d disappeared. They’d explored the fifth floor together, and she’d confided in him about her secret meeting with Ikusaba. Even if Togami’s suspicions were right and she hadn’t been telling him everything, they’d at least been allies in this fight… hadn’t they?

“Not yet,” Kirigiri corrected herself, a few lines forming around her mouth as her lips tightened. Her eyes flickered off towards the cameras, just for a moment.

He saw what she meant then, and a twist of guilt threaded its way through his mind for suspecting her. Of course she wouldn’t want to share what she’d been doing where the mastermind could overhear them. She’d gone to a great deal of trouble to keep her meeting with Ikusaba hidden… and if there was any chance that she might have learned something valuable, she’d want to keep it secret at all costs. And there was only one place in the school where they could reliably discuss secrets.

“Then… do you think you might feel like talking after a bath?” Naegi asked hesitantly.

Kirigiri tilted her head a fraction to one side, the painful pressure of her gaze boring into him until he almost wanted to back away. He didn’t know what she could be looking for that intently, or if she was able to find it — but after a long moment, she gave a single sharp nod. “Yes. There are some things that need to be said.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned and headed for the door. Naegi stared after her for a few seconds before groping hurriedly for the music stand pole. He hadn’t realized that she would want to go to the bathhouse now — he’d thought that they could go there to discuss everything after the
trial was finally over. After all, the investigation of Ikusaba’s murder really ought to be their priority at the moment — it wasn’t like Kirigiri to ignore an approaching class trial so completely.

Not unless she’d found something really important.

With that in mind, he reluctantly used the pole to lever himself up off the bed, taking care not to jar his injured arm as he stood. It ached anyway, with a constant dull burn that promised painful retribution if he acted carelessly. He really would have liked to take another of the painkillers that Ogami had given him earlier… but even if he’d been able to get a bottle open one-handed, anything that had been in this room could potentially have been drugged. Naegi sighed and put the thought out of his mind, heading out of the room after Kirigiri.

He’d just finished locking the door behind him when heavy footsteps came hurriedly down the hall in his direction. He looked up to see Ogami bearing down on him, alarm sharp on her face even from a distance.

“Is something wrong?” she demanded as soon as she was in earshot. “Why are you leaving the dorm room?”

“Kirigiri asked me to go with her,” Naegi explained. He glanced around — but the mysterious girl was nowhere in sight. She must have headed into the bathhouse already. “She came back, and she seems okay — but she wants to talk about something.”

“Kirigiri?” Ogami’s eyes widened. “She’s resurfaced from wherever she’s been all this time? But — what does she want?”

“I don’t know. She hasn’t told me yet.” Naegi began making his way towards the bathhouse.

Ogami kept pace at his elbow, a deep line creasing its way across her forehead as they walked. She kept glancing down at Naegi every few steps, and not quite as though she was checking to make sure he was okay. Naegi had the disconcerting feeling that she wanted to say something to him, but he wasn’t sure what that could be. Maybe she was waiting until they reached the bathhouse, so that she could speak without the mastermind overhearing them.

But as they entered the bathhouse, rather than seize the opportunity to say whatever was on her mind, Ogami dropped back a pace so that she was just behind Naegi’s left shoulder instead of at his side. Naegi blinked a little in confusion, but before he could ask what she was doing, Kirigiri stepped forward from the other side of the room.

“I see that you brought company.” She crossed her arms and surveyed them both, eyes darting back and forth between them like she was assessing something. She probably was, Naegi supposed — she always seemed to see a thousand things he missed.

“I gave my word that I would watch over Naegi in Togami’s absence,” Ogami said.

Naegi grimaced at that wording — was Ogami following him because she and Togami had decided between them that he needed a babysitter? “I’m feeling a lot better,” he insisted. “I really don’t think I’m going to collapse again or anything.”

Kirigiri’s eyebrows lifted. “Again?”

“Well… I was unconscious for a little while,” Naegi admitted. He glanced down at his injured left arm, still cradled in its sling. “And… I guess I’m still not completely recovered.”

“It certainly looks that way,” Kirigiri said, fingers tapping against her elbow as she stared at him.
“You make the perfect picture of injured fragility. I’m not surprised you’ve found yourself with a second bodyguard.”

“I don’t need to be protected!” Naegi objected, stung by the way she’d said the words. She didn’t think that he liked having someone hanging over his shoulder in case his health failed him, did she?

“No, I suppose not. You’ve always been stronger than you seem.” The faintest hint of a smile crossed Kirigiri’s face at the words, before her eyes snapped towards Ogami. “And so he’ll manage perfectly well when you leave.”

Naegi nodded slowly, realization dawning. Whatever Kirigiri had wanted to say in the privacy of the bathhouse, it had to be related to her investigation into the mysteries of the school — a search that she’d only shared with him. No wonder she’d been a little shorter with him than usual when he’d appeared with another student in tow — she was reluctant enough to tell him her secrets, let alone a second person. Of course she’d insist that Ogami leave before she said anything of substance. It was probably a mark of how important this conversation was that she hadn’t immediately left the bathhouse on seeing an unexpected person enter.

He turned to look up at Ogami. “I’m sorry — but I think she’s right. She and I should talk about this alone.”

Ogami looked from Naegi to Kirigiri. “I’m not certain that is a good idea.”

“I won’t do anything strenuous,” he assured her. “I’ll sit and rest the whole time. And if anything happens, Kirigiri will be right here.”

“Of course I will,” Kirigiri agreed. “I intend to keep a very close eye on him.”

“See?” Naegi said, trying his best to sound encouraging. “I’ll be fine.”

“Well…” A frown twisted across Ogami’s face, like she was trying to think her way through a complicated question. “If you’re sure this is the best way to approach matters…”

“I am,” Naegi assured her.

She sighed. “Very well. You’re far smarter than me. I will trust your judgment.” She looked over at Kirigiri again. “And when I see the others, I will inform them that Naegi is with you.”

Kirigiri nodded. “Feel free.”

Confusion flickered across Ogami’s face, like she’d expected a different response. “Then… I’ll do so.” She took a step towards the door.

“Actually — could you do something else first?” Naegi asked hastily, before Ogami could leave to head upstairs. He was pretty sure that if Togami heard Kirigiri had reappeared, he’d immediately rush downstairs to talk to her — whether he was up to dealing with the stairs or not. “I never got the chance to investigate the library. Would you go in and take a look around?”

“If you wish,” Ogami said dubiously. “Is there something you want me to look for?”

“Nothing specific,” Naegi said. “But it’s related to what’s been happening, and no one’s looked at it yet.”

“Very well.” Ogami gave the pair of them one last look, then nodded and headed out of the
Once she was out of earshot, Naegi looked back at Kirigiri. “So… what did you want to talk about?”

But she tilted her head, giving him an assessing look. “You really aren’t doing well, are you? She’s right — you should sit down.”

“I guess.” Naegi supposed he had just told Ogami that he would, after all.

He started to drag himself across the floor to one of the benches — but to his surprise, Kirigiri stepped briskly over to help, placing a supportive arm at his side so that he didn’t have to lean quite so much weight on the music stand pole. He would have protested that he didn’t need the help — but having her there to steady him did make it easier to settle onto the low, backless bench without losing his balance.

“Thanks,” he said, giving Kirigiri a smile as she sat down across from him.

She didn’t return the smile, expressionless as ever. “It would look very suspicious if you collapsed while alone with me.”

Naegi shook his head. “You don’t have to worry about that.” He leaned forward. “But more importantly… what did you want to tell me that you couldn’t say in front of the cameras?”
Kirigiri and Naegi discuss what she was doing during her disappearance.

Naegi watched Kirigiri as she tugged absently on her single thin braid instead of answering him immediately. She was thinking about what to tell him, he realized, the knowledge causing a slight pang through his chest. Even now, even after all they’d been through together, she still didn’t trust him enough to tell him everything.

But then again… didn’t the fact that she was thinking about it mean that she planned to tell him something? She wasn’t going to keep him entirely in the dark. Compared to her iron grip on secrets in the past, that had to be progress. He couldn’t expect someone as cautious as Kirigiri to trust him completely in a matter of days. All he could do was wait for her to come to a decision, and do his best to seem trustworthy in the meantime.

Finally, Kirigiri sighed. “Ever since I left you a day and a half ago, I’ve been exploring one of the locked areas of the school.”

“Then — Ikusaba held up her end of the deal?” Naegi asked, startled. The longer she’d been gone, the more he’d feared that Togami’s thoughts about a trap of some kind had to be right. “Which area did she open?”

Kirigiri tilted her head, one corner of her mouth curling slightly upward. “What do you think?”

Naegi frowned, considering the question. He knew it wasn’t the headmaster’s office or the data center, since he and Togami had been in both of those rooms without seeing a trace of her. His thoughts briefly darted to the second locked door in the data center — but he didn’t see how Kirigiri could have been searching the mastermind’s center of operations while Monokuma was active. The biology lab was a possibility… but if she’d been up on the fifth floor, surely she would have noticed the disarray in classroom 5-C on her way back and stopped to investigate. And if she hadn’t actually been trapped or in trouble, a day and a half seemed like an awfully long time to search a single room.

“Were you in the second floor of the dorms?” Naegi asked.

She smiled, a thin curve of the lips without warmth or humor. “That’s right. There are no cameras or security monitors there, so I was able to explore without the mastermind’s eyes on me.”

Which explained why she hadn’t shown up on his upgraded e-handbook. Naegi nodded slowly. “I guess that must be why they kept that area locked for so long — they don’t have a way to monitor us if we go there.”

“That isn’t the only reason.” Kirigiri’s eyes were fixed on Naegi, a wall of gray steel hiding her thoughts from view. “I believe that floor holds the key to some of the secrets at the core of why we were imprisoned here — secrets that the mastermind doesn’t want us to learn.”

“What secrets?” Naegi asked, his eyebrows drawing together. “Do you mean you found something
She eyed him, twisting her braid around her finger like a long, coiling snake. “And what if I said yes? What if I told you everything I saw and all the truths I’ve learned? What would happen if you knew exactly what I know?”

“Well… we’d talk about it, wouldn’t we?” Naegi said, puzzled. “I don’t know what else would happen. I guess that would depend on what you found out.”

“Would it?” One of her eyebrows arched up in a pale flash. “Do the specifics matter? After all, the most important thing about any information from behind that locked door is that it’s something the mastermind doesn’t want any of their captives to know.”

Naegi stared at her in bewilderment, trying in vain to look through the blank mask of her expression to find some hint about what she was trying to tell him. “But if the mastermind wants to keep this stuff secret, doesn’t that make it even more important to share it? I mean, you haven’t told anyone else, right? You’re the only one who knows so far.”

“Of course that’s the case,” Kirigiri said calmly. “Who else is there? You know perfectly well that you’re the only one I’ve been working with.”

That wasn’t exactly a surprise to hear. After all, the closest Kirigiri had come to working with anyone else was when the two of them had met up with Togami on the fifth floor — and she’d barely seemed to tolerate him, even aside from Togami’s low opinion of her. Naegi couldn’t imagine Kirigiri choosing to confide in someone who had repeatedly accused her of plotting murder and betrayal. But… if she hadn’t told anyone else…

“Then do you mean you don’t want to tell anyone?” Naegi asked, doing his best to follow what he could see of the twisting train of her logic. “You’re just going to keep what you learned to yourself? Isn’t that more dangerous?”

“Dangerous for who?” Kirigiri’s words were barely louder than a whisper. “The mastermind has gone to great lengths to make sure that we don’t learn too much about what’s been happening. What would someone like that do… if one of their pawns knew something that could disrupt the game?”

“Well… I think they’d be pretty mad,” Naegi said. “They wouldn’t want us knowing something like that. But —”

“But you can’t take away knowledge once someone has it,” Kirigiri cut him off, her eyes frozen on his. “No matter how you try to hide it or erase it, you can’t get rid of ideas once they take root inside our heads.”

“I guess that’s true.” He wouldn’t have phrased it quite like that, but he didn’t see much point in arguing with the basic idea. He just couldn’t see where she was going with it.

“And that means that once someone possesses this knowledge that the mastermind tried to hide,” Kirigiri went on, her voice distant with the chill of new frost, “they’re a threat to the entire situation. Anyone who knows too much can upset the game the mastermind worked so hard to create — and that’s something they can’t ignore.”

The ice in her demeanor began to trickle its way down the back of Naegi’s neck, and he felt his shoulders hunching defensively against it. “Wait… are you saying that you think you know too much?”
“No. I’m saying that the *mastermind* thinks I know too much.” Her voice was quiet and even, as if she were stating nothing more than mundane facts.

Except that these words were anything but mundane. Naegi stared at her, eyes wide with all the horror that she wasn’t displaying. “What are you talking about? Did something happen?”

“You tell me,” Kirigiri countered, leaning back and crossing her arms. “After all, I’ve been out of touch for more than a day. There’s no possible way that I could know what’s going on. So tell me, Naegi… has something happened?”

Under the pressure of her stare, the prickling along his neck intensified into a wave of needles crawling their way down his spine. For a strange moment, he felt almost like he did during the class trials, when she would turn to him and demand that he give her an answer that would prove a point she couldn’t make on her own. Looking back at her, trying to fight the urge to edge away along the bench, the room seemed to tilt around him in the dizzy whirl of the trial arguments, with his friends shouting from every direction until he didn’t know where to look.

And then he blinked, and the disorientation evaporated. He wasn’t in the middle of a trial arguing for everyone’s lives — not yet, anyway. He was sitting in the bathhouse with Kirigiri, and she had no idea about the terrible truth that was the answer to her question.

“Yes,” Naegi said. “A lot of things happened, but… there’s one that you really need to know about. While you were gone, there was another murder… and it wasn’t one of us.” He took a deep breath to brace himself for what he had to say. “Mukuro Ikusaba is dead.”

She went very still, a statue carved from chilly ice and silvery marble. “I see.”

“The body discovery announcement played a while ago, so the trial will probably be starting soon,” Naegi went on, when it became clear she wasn’t going to say anything further. “Togami and I have been trying our best to investigate, but…” He glanced down at his injured left hand, still cradled in the makeshift sling. “Well, we haven’t been able to get as far as we would have liked.”

“But you must have found something.” Her voice sounded far away, like she was talking to him from across an almost insurmountable distance. “There would have been clues to this murder.”

“Well… yes, there were some,” Naegi admitted. “The Monokuma File didn’t say the exact cause of death, but it does say that she was poisoned. And when we searched the room, we found the kind of humidifier you were going to use when you pretended to kill me.”

Kirigiri closed her eyes. “Of course you did.” Naegi wasn’t sure what to say to that. He watched her for a long moment, until she opened her eyes again to reveal a steely glint. “And I suppose you found the poison, as well.”

He nodded slowly. “The bottle, anyway. But I don’t know how the culprit got it out of the dojo locker after we burned the key.”

“Quite the mystery.” Her lips quirked with a humorless smile.

Looking at her now, Naegi’s thoughts flashed back to that moment, when the two of them had worked with Togami to try to ensure the poison had been sealed away. She’d insisted so fiercely that they make sure the bottle stayed intact — not just to stop it from being used, but to act as insurance. It had seemed like a strange explanation, but he’d gotten pretty used to Kirigiri making weird demands for inexplicable reasons. But now that the bottle had somehow turned up as evidence in a murder, he had to wonder…
“Did you know something like this was going to happen?” he asked, searching the blank mask of her face for some hint about her thoughts. “When you decided to work with Ikusaba and went into one of the locked areas to find the mastermind’s secrets… did you see this coming?”

“I suspected.” Maybe it was just his imagination, but at those words, Naegi thought he saw a flicker of sadness dart across her face for the briefest moment. “But I hoped that I was wrong.”

She’d thought a murder might happen while she was gone… and she’d left anyway. Naegi didn’t know whether to be horrified at her ruthlessness, or in awe of her courage. He wouldn’t have had the nerve to act that way, not if he’d thought there was a real chance that someone else could end up dead… but he’d never been able to match her drive to learn the mastermind’s secrets, either. He might not like it, but he could understand why she would have done something like that.

“Okay.” He nodded slowly. “Then… what are you going to do now?”

“The only thing I can do.” She tilted her head. “You didn’t expect me to give up without a fight, did you?”

Naegi couldn’t help the brief grin that flashed across his face as her determination sparked an answering feeling in him. “No. Of course not.”

“I can see the trap being set in this trial,” Kirigiri said, something cold twisting across her face as she spoke. “But I told you once before that I’m not planning on dying. I don’t intend to lose — even with the mastermind against me.”

“So you have a plan for the trial?” Naegi asked, a hint of genuine, untainted hope stirring in his chest for the first time since Togami had told him about the corpse on the fifth floor.

“Not just the trial.” Kirigiri crossed her arms. “If this is the only chance I get, then I plan to play for keeps.”

Naegi blinked. “What do you mean?”

A cold, hard smirk curled across Kirigiri’s lips. “By the end of this trial, I intend to unmask the mastermind.”
Naegi stared at Kirigiri in shock, her words ringing through his head. *Unmask the mastermind…* was that even possible? How could she do a thing like that? But… Kirigiri didn’t exaggerate or use hyperbole to make herself sound impressive. If she said that was her plan… then she had to have a real way to attempt it, one she seriously believed could work. But… if that was true…

“Did you learn something new about the mastermind while you were exploring the second floor?” Naegi asked, frowning. “Was there something you found in those dorms that you can use to prove their identity?”

Kirigiri just looked at him, her expression shuttered against any hint of a reaction. “You can’t really expect me to tell you that.”

Naegi couldn’t stop his shoulders from sagging a little at her cold response. It hurt to hear her say so… but he knew she’d never shared a word more than she’d absolutely had to in order for him to help her. And if she really had learned something that she could use against the mastermind like this, of course she’d want to protect it even more fiercely than her other secrets. “I guess not.”

She nodded, apparently satisfied by that response. “After all, it would be terribly unfair to insist that I present my evidence in secret, before the trial has even begun.”

Naegi frowned at the way she said the words, with a slight emphasis on the word *unfair*. That wasn’t usually a concept that Kirigiri seemed to care all that much about — after all, it wasn’t technically fair for her to work on her own while still insisting that the rest of them tell her what they knew. But that method did seem to be effective… and from what he’d been able to learn about her, she preferred pragmatism to abstract notions of justice.

No, it was the mastermind who valued fairness — or at least the illusion of it. Nothing about this game was truly fair, not when the mastermind held all the power and gave them no choices. But even so, time and again Monokuma had insisted that everything happen according to the rules, even going so far as to say that he himself was bound by them.

And if that was the case… then maybe fairness had to matter, if they were really going to take on the mastermind. Whatever Kirigiri was planning, it couldn’t involve so much as a whiff of cheating… not unless she wanted to end up like Asahina, gunned down in the middle of the trial room. If the mastermind was already suspicious of her, then deliberately opposing them during a trial would only make her more of a target. It would be a huge risk in any case… and once the mastermind figured out what she was doing, he was pretty sure she’d only get one try.

He looked at her, cool and collected, her demeanor projecting a quiet confidence that was both nothing like Togami’s and equally powerful. But no matter how confident she might be, he had to ask. “And you really believe this plan can work?”

She tilted her head. “Do you think I don’t have a chance?”
“That’s not it!” Naegi protested hastily. He hadn’t meant to make her think that he didn’t believe in her.

“Then you don’t believe I could have found the proof to make it happen?” she pressed. She sounded almost bored with this line of questioning, as though his answer didn’t really matter to her either way... but Naegi wasn’t sure that was true. After all, she wouldn’t have asked if she didn’t want to know what he’d say.

“If there was anything giving away the mastermind in that locked floor, of course you would be able to find it,” he told her earnestly. “No matter how well they tried to hide it, you’re way too good a detective to miss something important.”

Only when Kirigiri’s eyes widened slightly did Naegi realize exactly what he’d just said. Detective — that was what he’d called her, the word hanging heavy in the air between them. Before today, he could have used the word casually as nothing more than an offhand compliment to the deductive skills that she’d displayed time and again during their time in Hope’s Peak... but after seeing her profile in the headmaster’s office, he knew it meant more. And now she knew it, too.

He opened his mouth to say something — an apology, an explanation, he wasn’t even sure what words he would have chosen — but she shook her head sharply before he could. “Well, I suppose that puts it out in the open, doesn’t it?”

The words sounded like an admission... but they felt more like an accusation, hitting Naegi with a rush of sour guilt. He knew things about her that she hadn’t wanted him to know — things she’d worked hard to keep a secret. Even if there had been mitigating circumstances with the murder and the approaching trial, that didn’t make it better. He would have liked to ask her why she’d kept it a secret, why she hadn’t trusted the rest of them with this information... but face to face with her, he couldn’t quite bring himself to demand answers.

“I guess it does,” Naegi said, swallowing back the guilt until only the faintest touch of regret lingered in his voice. “But... even without knowing, your skills are pretty impressive. Just based on those, I know you would have found any clues that were there.”

“Your faith is touching.” Kirigiri said the words with a complete lack of inflection. Naegi couldn’t quite tell just how upset she was about his knowing her talent — but she hadn’t stormed out like when he hadn’t confided in her about Ogami and the mastermind, either. That had to be a good sign. Even if she was angry, she wasn’t cutting herself off from him completely — after all, with the clock ticking down on their investigation, that would have been disastrous.

“Yes,” Naegi said, swallowing back the guilt until only the faintest touch of regret lingered in his voice. “But... even without knowing, your skills are pretty impressive. Just based on those, I know you would have found any clues that were there.”

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“Then... are you ready for the trial?” he asked hesitantly, not wanting to seem like he was pressuring her to tell him things that she’d already said she wouldn’t share.

She shrugged. “Would it matter if I said no?”

Because the trial was coming whether they were ready or not, just like always. “Not really. But... if you’re not going to tell me anything else, I’d at least like to know that you’re as prepared as you can be.”

“Is that so?” Kirigiri tugged at her braid again, eyeing him thoughtfully. “Well, I can’t say that I like having my hand forced in this manner... but even so, I believe I am as prepared as I can be.” A faint smile touched her lips. “I think you’ll be surprised to learn how much I’ve uncovered.”

“I hope so.” Naegi did his best to give her an encouraging smile, but it seemed to twist into something closer to a grimace. “I mean... if you can really do something during this trial that will
go after the mastermind, then that won’t just help you — it’ll matter for everyone.”

“I’m aware of the consequences,” she said. “And you can believe me when I say that I do have the wellbeing of all the other students here in mind.”

“Good,” Naegi said, feeling rather relieved at the knowledge that she’d taken their friends into account in this plan. He’d never really doubted it — after all, Kirigiri had been against the murders from the first, helping in all the trials and fighting against the mastermind in any way she could. But even so, it was good to hear her confirm as much aloud. “I’m glad you care about what will happen to them.”

“Care is a strong word,” Kirigiri said, her light tone at odds with the weight of her gaze. “But I wouldn’t be much of a detective if I couldn’t keep the innocent from going down along with the guilty, would I?”

“I guess not.” Naegi wasn’t entirely sure that the question he thought he was answering was the one she’d actually asked, but that response seemed safe enough. “I don’t want anyone innocent to get hurt, either.”

“Yes… you’ve made that clear.” Kirigiri crossed her arms. “Well, I can promise you one thing. If my plan works, all of your friends will get through it safely.” One corner of her lips tilted upward in something that wasn’t quite a smile. “You can trust me on that.”

Naegi nodded slowly, finally allowing the first twinge of hope to begin coiling through his mind at the thought that her plan, whatever it was, might really work. “I do trust you.”

She looked at him for a long moment, then shrugged. “We’ll see.”

Before he could ask what that was supposed to mean, she stood and stepped away from the benches. He scrambled for the music stand pole, trying to push himself up as fast as he could, but by the time he’d made it to his feet she was already out the door. He thought about calling after her, asking her to wait — but he didn’t have the breath to waste on something that had never worked before. Nothing had ever been able to stop Kirigiri from walking away when she was done with a conversation —

_Ding dong, bing bong._

The ringing bells were a little muted in the bathhouse, walled off from any of the mastermind’s television monitors, but even so, Naegi couldn’t fail to recognize them. Dread coiled heavy and sour in the pit of his stomach, weighing him down as he tried his best to hurry out of the bathhouse to a place where he could hear the full announcement.

He stepped through the bathhouse door into the open area of the dorms, to find Kirigiri standing cross-armed in front of the nearest television monitor, staring up at Monokuma’s grinning image with a stony expression.

“I’ve counted all the way to one hundred, but I can’t find any of you sneaky little snakes!” the bear said brightly, tilting his head as though genuinely puzzled. “I was going to compliment you all on your fantastic hiding spots — but then I realized you just haven’t shown up yet! It’s like you don’t even know what game we’re playing!” He threw back his head and laughed. “Well, no more time for second best — there’s only one game left! Everyone form your teams — it’s time to get this trial started!”

The screen winked out, cutting his cackling laughter off short.
Naegi looked up at Kirigiri. She ignored him, still staring at the empty television screen, even though it only showed their distorted reflections mirrored into blackness. “Well… I guess this is it,” he said, the words coming out as more of a question than he’d intended.

That seemed to snap Kirigiri out of whatever thoughts had been occupying her. “Yes. I suppose there’s no time left for anything else.”

Naegi frowned. “But… that doesn’t seem fair, does it? I mean… you haven’t even had a chance to examine the murder scene, right? How are you supposed to be part of the trial if you don’t even know what happened?”

She shrugged. “It’s a little late to worry about that.”

“Not if you’re fast,” he said. “Look — I can’t walk very fast like this, and Togami will be even slower. You could run up to the fifth floor and look at the body while we’re gathering.”

Kirigiri raised her eyebrows. “In direct defiance of an order?”

“It isn’t defiance,” Naegi countered. “I’m sure you’ll still get to the trial room in plenty of time.”

She tilted her head and frowned at him, and he could almost see the gears spinning in incomprehensible calculations. After a moment, she gave a single sharp nod. “All right, then.”

And with that, she turned and headed for the door, moving as fast as if she were running for all that she hardly seemed to expend more effort than a brisk walk. Naegi tried not to feel too nervous as he watched her go. It wasn’t like the last time he’d helped her go off on an investigation, after all. Compared to her search of the second floor dorms, this was hardly dangerous at all. But even knowing it was true, the reassurances rang hollow in his head.

Naegi sighed and began heading for the door to the other half of the first floor, step by careful step. He didn’t hurry, in spite of his painful awareness that the ticking clock had finally run down. There was no reason to rush, not when he wanted to buy Kirigiri as much time as possible to do a quick investigation of the body. But whether he hurried or not, he couldn’t avoid the fact that the time had finally come — the class trial was about to begin.
Chapter 217

Chapter Summary

Naegi heads to the trial room to wait for the other students.

Naegi made his way across the open space of the dorms, every faltering footstep echoing through the empty space. The uninterrupted reverberations were a stark reminder that he was the only one still on this floor. The school had seemed almost overcrowded when all this had begun, with one or another of the students hanging around in almost every room — but now they could scatter so thoroughly that even if he called out, no one would be around to hear.

No one here in the school, anyway. Naegi glanced up at the nearest camera as he crossed through the door between the dorms and the rest of the first floor, before quickly averting his eyes like he’d accidentally met a hostile stranger’s glare. He was never alone here in Hope’s Peak, not as long as those cameras were filming. People across the world were watching every move anyone made in this school, even if he still didn’t fully understand why. But somehow, knowing that he wasn’t truly alone made him feel more bereft of human connection than ever.

But as he rounded the corner past the empty classrooms, the red door to the trial rooms burning all too closely for his liking — another set of footsteps pounded near, shattering the weighty silenced of the hall. Naegi’s head jerked up towards the corridor ahead — just in time to see Ogami rush around the corner.

Rather than turning towards the red door, she swung in the direction of the dorms, momentum carrying her another several steps forward before she caught sight of Naegi in front of her. She slowed, scanning the hallway behind Naegi for a moment before a deep frown overtook her expression. “What happened to Kirigiri? Surely she didn’t go on ahead while you were in need of assistance.”

“No, of course not,” Naegi assured her. “Well — not exactly. She went upstairs.” He frowned. “Didn’t you pass her on the way?”

Ogami shook her head. “I must have missed her. It took me some time to make my way back across the library floor without disturbing any of the robot pieces Togami left.” Her shoulders twitched like something cold had been dropped along her spine. “I didn’t dare risk damaging anything that had once been a piece of Monokuma.”

The thought of that made Naegi want to shudder himself — there was no way that Monokuma would ignore the rule against attacking the headmaster just because the robot had already been taken apart. “Yeah, that could be really dangerous! I’m glad you were being careful around it.”

Ogami nodded. “I might say the same to you. I’m relieved to see that you are still in one piece.” She frowned. “Or at least in the same condition that I left you in.”

“Yes, I’m trying to go slowly so I don’t get too tired,” Naegi agreed, grateful to seize on the easy explanation for why he wasn’t moving in any hurry. “I don’t want to collapse or anything during the trial.”
“Hmm.” Ogami pursed her lips and gave him a long look. “Yes… I’m glad to see that you are taking care of yourself, as well.”

Naegi blinked at the strange repetition. Wasn’t that what she’d said in the first place? But what else could she have meant that she’d been worried about?

“Do you require assistance to make it the rest of the way to the trial room?” Ogami asked, glancing back down toward the red door.

“Um… I don’t know.” Naegi gave the stretch of hallway ahead a considering glance. His knees were starting to show a slightly worrying tendency to wobble the longer he stood upright… but he was pretty sure he’d be okay once he got into the waiting room outside the elevator, where he could lean against the wall until the others arrived.

Ogami shook her head and placed a gentle arm around Naegi, taking some of his weight with all the care he’d expect of someone trying to handle a piece of cracked china. “I suppose that is the closest you’re able to come to asking for help.”

Naegi frowned as they slowly made their way down the hall to the red door. What did she mean by that? He wasn’t entirely sure what had happened while he’d been unconscious after getting stabbed, but he knew that Ogami had worked hard to take care of him, even going so far as to put aside her grief for Asahina so that she could save his life. Did she think he didn’t appreciate everything she’d done for him?

He looked up at her as she reached up to open the heavy red door. “Thank you.”

“You could hardly manage the handle without a free hand.”

“Not that.” Rather than entering the waiting room, Naegi turned so that he could look her full in the face. “Thank you for helping me — both now and earlier. I’m not sure if I said so earlier —”

“You did,” Ogami cut him off, a shadow falling across her gaze. “And you needn’t repeat yourself.”

“I just want to be sure you understand,” Naegi said, staring up at her earnestly.

“I… I do.” She looked away, her mouth going thin and white. “But I don’t wish for your gratitude. Please… don’t bring it up again.”

Naegi nodded slowly. “Okay… if that’s what you want.”

As he walked through the red door into the waiting room, the silence hung heavier around him than it had out in the hall, filling the air with an almost tangible sorrow. Part of it came from the weight of Ogami’s words to him, every syllable burdened with the unspoken knowledge of how she’d been forced to work against her friends… but the rest was already present, intrinsic to the air of the room itself.

As Ogami let the door swing shut behind them, Naegi looked around the empty waiting room. In all the other trials, he’d been the last one to arrive, so he’d never had to spend much time in here before Monokuma popped out and ordered them into the elevator. With the room so barren of any distracting features or decorations, nothing drew his eye away from the gaping holes where his friends used to stand.

Everywhere he looked, ghosts of the dead students stared back at him, empty-eyed and afraid in the moments before they’d been dragged down to a life or death battle none of them had asked for.
Here Celeste stood, her air of calm nothing more than another lie she’d wanted them to believe. There was Hagakure, eyes darting nervously around the room as he jumped from conclusion to conclusion about who he could trust. And here, in a spot that shouldn’t have been empty even more than any of the others, Asahina crossed her arms and looked away from the others, terrified to give away a secret that could damn her beloved friend.

Naegi had to close his eyes against the memories just for a moment, swallowing in an attempt to ease the sudden tightness filling his throat. He couldn’t let himself forget the friends he’d lost… but he couldn’t let the memories stop him from focusing on what had to be done, either. Mourning could come later, when the trial was done, but for now… they just had to get through it somehow.

Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes and looked up at Ogami… but her eyes were locked on the same place that had held his gaze so powerfully a moment ago. Deep lines creased across her pale face, the dark circles stark beneath her haunted eyes. She was seeing Asahina, Naegi realized — remembering the girl who’d died for her in the only way she had left.

No — not the only way. Spurred to action by the look on Ogami’s face, Naegi managed to haul himself across the few feet to the wall, leaning back against it to support enough of his weight that he could free his good hand from the music stand pole. He reached into his right pocket, the only one he could reach, fumbling past his handbook and Togami’s dorm key until he found the folded paper he’d torn from the headmaster’s student roster.

He glanced up at Ogami again, but she hadn’t moved a muscle. She almost seemed to be in a trance, eyes locked on the place Asahina had stood as though she were hypnotized. The old superstition about not waking a sleepwalker occurred to him… but he didn’t want to leave her trapped in that nightmare if he could help it.

“Um… Ogami?” Naegi asked hesitantly. She didn’t seem to notice, too lost in her dark thoughts to hear. He raised his voice and tried again. “Ogami?”

She didn’t so much as twitch. Naegi grimaced. Normally, after two failed attempts to get someone’s attention, he would’ve taken the hint… but letting Ogami sink so far back into despair right before a trial sounded like a spectacularly bad idea. He bit his lip, then picked up the music stand pole again. Carefully, he let it tip forward, intending to use it to tap the taller girl on the shoulder.

He never got close. He’d barely managed to tilt the pole a few inches forward before Ogami spun, her hand shooting out to knock the pole away with a resounding crack. Naegi gasped as the impact shuddered through his body, a spasm of white-hot agony jolting through his injured arm. His knees turned to water, buckling under the unendurable weight of his body as he slid down the wall.

Until an arm braced him against the wall, stopping him before he could hit the ground. Naegi’s vision spun in nauseating whirls when he tried to look past the pain, but he recognized the muscular size of Ogami’s hands as she supported his weight, gently lowering him until he could sit safely on the ground. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall, breath hissing through his teeth as he tried to force himself past the waves of pain radiating out from his arm.

After a few moments, sounds began to permeate the pain pulsing through his consciousness, slowly forming into words.

“— sorry, so sorry, my god I’m sorry —”

When he realized just what he was hearing, Naegi forced his eyes open again. Even as the world blurred and shook around him, he could still make out enough of Ogami’s horrified face to
understand what she must be thinking. “It’s… okay,” he managed to say, though he couldn’t raise his voice above a whisper.

She heard him anyway, slumping down beside him in relief. “Thank goodness. I feared you might lose consciousness again.”

“No,” Naegi said, hoping that he sounded more reassuring to her than he did to his own ears. “Just… hurts a little.”

Ogami snorted. “I’m certain it hurts a great deal more than that. You needed try to hide the truth for my benefit.”

Sitting still, his vision began to settle enough that he could look up and try to meet her guilt-stricken eyes. “Really… it’s fine. I shouldn’t have… startled you.”

“And I should have had better control of my reflexes than to react as if a simple attempt to touch my shoulder was an attack,” Ogami said, her mouth twisting as she looked away from him. “I’m glad that it was merely your walking stick, rather than your hand. I’m afraid it… well, it didn’t fare well.”

Naegi followed her gaze to the place where the music stand pole had fallen to the ground. A long crack ran through it from the place where Ogami had struck it, splintering the solid wood to pieces. It hadn’t broken entirely, but it certainly didn’t look capable of bearing his weight any longer. At the thought of that kind of force being directed at his hand, instead of just an object he’d been holding, Naegi couldn’t quite suppress a shiver of horror.

“I will do whatever is necessary to help you remain upright until the trial ends and you can return to rest,” Ogami promised. “I cannot apologize enough for allowing myself to become so distracted.” She swallowed, the movement of her throat plainly visible. “I didn’t realize how difficult it would be to return here.”

“I know it’s hard,” Naegi said softly. “That’s why I was trying to talk to you. I… well, I found something that I think might make it a little easier.”

He’d lost his grip on the folded paper when the pole had been knocked out of his hand, but it had drifted to the floor just a few feet away. Seeing what he was looking at, Ogami immediately retrieved the paper and tried to hand it to him.

Naegi shook his head. “No… it’s for you.”

“Me?” Ogami looked puzzled, but she unfolded the paper and glanced down at it.

And when she recognized Asahina’s picture smiling back up at her, all the color drained out of her face. She stared down at the profile page in silence for a long moment, so frozen that Naegi wasn’t even sure she was still breathing. As she stayed silent without answering, Naegi began to frown. Had he misjudged what she needed? He’d thought that she might like to have a way to remember her friend… but maybe giving this to her now had only made things worse.

Finally, Ogami’s head moved, tilting upward just a few inches until her gaze pierced into Naegi again. “Where did you find this?”

“Um… upstairs in the headmaster’s office,” Naegi said. “I came across it when Togami and I were searching for clues, and… well, I thought it might make you feel better to see her smiling.” He bit his lip. “Is that okay?”
“Okay?” A choked laugh rasped its way out of Ogami’s throat. “It’s — it’s more than —” She stopped, squeezing her eyes tight and clenching her lips together. But even so, a single tear managed to escape, trickling down her cheek before she knocked it sharply away with the hand not cradling the profile. She took a deep, shuddering breath, then opened her eyes again. “Thank you. You have no idea what this means to me.” A smile cracked its way across her tired face, like the first tentative rays of the sunrise. “Thank you.”
Chapter 218

Chapter Summary

The remaining students gather in the waiting room before the fifth class trial.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Naegi looked at the picture of Asahina that Ogami held so gently, her thumb resting along the edge of the other girl’s cheek. It was almost as though she wanted to reach through the photo to brush a hand along her friend’s smiling face.

The thought made him avert his eyes, belatedly realizing that maybe this was a moment that Ogami wouldn’t want anyone else to see. He couldn’t do anything about the cameras, but he could at least allow her the illusion of privacy until she could collect herself. She’d been right when she’d said that he didn’t really understand what that picture was to her… but he was glad it helped.

He wished that he could have taken the entire book of profiles, so that they could have had the reminders of all their fallen friends… but of course Monokuma would never have let him do something like that. He was probably lucky that the bear hadn’t tried to confiscate this profile along with the rest of the book.

After a moment, a rustle of paper drew Naegi’s eyes back to see that Ogami was carefully folding the profile and slipping it into her pocket. That was probably the best place for it — even Monokuma would have some trouble getting an object away from Sakura Ogami if she didn’t want to let him take it. Once it was safely stowed away, she looked back at Naegi.

“Are you feeling well enough to try to stand again? If you’re able, it might be best if you were on your feet when the others arrive.”

Naegi could just imagine how upset Togami would be if he came into the waiting room to find him slumped on the floor. “Yeah… I think if you can help me up, I’ll be able to manage.”

Ogami eyed him suspiciously for a moment, then nodded. She slid an arm around behind him and carefully lifted him up, supporting him so that he hardly had to bear any of his weight by himself. Rather than letting go once he was upright, she helped him lean back against the wall again, keeping her hand on his good arm to keep him balanced.

“Thanks,” Naegi said, a little more breathless than he’d expected to be. He shouldn’t be quite so tired just standing up, not when he’d had to spend so little effort on it… but nevertheless, his body ached with exhaustion. He did his best to ignore it, though. He couldn’t afford to be exhausted, not when the trial hadn’t even begun.

“It’s a small enough way to assist you,” Ogami said dismissively. “Now, more than ever, I wish to aid you in any way that I can.” She sighed, shaking her head. “It seems that every day I end up with more and more sins for which I must make amends.”

“No, this was an accident,” Naegi protested. “It’s not a sin or anything like that!”
Ogami shrugged. “Perhaps not, then. But compared to the totality of my crimes against the innocent, it hardly makes a difference.”

The innocent… That word echoed in Naegi’s mind, reminding him of his cryptic conversation with Kirigiri about her plan to unmask the mastermind. Whatever she was doing, she meant for it to happen during the trial…

Naegi looked up at Ogami with a frown. “You said… you want to help? In any way you can?”

“If it is within my power, yes,” Ogami said quietly. “Is there something you would like me to do?”

“Well… maybe, if you think you can do it.” Naegi didn’t know if he had the right to ask her for this… but he didn’t like the guilt-ridden way she kept insisting she was so much worse than the others, either. “I’d like you to promise me that this time, in this trial… you won’t throw away your vote.”

Ogami stiffened. “You want what?”

“I’d like you to vote for whoever you think is genuinely the culprit in this trial,” Naegi said, holding to his request despite her reaction. “Not for yourself.”

Ogami looked at him for a long moment, and he almost thought she wasn’t going to answer him. Finally, she whispered, “Why?”

Naegi knew he couldn’t tell her about Kirigiri’s plan. He didn’t even know if her plan would involve votes, not for sure — but the vote was the only thing he could think of that would make a trial the right place to confront the mastermind. Anything else could be done more easily in another environment, rather than in the trial with their lives on the line. And if Kirigiri was counting on doing something with votes… then he wanted to be sure she had as many as she needed.

But even if he couldn’t say as much to Ogami, that was only one reason. He’d had another purpose for this request, as well. He looked into her shadowed eyes and said, “I don’t want you to keep blaming yourself for what the mastermind made you do. You aren’t some hidden agent or guilty monster — you’re one of us. You’re on our side. And I’d like you to fight with us… if you can.”

Ogami looked like he’d asked her to pluck a burning ember straight from a fire. “I… I don’t know.”

Naegi nodded slowly. “Okay. That’s fine. It was just a suggestion. You don’t have to if you don’t want to. You have the right to vote however you want.”

But a shiver passed over her face at those words. “Do I?”

Naegi blinked. “Huh?”

“Maybe you’re right.” She sighed, running a hand distractedly through her hair. “Maybe… if I truly do wish to be on your side instead of the mastermind’s… maybe I don’t have the right to abstain from voting as I have been doing. It was one thing when there were more people in the trials, but… now that there are so few students remaining… even one vote could make a critical difference.”

Naegi didn’t answer. Even if he’d known what to say to that, it seemed like he shouldn’t push her one way or the other. He’d influenced her enough already — she had to make this decision on her own.
Eventually, Ogami sighed again, as if she were letting go of something she’d been clutching too tightly. “Very well, Naegi. If this is what you wish for… then I promise not to abstain from voting. I will vote for the person I truly believe to be guilty… just as all the rest of you have done.”

Even though she was agreeing to what he’d asked of her, hearing Ogami’s words filled Naegi with a surge of sadness. This was a terrible ritual he was insisting she participate in, one that would add another scar of guilt to her wounded heart. He knew that all the deaths were the mastermind’s fault, that the “executions” were just murders by another name… but it still made him feel horribly complicit every time he voted to send another of his friends to their fate. And that was the burden he’d asked Ogami to share.

Maybe it was too much to ask of her. Maybe he didn’t have the right to ask her to do anything else, after she’d fought against the mastermind to help them. After all, surely the other four of them could come to a conclusion on their own. If refusing to vote for the guilty party could make Ogami feel better, maybe he should take back his request. He looked up at Ogami, wondering what he ought to say.

Before he could decide, the heavy red door slammed open, hitting the wall with a metallic crash. Genocide Jill stood framed in the doorway, looking none the worse for wear even after being trapped in the hidden room overnight. And next to her, bracing himself against the wall with an annoyed scowl —

“Togami!” Naegi brightened, doing his best to smile at the other boy in spite of the pain still throbbing through his arm. Just seeing his boyfriend walk through the door, even clutching at the wall to stop himself from swaying on his feet, made the oppressive air of the waiting room just a little bit easier to breathe.

Once he made it through the door, Togami ignored Jill’s eager attempts to take his arm in support and immediately zeroed in on Naegi and Ogami. Naegi tried to straighten and look like he’d just decided to lean casually against the wall, but from the way Togami’s eyes narrowed, he didn’t think he’d been very convincing.

“What happened?” were the first words out of Togami’s mouth as soon as he got close, a little too loud for the space. His gaze dropped right to Naegi’s lips after he spoke, dashing the faint hope Naegi had been harboring that maybe the other boy’s hearing might have improved a little in the time they were apart.

“It was nothing,” Naegi assured him, remembering to keep his words slow and clear. “I nearly fell again, that’s all — but Ogami caught me before I could. I’m fine now!”

If the look of intense skepticism was any indication, Togami didn’t seem inclined to accept this explanation. “You said you’d be careful.”

“I have been!” Naegi insisted. “This was just an accident, that’s all.”

Togami scowled, looking as though he was thinking about pressing the issue further. But before he could, Jill bounded back to his side and leaned in towards Naegi, her tongue curling out towards him.

“I don’t know what my White Knight’s complaining about, Makyutie!” she said, raking her eyes up and down his body with a leer. “You’re looking way tastier than the last time I saw you!” She laughed. “Gotta say, I’ve always been more into the hurt-torture than the hurt-comfort scene, but you’re making a good argument for trying new things!”
By now, Naegi had spent enough time with the genocider that he was pretty sure he knew what she really meant. He smiled at her gratefully. “Yeah, I’m doing a lot better. But I know I wouldn’t have been if you hadn’t gone for help so fast.”

Jill tossed her braids. “Aw, but there’s nothing fun about an accidental death! Sure, you need some spontaneity to spice up the final product, but you’ve gotta start with a plan if you want real art!”

Which was much closer to an apology than Naegi had ever expected her to get. “Thank you.”

Jill’s grin curled into a leer. “Well, sugar, if you’re really feeling grateful, then you and my White Knight could —”

“Haven’t we been standing around here long enough?” Togami cut her off, glaring directly into her face. “We’re here for a trial, not more of your nonsense.”

“But we can’t start yet,” Naegi objected. “We’re not all here.”

“Wow, on the ball as always, huh?”

Monokuma bounced out into the center of the room, grinning up at them from just behind Jill and Togami.

“But you know, staying up there must take a pretty careful balancing act, don’t you think?” He tilted his head thoughtfully. “Hmm. I wonder if you can keep it up?”

Togami looked momentarily puzzled as the attention of the room shifted, but he turned to look behind him before Naegi could explain what was going on. He didn’t so much as flinch at finding Monokuma mere feet away from him, which Naegi had to admit was pretty impressive. The heir just crossed his arms imperiously and took a few steps to the side so that he could keep Monokuma in the corner of his eye while looking back at Naegi, eyebrows raised impatiently.

“He was just talking like always,” Naegi told him, rather than trying to repeat Monokuma’s babbling. “Nothing important.”

Monokuma gasped, paws flying to his mouth. “So cruel! Who would have thought that sweet little Naegi had it in him to be so terrible? Why, I think my heart might break!”

Togami narrowed his eyes when Naegi didn’t translate the words that went along with the bear’s antics. “Stop whatever nonsense you’re going on about and tell us — is it time to start or not?”

“Huh?” Monokuma tilted his head, looking puzzled. “But that’s what I wanted you all to tell me! I mean, the bell’s sounded, class is in session, but it looks like some of our brightest students are about to lose their perfect attendance records. If you’re not careful, you might lose your spot on the honor roll!” He threw back his head and laughed.

Togami glanced from Monokuma to Naegi. “If we’re not starting yet… there’s only one person left who isn’t present yet. And after going missing for so long, do you actually expect her to turn up?”

“Yes, I do!” Naegi couldn’t stop the smile of relief that crossed his face. “Kirigiri’s alive, I’ve seen her.”

Togami stiffened, his face locking into hard, frozen lines. “You’ve seen her? In person?”

“Yes, and she’s fine,” Naegi assured him, though he couldn’t share any details with Monokuma listening in and the cameras broadcasting every word. “I’m sure she’ll be here any minute.”
“Oh, really?” Even the slight dissonance of tone couldn’t disguise the ice in Togami’s voice. “Then why exactly isn’t she here now? The announcement sounded — that means the investigation period is over. What else could she possibly have to do?”

“Now there’s a student who knows what ‘pencils down’ means!” Monokuma said brightly. “He always plays by the rules, huh? Man, it looks like someone’s angling to become the new teacher’s pet!”

“She’s on her way,” Naegi insisted, doing his best to ignore the unnerving grin Monokuma was sending his way.

“But is that really good enough?” Monokuma asked thoughtfully. “I mean, maybe we should dock a few points from her participation grade. It would only be fair, right?” He grinned, the light gleaming off his pointed teeth.

“No need for that.”

Naegi jerked over towards the door — to see Kirigiri standing there, arms crossed and a familiar smirk touching her lips. “I’m here.”

Chapter End Notes

And now, before we head into the trial itself, I'll be taking a quick break to make sure I have my trial outline in order. That means there will be no new chapter on Sunday, sorry! The story will resume next Thursday. See you then!
Chapter 219

Chapter Summary

The remaining students take the elevator down to the fifth trial room.

As soon as Kirigiri announced herself, the atmosphere of the waiting room changed like she’d pumped the air full of crackling electricity. The other students jumped and spun towards the door like a row of marionettes all tugged by the same string.

Junko laughed as she watched them, though she kept her hands well away from the button that would turn the sound into Monokuma’s adorably distinctive cackle. After all, even if her act was the best around, she couldn’t expect to steal every show! And with Kirigiri’s usual focus on working behind the scenes, it would only be fair to let her have center stage now that she was preparing for a spectacle. It had been such a long time since anyone else had made so much effort… Junko couldn’t wait to see her performance!

In fact, if the Monokuma robot’s camera was giving her an accurate read of the room, it looked like the show was already in progress. Kirigiri was sure in character as she stalked into the room, all cool confidence and chilly masks. Credit where it was due — the girl knew how to put on a good act, especially when she breezed past Naegi without answering a single one of the questions he was trying to ask. Any normal observer might have bought the idea that she barely cared about the scene around her at all.

But after two years studying her darling friends, Junko could read the truth from them with as little effort as if they’d said it aloud. And when it came to the prickly little loner Kyoko Kirigiri, Junko knew that the more walls she put up to hide her emotions, the more vulnerable she was. The steely iron in her eyes, the even set of her shoulders, the calm line of her mouth showing only the faintest hint of a knowing smirk — all of it screamed out that there was a gaping weakness beneath just begging to be exploited.

And what kind of friend would ignore such an obvious invitation?

Kirigiri finally stopped directly in front of the Monokuma robot, raising one eyebrow as she stared down at it. “So?”

Junko couldn’t stop the giggles from gurgling up in her throat at the other girl’s flat, dry voice. So she was even pulling the emotions from her tone as she issued a challenge? Oh, this fight was going to be fun!

“What’s this? Usually I’m the one who gets to show up fashionably late!” she exclaimed into the microphone, pressing the button that would project her words through Monokuma’s mouth. “It’s pretty bold to go around trying to steal the headmaster’s place in the lineup, don’t you think? I mean, what if you went so far as to try to step into my shoes as the last word in adorable ursine style? That kind of crime would definitely have to count as breaking a school rule, right?” She flipped another button, and Monokuma’s sharp teeth gleamed in an innocent smile.

“But not at all,” Kirigiri said, like she actually expected people to buy her cool as a cucumber act. “I made it here. I haven’t broken any rules in the process.” She turned her head to the side, glancing
at the other students. “Isn’t that right, Naegi?”

“Huh?” Naegi blinked, and Junko shook her head in pity. The poor injured boy didn’t have a clue why the sudden question had been thrown his way. “Well… yeah, I think that should be right. I mean, the rules only say we have to show up — there’s nothing in there about time limits or being late.”

“So there shouldn’t be a penalty,” Kirigiri concluded, turning back to Monokuma as though she thought that settled things.

“Wow, I guess you’ve been doing your homework!” Junko said brightly. “And with full marks, too! You’re right, there’s no official penalty for being late.” She leaned forward towards the camera feed, getting a good look at Kirigiri’s eyes. “But I bet you’ll be sorry when exam time rolls around.”

And there it was — a flicker of the eyelashes, a contraction of the pupils. No matter how confident Kyoko Kirigiri wanted to be, fear and doubt were already gnawing their way through her heart. Junko tapped another button as her laughter overtook her again, letting Monokuma’s cackling mingle with her own.

But for some inexplicable reason, no one else joined in. Junko rolled her eyes, releasing the button. God, her friends were such downers sometimes — no appreciation for real art of comedy! Sure, she knew the humor would play better with the international audience, but where was the fun in that if she couldn’t even see it?

“Well, time to get on with it!” she announced. “Hurry, hurry, time to get on the elevator before the clock runs out! Bet you all can’t beat me down there!” A last few taps of her fingers made Monokuma disappear from the room, and she flopped back in her chair to see how long they’d make her wait.

“Kirigiri… did you have enough time to see the body?” Naegi asked.

She only spared a single glance back at him, mask locked in place. “I saw enough to prepare for what’s coming. Don’t worry — everything seems perfectly fair and in accordance with the rules.”

She didn’t even give the poor boy a chance to answer before striding into the elevator, taking her place just inside the door and turning to stare up at the camera with cold eyes. Junko beamed back, fluttering her fingers in a flirtatious wave. She loved it when her friends were thoughtful enough to say hello!

It was such a shame this would be the last chance Kirigiri would get.

Naegi would never get used to the elevator down to the trial rooms, its shaky descent clunking its way through his aching bones. If he’d tried to stand on his own as he usually did, in the center facing the doors, he knew he would have been jolted off his feet before the elevator so much as reached the halfway point. Now, even though he did his best to brace himself against the wall with his free hand, only Ogami’s supporting arm kept him upright during the ride down.

No one spoke as the elevator descended, the dim light sending deep shadows pooling at their feet. Naegi would have liked to take this one last chance to ask Kirigiri a few more questions before they
began the trial, to try to help with whatever she was planning — but even if he could have seen the slim girl behind Ogami’s bulk, he wasn’t sure he could have mustered the nerve to break the silence of the elevator. The heavy air sucked away all pretense of speech, leaving only the pressure of the oncoming trial… and the threat of death that came with it.

The ride seemed to last for an eternity, but even so, Naegi wasn’t ready when the elevator doors finally opened, flooding them all with the bright lights of the trial room. Spots blazed across his vision until his eyes snapped instinctively shut, turning his head away to shield himself from the aggressive glare.

But he knew he didn’t have the luxury of hiding in the elevator forever. He could already hear the brisk click of heeled boots crossing the floor — that would be Kirigiri, striding out to take her place at the circle of podiums. With a grimace, Naegi forced himself to turn his head back to the doors and open his eyes.

Even braced for the onslaught of light, it was almost punishingly bright after the dark elevator. The walls of the trial room had been lined with mirrors — but not the smooth, even mirrors he was used to seeing above a bathroom sink. These mirrors had been warped and broken, distorting the reflections with bulging grins and jagged edges. Images bounced back and forth from surface to surface, tangled by cracks and lumps and twists, until the monstrous creatures staring back at him were barely recognizable as his friends.

Naegi tore his eyes away from the room ahead. He couldn’t let himself get distracted by the decor, no matter how disturbing it might be — he had to focus on making his way out of the elevator. Even with Ogami helping him, he still had to make the effort of dragging his foot forward with every trudging step, fighting against the need to close his eyes and rest for just a few minutes. Rest wouldn’t be an option until the trial ended.

As soon as he took the last step over the threshold, the elevator doors slammed shut behind him with a clang, nearly catching the back of his hood in their grip. The sound echoed through the room with a hollow tremor, bleeding into the slower tapping of footsteps as he and Ogami made their way across the long stretch of floor to the podiums.

As Naegi concentrated on every painful step, another pair of footsteps fell into the paced beside him. He looked up to the side, his heart lurching at the sight of Togami at his side. Even gray-faced and swaying with exhaustion, the other boy’s eyes narrowed with a bitter determination not to be defeated. Naegi knew he should be relieved to see that his boyfriend hadn’t lost his willingness to fight in spite of being so tired… he just wished that he could draw more confidence from the other boy’s face.

Togami glanced down at Naegi, as if feeling the pressure of his gaze, and the faintest hint of sadness crept into his expression for a moment as their eyes met. “Are you ready to face this?”

Naegi would have liked to say no, but he knew it wasn’t an option. “I have to be, don’t I?”

“Yes. You do.” Togami’s lips tightened briefly, going white around the edges. “You know that I — well, that I trust you, Naegi. I’m going to be depending on you to be on my side in this trial.”

Naegi frowned. “What are you talking about? I —” The words caught in his throat, choked back by Ogami’s silent presence hulking at his side and the legion of security cameras gleaming at him from the walls. “I’m always on your side,” he said, instead of the words that had almost said themselves in response to the plea for his trust.

Togami nodded slowly. “Good.” He raised a hand towards Naegi — then paused, his gaze
flickering first to Ogami, then to the cameras all around them. When his eyes finally reached the throne where Monokuma sat, grinning down at them all, Togami let his hand fall back to his side, a scowl crossing his face. He looked back at Naegi. “I know you’ll be able to make the right decision in the end.” He turned and walked towards the podiums, circling around to take his place between two crossed out portraits of Fujisaki and Celeste.

As Ogami helped Naegi up to his podium, he let his eyes trail around the circle, taking in the crossed out portraits of all the friends who’d died because of the mastermind’s killing game. He looked at each portrait, meeting the eyes of every student through the heavy Xes that did nothing to obscure their faces… until he got to a picture that shouldn’t have been crossed out.

Genocide Jill stood in front of her podium, tapping a pair of scissors against her palm as she glared up at the portrait of a terrified Fukawa, frozen in the moment that she’d seen her picture lit up as the blackened. A dark red X slashed across the image, proclaiming the girl’s death even as her alter ego took her place in the circle. Naegi bit his lip, wondering if he ought to say something.

“Man, I can’t believe you didn’t try to get my good side!” Jill spun to face the rest of them with a wide, off-kilter grin, Fukawa’s image looming over her shoulder. “I mean, nothing moves books like a good photogenic glamour shot, right?” She threw back her head and laughed, a note of manic wildness threaded through the sound.

“Does it matter?” Kirigiri asked, sounding bored. “You know which podium is yours. That’s what matters.”

“Wow, you just want to get right to it, don’t you?” Monokuma asked brightly, leaning forward with a cheerful grin crossing his face. “Well, if you’re that eager, then I think we don’t need to waste any time with jokes or setting the scene. Let’s get started!”
Chapter 220

Chapter Summary

The students begin the fifth class trial, and immediately run into a roadblock.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As the other students slowly settled into their places around the circle, Naegi gripped the edge of his podium with his good hand. It was a little tricky to keep his balance when his head still ached from his collapse back in the waiting room, but he was pretty sure he could keep himself upright by leaning most of his weight on the wooden posts. They seemed sturdy enough to support him for a while… as long as he had the energy to hold on.

As Monokuma launched into his usual explanation of how the trial would work, Naegi’s gaze traveled around the circle. There were so many empty places that the portraits of the dead outnumbered the living, a bitter reminder of their failures to overcome the mastermind’s plan for them. Four of his friends had already been made into murderers, and they’d been murdered by the mastermind in turn. Every trial so far had ended in tragedy, with a new grief that was almost too heavy to bear.

But maybe this one wouldn’t. Naegi looked over at Kirigiri, midway around the circle to his left. Her expressionless eyes were fixed on Monokuma like she was paying close attention to his instructions, even though she must have known them by heart after so many repetitions. Maybe she wanted to be sure that she understood the rules completely before trying to put her plan to fight the mastermind into motion… whatever it was.

He still wished she’d trusted him enough to confide the details of what she was going to attempt, but even the simple knowledge that she had a plan made him feel a little better about going into this trial. Things still looked bad when he thought about the clues he’d seen… but at least there was a ray of hope beyond the mundane specifics of this death. For the first time, they had a chance to go beyond just arguing amongst themselves. If Kirigiri’s plan worked, they would finally have a chance to strike back against the root cause of their grief.

But if it didn’t work…

Naegi looked away from the pale girl, too unsettled by that thought to look at her any longer. His eyes slid around the empty circle in the other direction, drawn to his right with all the force of a magnet until he found himself looking at Togami. The other boy wasn’t watching Monokuma — which made sense, since he wouldn’t be able to understand anything the robotic bear said. Instead, he glared straight across the circle at Kirigiri, as intently as if he was waiting for her to make some kind of sudden move.

“I’ll leave the rest up to you!” Monokuma finally concluded, smiling innocently out down at them from his huge wooden throne.

“Very well.” Kirigiri turned away from the bear, looking directly at Naegi. “In that case, we should begin by discussing the victim.”
Naegi started to nod — and then he frowned. Something was bothering him about that, something nudge at the back of his mind as he looked over at Kirigiri. She had her head tilted towards him, not paying attention to any of the other students… not looking at anyone other than him…

_I’m trusting you to be on my side._

As Togami’s words from a moment ago echoed in his mind, Naegi looked sharply over to his right. Togami glared back at Kirigiri, his mouth a tight, thin line as his eyes tried to track her face. If she was looking at Naegi, then that meant he had to see her nearly in profile. And she always spoke so quickly, wasting no time with getting her words out. It was just a speech pattern, nothing Naegi would have thought anything of before — but now, he realized what it had to mean for the trial ahead.

“Actually… before we start talking about the victim, I think there’s something else we need to do first.” Naegi made sure to speak slowly, turning his head so that Togami would be able to get a clear view of his mouth. “This trial is going to have to be a little different from the earlier ones.”

“What are you talking about?” Ogami asked. Out of the corner of his eye, Naegi could see her frowning at the way he’d angled his head. “Are you all right? Is your head bothering you?”

“No, it isn’t me,” Naegi said, looking straight at Togami. The other boy had gone pale, his face frozen with an attempt at an icy mask — but with the flickers of exhaustion showing through it, Naegi could still see his boyfriend’s quiet fury at the conversation they were about to have. He had to hate this, having such a huge injury announced in front of everyone… but if they were going to have a trial in such a way that he could participate, Naegi didn’t see any other choice. “It’s about Togami.”

“What about him?” Kirigiri asked, a flicker of surprise breaking into her tone.

“Wow, look who doesn’t know as much as she thinks she does!” Jill laughed, her braids flying out as she spun to her right. She was looking right at Togami, too, Naegi realized — and she wasn’t speaking at her usual motormouth speed, either. “You haven’t even noticed that my White Knight isn’t jumping into battle today!”

She had to know already. The only reason Naegi could think of for Jill to change her behavior so drastically would be if her beloved White Knight needed it. Togami must have told her when she’d gone to meet him in the headmaster’s office. Unless she’d figured it out for herself… since it would have been nearly impossible for him to hide his hearing loss from a girl who paid so much attention to his every move.

“What are you talking about?” Kirigiri asked, her eyebrows snapping together in annoyance.

Naegi looked back at Togami again, waiting a few seconds to give the other boy a chance to object — but Togami said nothing, even though he had to know what was under discussion. Naegi could see Togami’s gaze dart around the circle at the girls staring at him, before finally settling back on him. With his hands clenching tight around the podium, Togami gave a single sharp nod.

“Togami can’t hear anything we’re saying,” Naegi said, and he grimaced at the impact he could see his words make on the other boy. “There was an explosion in the room where we found the body — you must’ve seen the way it looked when you went upstairs. Someone attached a bomb to the corpse, and it went off when Togami tried to take a closer look.”

The terror of running into that burning room flashed through his head, thick smoke filling his nostrils and the flames hot against his skin. Even the echoes of the fear he’d felt were enough to
stop the words in his throat, forcing him to relive that awful moment when he’d feared Togami had been caught in the heart of the blast. The worst hadn’t happened then… but it so easily could have.

“Are you telling us that this explosion destroyed his hearing?” Ogami asked, horrified. “But — surely that can’t be right. You were speaking with him before the trial began!”

“He can read lips,” Naegi explained. “That’s why Jill and I are looking at him when we talk — so he can read our lips.”

“I see, so he’s still able to understand us?” Kirigiri raised an eyebrow in Togami’s direction. “Very convenient.”

Togami glared at her. “What is that supposed to mean?”

She shrugged. “It would have been quite a coup for the culprit in this case if you’d ended up completely unable to communicate in the middle of a murder investigation. It’s a good thing for everyone else that the blast only deafened the one person able to understand us anyway.”

Naegi blinked across the room at her, not quite sure what she was getting at. With a more sarcastic inflection, the words could have sounded like she’d meant to accuse Togami of faking his deafness — but from her bland tone, she could just as easily have meant it sincerely.

But since Togami couldn’t hear the questionable way she’d spoken the words, his glare didn’t relent at all. “Yes, this murderer has certainly made a critical misstep in this particular attack. Anyone who saw the body would know that the killer didn’t position that bomb merely to wound — it would almost certainly have killed anyone close to the body when it went off.” He leaned forward, his blue glare mercilessly cold. “I have every intention of making this blackened bitterly regret their failure.”

“Is that so?” Kirigiri tugged on her braid, looking as though she barely cared at all what was being said around her. “In that case, I suppose I should wish you luck.”

The atmosphere of the room seemed to shift as Togami and Kirigiri stared at one another, like a shadow spreading dark and ugly in the space between them. Naegi didn’t like the chill it sent down his spine, or the goosebumps it raised along his arms. The pair weren’t attacking each other, not exactly, but their words still had the sharp edges of blades drawn and at the ready.

“We’re all going to need a lot more than just luck,” Naegi said, interrupting the stand-off. Togami wasn’t looking his way yet, but that was all right — these words weren’t for him. “We’re going to need to help each other. That’s why I said we’re going to need to treat this trial a little differently. Togami can only read our lips if we’re looking at him, and he can only see one person at a time. When we talk, we’ve all got to make sure we do it so that he can understand us.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Ogami said, looking Togami’s way with a nod. His only acknowledgment of her agreement was exhaling a small huff of air, a scowl darkening his face.

“It certainly does,” Kirigiri agreed, turning to face Togami as she spoke. “After all, leaving one of the students out of our discussion due to events outside of his control would hardly be fair.” One corner of her lips twisted fractionally upward.

“Exactly.” Naegi said hastily, before Togami could decide to take Kirigiri’s remark as a veiled insult again. “And this investigation was pretty unusual already. I don’t think any of us were able to see all the different pieces — and some of you hardly saw anything! We can’t afford to leave anyone behind if we want to figure out what really happened.”
“That’s true,” Ogami agreed, a frown creasing her face. “I must admit, I’m not very comfortable with the idea of voting for a culprit when I haven’t even had a chance to view the corpse. I have faith in the accuracy of your reporting, of course, but I would have liked a better understanding of the murder.”

“Better? Hah — try any understanding!” Jill snapped, her scissors a silvery whirl in her hand. “All I got to see was the inside of the world’s least exciting secret passage! That was definitely not worth the price of admission!”

“Huh? You’re all complaining?” Monokuma tilted his head in bewilderment. “But you all had the same amount of time to investigate that you always get! It’s not up to me to discriminate against your choices of personal investigation methods!”

“No one chose to be locked up or knocked unconscious,” Naegi pointed out.

“But we can’t expect Monokuma to bend the rules just because the circumstances have changed,” Kirigiri said, before Monokuma could respond. “That’s always been true, hasn’t it? The rules apply to everyone.”

Monokuma grinned at her, his teeth gleaming bright and sharp. “Wow, you sure get it, don’t you! It’s so nice to feel understood!” He covered his mouth as he snickered.

“Well, then I guess the only thing we can do is make sure we exchange all our information,” Naegi said, turning away from Monokuma’s unnerving face to look back at Togami. “I think Kirigiri wanted to start with the victim, right?”

“Sure, let’s talk about the mystery corpse!” Jill agreed brightly. “Turning up out of nowhere, sure sounds like a B-movie plot twist to me! Let’s hear it, Makuyutie — was it anyone adorable enough to be worth killing?”

“Well… I don’t know about that,” Naegi said, frowning. “We never got a good look at her. The body was pretty well covered when Togami found her, with a mask and a coat. And by the time I saw the body, the bomb had already gone off.” At the memory of the ruined corpse, sour bile surged up his throat, forcing him to stop and swallow it back.

“It’s true, there wasn’t enough of the body left to get a clear look at it,” Togami said. “Even identifying it was more of a trial than it should have been, since several different people had gone missing last night. But now that we know for certain which of you are alive, the identification is obvious.”

“The sixteenth student,” Ogami said softly. “The one who’d been hiding in the school since the start of the mastermind’s game. I’d feared that we would have to deal with this mysterious person eventually — but I never expected that she would only be revealed to us as a corpse.”

“But that’s not entirely true,” Togami said, his too-loud voice harsh in the brittle air. “Our mystery student didn’t die without revealing herself. Isn’t that right?” His gaze burned across the circle, drawing the other students’ eyes to Kirigiri’s unruffled face.

She tilted her head. “What is it that you expect me to say?”

“It sounds as though you wouldn’t trust me to tell you anyway.” Kirigiri’s eyes slid around the circle until she was looking at Naegi, though she kept her face oriented in Togami’s direction. “Why don’t we ask someone that everyone trusts? Tell us, Naegi — what happened with the
sixteenth student?”

Chapter End Notes

Since Thanksgiving is coming up this week here in America, I will be taking a short break for travel and visiting my family. That means no new chapters through the rest of November. The next new chapter will be posted Thursday, December 1. Happy Thanksgiving to those of you who are celebrating!
Naegi blinked as the other students all turned to look at him in the wake of Kirigiri’s question, waiting expectantly for him to give them answers. It seemed a little strange to him — why would Kirigiri want someone else to tell about the events she’d seen first-hand? She did like to ask him questions during the trials, he’d noticed that right from the start… but this time felt a little different from the others.

In all the earlier trials, the questions had always been about specific pieces of evidence, things he’d found during the course of his own investigation. When she wanted to make a point, Kirigiri would ask him to answer her question about it rather than telling everyone herself — but that seemed to be a way of verifying her answer with another person’s independent conclusions.

But the information about Ikusaba wasn’t really something he’d uncovered during the investigation. He’d never met Ikusaba — he’d never even seen her alive that he knew of. All he would be able to do now was repeat the story Kirigiri had told him. Why would she want him to do something like that? Did she really think the others doubted her that much?

Did they?

Naegi didn’t want to think that his friends would have made up their minds already, without even going through the trial… but one of the painful lessons he’d had to learn in this school was that he didn’t always know what other people thought. And from the way the evidence had been piling up when the final announcement had sounded, he knew things looked very bad.

Well, if that was the case, then he would just have to try to convince everyone else otherwise. After all, if Kirigiri was planning to go through with a plan to attack the mastermind’s carefully-protected anonymity, she would need all the support she could get from the rest of them. He’d have to do his best to try to reinforce her credibility.

“Okay. I’m not sure I know everything that happened, but I’ll do my best to explain.” Naegi looked around the circle at his friends one more time before turning back to face Togami. “We all assumed the fifteen of us who met in the entrance hall at the start of this were the only ones involved, but that’s not true. There’s been a sixteenth student hidden in the school all along — Mukuro Ikusaba. For the last few weeks, she’s been working with the mastermind from behind the scenes, watching us through the cameras and talking to us through Monokuma. But the night after the last class trial, she stopped hiding and decided to approach Kirigiri.”

“When she was searching the headmaster’s office by herself,” Togami added sharply.

“But I was under the impression that the mastermind barricaded the office door after I broke the lock,” Ogami said, frowning.

“I got in before that,” Kirigiri said calmly. “If the rest of you had thought to take advantage of the
opportunity immediately instead of putting it off until morning, you might have been able to search the office as well.”

“What the hell are you so excited about that place for?” Jill demanded, one hand on her hip. “It was nothing but a snore-fest — not a single picture of cuties in sexy uniforms or special detention gear in the whole place! What’s the point of being the head honcho if you’re not even gonna use it?”

“Wait — what are you talking about?” Kirigiri asked, a hint of frown flickering across her face for a moment.

“That’s what I want to know!” Monokuma called out cheerfully before Jill could respond. “Are you saying I’m not living up to my headmasterly duties? Do you feel like there’s some aspect of your wholesome school life I’ve failed to nurture? I would never want my precious students to feel like your needs are going unfulfilled!” He grinned at them, teeth gleaming.

Togami scowled at Naegi. “Is he saying anything relevant?”

“Uh… not really,” Naegi told him.

“Then ignore him and get on with it,” he ordered, crossing his arms impatiently. “I don’t want to spend more time in this trial than we have to.”

“Right.” Naegi supposed that letting Monokuma distract them wouldn’t be a good thing — not when they had so many problems to work through. “So Ikusaba found Kirigiri in the headmaster’s office and decided to talk to her. She wore a mask and coat and stuff so Kirigiri couldn’t recognize her later, but she introduced herself and explained what she’d been doing here in the school. And then… she made a suggestion.”

Naegi couldn’t help but glance across the circle at Monokuma as he began to reveal this particular secret. The mastermind already knew about Ikusaba’s offer of betrayal — of course they knew, they had to know — but even so, saying it here felt like nails scraping down the center of his spine. The mastermind was their real enemy, and he hated the feeling that he was about to sell out a potential ally.

“Well?” Jill demanded, before Naegi had quite gotten up the nerve to continue. “Come on, Big Mac, you can’t leave us high and dry after that! What was our mystery corpse’s last request?”

Naegi grimaced. He would have liked to object to calling Ikusaba’s discussion with Kirigiri a last request — but he supposed that was technically what it had been. “Ikusaba asked Kirigiri to work with her… against the mastermind.”

He half-expected Monokuma to interrupt at that, bubbling over with some sort of ridiculous joke or disturbing innuendo — but nothing happened. The bear just sat silently on his throne, head tilted slightly to one side in his usual expression of mild interest. Naegi shivered and tore his gaze away, looking back at Togami. The sight of his boyfriend could usually steady his nerves… but the icy look of concentration on Togami’s face now didn’t make Naegi feel much better.

“Ikusaba said that she’d changed her mind about helping the mastermind while she was watching us over the cameras,” Naegi went on after a moment. “She said she was just a part of a mercenary group the mastermind brought in from outside, and she wanted to help us escape instead of going through with the rest of the mastermind’s plan. But she couldn’t just let us out — she didn’t know everything the mastermind did. So she said that she would unlock one of the hidden areas of the school that we couldn’t access on our own, where the mastermind might have hidden something
that we could use against them.”

“A locked area?” Ogami asked, startled. “Do you mean that Ikusaba wasn’t subject to the rule about locked doors?”

“Um… I’m not sure,” Naegi said, glancing over at Kirigiri. She didn’t respond, so he figured she must not know for certain either. “But it didn’t really matter if the rules counted for her or not, because she had a key. She unlocked the door to the staircase that goes up to the second floor of the dorms, and Kirigiri went in to look for clues. And while she was searching…” Naegi trailed off with a sigh.

“So she tries to stab her boss in the back and ends up dead?” Jill said, tapping her scissors against one palm. “Not bad as motives go! Traitors have to expect to get it from both sides, huh?”

“She must have known the risks of trying to act against the mastermind,” Ogami agreed, her eyes grim. “They would be even harsher when retaliating against a former ally than they have been when playing out the rules with the pawns of their game.”

“Except that things aren’t that simple,” Togami interrupted, his too-loud voice almost violent as it shattered across the circle. “You’re all acting like this was just a case of the mastermind executing an agent for treason — but we don’t hold class trials for executions. Enoshima and Asahina were both executed for breaking rules, and the mastermind made a point of doing so publicly. There was no attempt to hide what had happened, and we didn’t have to solve the riddle of why they died.”

“No, we all knew what happened to them from the beginning,” Naegi agreed heavily, the corpses of the two dead girls flaring bright across his vision. “The mastermind wanted us to know. Whatever happened to Ikusaba… someone definitely tried to conceal the truth about it.”

“Of course they did,” Togami said. “Getting away with murder is the whole point of the mastermind’s killing game. And since we’ve been thrust into another round of it, we know that this isn’t just another execution. Ikusaba’s involvement might bring the mastermind into it, but this is as much of a trial as any of the others. We’re still dealing with a killing among the students.”

Naegi didn’t move at those words, but he could see the way they made the other students shift. After Togami had made it clear that they were dealing with a student murderer, all three of the others had turned to look at Kirigiri.

Well, he’d known walking into this trial that it didn’t look good. Someone had killed Ikusaba at some point during the last thirty-six hours, that much was certain — and there weren’t a lot of options, not with the trial proceeding the way it was. Togami had said that meant this wasn’t about the mastermind — but according to Kirigiri, the mastermind was at the root of this entire murder. With so many questions still unanswered, Naegi wasn’t sure what he ought to believe.

No. That was the wrong way to go about it. He had to believe in his friends. They’d always managed to find their way to the truth before, however painful and difficult it might have been. He had to believe that they would be able to do it again. And above all else, he knew he had to trust in the two allies that had been with him through so much up to this point. Looking from Kirigiri’s cool silvery eyes to Togami’s fierce blue scowl, Naegi promised himself again that he would keep faith with both of them, no matter what happened.

And that meant he had to stop things from going too far in a direction they might all regret.

“Whatever we’re dealing with, it’s still a class trial,” Naegi said firmly, his voice pulling the other students’ gazes away from Kirigiri. Togami looked away last of all, only when Kirigiri herself
shifted her attention. When Naegi was sure the other boy was watching, he went on. “We have to treat this like the other trials and figure things out piece by piece. Since everyone didn’t get to see everything firsthand, that’s the only way to be sure we’ve got the right answer.”

“Except that answering every question was never our mandate,” Togami pointed out, crossing his arms. “All we’ve been instructed to do is determine the killer’s identity. If we can determine that beyond a shadow of doubt, is the rest of the trial really necessary?”

Naegi stared across the circle at him in disbelief. “Of course it is! We can’t accuse someone just because a few things look bad for them. If we just voted based on how things looked at the start of the trials, we’d have been wrong every time so far!”

“That’s true,” Ogami said thoughtfully. “These situations have always changed between the start of the trial and the end. With our lives on the line, we shouldn’t jump to conclusions.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for cutting the dumb trivia night chatter once we’re sure,” Jill added, snapping her scissors for emphasis. “But sorry, baby, doesn’t look like we’re there yet! That’s how you can tell the real artisans — we’re not afraid to take the time to do our stuff right!”

“Okay, good,” Naegi said, relieved that the others weren’t going to start arguing for an immediate vote against Kirigiri. “So we’ll go through things one at a time. We know the corpse is Mukuro Ikusaba —”

“Do we?” Kirigiri interrupted, raising one eyebrow. “Is that established? After all, if there was one mystery student hiding in the school, who’s to say that there aren’t others?”

“Uh… well, I guess it’s possible there was someone else,” Naegi said slowly, trying to figure out what Kirigiri had meant by that. “The body was rigged with a bomb that went off when Togami tried to unmask her, so we never got a look at her face. And when we got the Monokuma File, it just said that the body was unidentified — it never actually said this was Ikusaba.”

“But we know Ikusaba was in the school,” Togami countered. “No one has seen any evidence of these other mythical students you’re proposing. And Monokuma himself said that the game had sixteen participants.”

“Incontrovertible proof,” Kirigiri murmured, her expression never so much as flickering. “I never said there had to be other students — I asked how you can be sure this corpse was Ikusaba. It sounds to me as though you’ve simply assumed it without evidence.”

“No — that’s not right,” Naegi said. “We do have a reason to think it’s her. When you met Ikusaba, you said that she showed you the tattoo that marked her as a member of Fenrir, an elite group of mercenary soldiers. Well, even though the bomb made the corpse’s face unrecognizable, we could still see that tattoo on her hand.”

“I see. That does sound conclusive.” The corners of Kirigiri’s mouth tilted downward in a small frown. “Unless there were multiple people in the school with ties to the same group.”

“Is that going to be your answer to everything?” Togami snapped, his glare scorching across the circle at her. “What-ifs and smokescreens of imaginary killers?”

“Better to consider all the possibilities than to fail to notice reality because it’s unlikely,” Kirigiri said calmly. “Why should it be only sixteen participants in the game, whatever you’ve been told? Introduce the idea of hidden players, and the options immediately multiply. Is there any solid reason to believe that the people in the school are limited to the sixteen we know about?”
A solid reason… Naegi frowned, thinking back through everything he knew about the game, the mastermind, and Ikusaba’s role in the school. Nothing Kirigiri had told him eliminated the possibility of another student… and he supposed that Monokuma’s ramblings on the subject weren’t exactly real evidence. The rules in their e-handbooks didn’t mention numbers either way, and the list of student profiles didn’t even include Ikusaba.

The list of students… for some reason, that rang a bell. Where else had he seen a list like that? He was sure it was somewhere recent…

“The student roster!” The words burst out of Naegi’s mouth as the realization hit him. “The sixteen of us were the only ones in the Hope’s Peak student roster for our class!”
Chapter 222

Chapter Summary

The students debate the specifics of the murder scene.

The other students turned to stare at Naegi in confusion after his sudden exclamation.

“What are you talking about?” Ogami asked, frowning. “I don’t recall seeing a student roster.”

“No, it’s not something the rest of you would know about,” Naegi said, taking a moment to look around the room at the girls. Ogami looked rather puzzled, Jill was eying him with a little too much interest, and Kirigiri’s eyebrows had tilted upwards above her stony face as she watched him.

For some reason he couldn’t quite pinpoint, Naegi felt his stomach twist a little at their expressions — almost like a twinge of guilt. It wasn’t right that they should be confused about what had happened. He should have told them about this before now… but there hadn’t been time, not with the countdown to the trial ticking away behind them.

Well, the only thing he could do about it was to tell them now, and hope they didn’t mind too much. Naegi made himself turn away from the girls’ stares, reorienting himself so that Togami could understand him. He just had to hope that the girls didn’t react too badly while he couldn’t quite see their faces.

“Togami and I found the headmaster’s student roster earlier today, when we got the chance to search the headmaster’s office,” Naegi explained, doing his best to watch the other students out of the corner of his eye. The only one he could see clearly from this angle was Jill, and she didn’t seem terribly perturbed — but then again, it took a lot for something to really bother Jill. “Monokuma took it away, so we couldn’t bring it with us to show you, but it listed everyone who would have been in our class at Hope’s Peak. There were exactly sixteen students — the fifteen of us from the entrance hall plus Ikusaba.”

“Sounds like our mastermind likes to stick with a theme!” Jill said. “If you’re going the schoolroom route, might as well do it all the way, right? This whole murder deal was just about our class right from day one. Why toss anyone else in when there’s a perfect set of sixteen all ready to go?”

“I suppose that would make sense,” Ogami said, nodding slowly. “The mastermind has always seemed very committed to the idea that this is meant to be some kind of normal school life here.”

“So there’s no reason to suspect your pack of mysterious other students are participants in the game,” Togami said, acid burning through his tone as he glared at Kirigiri. “An official list of new students wasn’t released to the public, but the headmaster would certainly have known definitively who would be attending — he would have sent the invitations and received the acceptances himself. Or do you expect us to believe you’re unaware of that much?”

Kirigiri shrugged, as unconcerned as if the words had bounced off without so much as pricking her interest. “Naturally the headmaster would know the students who were planning to attend his school — I never said otherwise. We’ve yet to hear anything more than Monokuma’s word about
the actual number of students who are in the school with us. But a book listing profiles for only the sixteen students we know to be involved in the game already is certainly suggestive."

“Huh? You think some lame old book that no one’s even seen is more believable than the adorable bear sitting right in front of you?” Monokuma gasped in shock, his expression the image of hurt feelings. “What a cruel thing to say! And worse, it’s just plain wrong! After all, I’ve never told any lies. Can any of you say the same?” His red eye glinted as he looked around the room.

“What’s he going on about now?” Togami asked Naegi, pointedly turning his back on Monokuma when the bear looked his way. Monokuma’s grin widened at the unnecessarily petty reaction.

“Uh… he just said he’s not lying about anything,” Naegi said, eyes darting between Monokuma and Togami. It looked like the bear was more amused than annoyed by Togami, but it could be hard to tell when he was genuinely angry about something. “I think he means all the stuff he said about how there are sixteen players in the game.”

“Exactly!” Monokuma sang out brightly. “You know, it’s really too bad you don’t trust your beloved headmaster more! He’d never lead his precious students astray!” The words didn’t sound like much of a joke, but he threw back his head and laughed anyway.

“So you don’t lie when you tell us information?” Kirigiri ignored the cackling as she narrowed her eyes at Monokuma, studying him like she was trying to read something from the robot’s expression. “We should take your words as evidence?”

“Of course!” Monokuma cut his laughter off mid-chortle, switching back to his usual cheery mode in the blink of an eye. “I only tell you all these things out of the kindness of my soft and fuzzy heart — because I want you to learn! It’s the headmaster’s job to be smarter than his students, you know! After all, you’d have to be a pretty terrible headmaster if you couldn’t even manage that!”

Kirigiri stared at Monokuma for a long moment, her steely eyes unreadable. Finally, her mouth twitched in what wasn’t quite a smile. “That’s true. All right, since you’ve assured us so thoroughly that you wouldn’t lie to us, that seems to put an end to the idea that there might have been other students in the school.”

“Of course it does,” Togami snapped. “If you’re going to invent ridiculous daydreams instead of making a meaningful contribution to the discussion, maybe you should keep your mouth shut. We don’t have the time to waste on chasing down unproductive nonsense.”

“I thought it was quite productive,” Kirigiri said calmly. “And it’s important to eliminate every possibility when searching for the truth.”

“It’s also important to talk about things that actually happened,” Togami countered.

“True enough.” Kirigiri smiled, an icy sliver curving across her face. “If you put so much value on the actual events, then perhaps that is exactly what we should discuss.”

“Right — that’s a good idea,” Naegi agreed quickly, before Togami could respond with another barb. Togami and Kirigiri had never really gotten along, but their disagreements had never bled over into the actual class trials before. He wasn’t sure exactly why they were sniping at each other so much this time, but he really hoped they managed to resolve it soon — otherwise, how were they going to come to any kind of agreement about Ikusaba’s death?

“Yes, I would like to have a better understanding of exactly what happened to Ikusaba,” Ogami said, frowning. “You’ve mentioned bombs, poison, knives… it all sounds very excessive for a
single girl, even one who was part of a mercenary group. How was she killed?”

“Well… we don’t know,” Naegi admitted. “Not for sure. The bomb only went off after she was already dead, but there were a bunch of other injuries listed on the Monokuma File that could have been the cause of death.” He frowned, remembering that he’d had to leave his copy of the Monokuma File back in the data center, since he hadn’t had a free hand to carry it. “Togami, did you bring your copy of the file?”

“Of course,” Togami said, pulling out the familiar-looking document. “It’s not very informative, but you all might as well hear it.” He read out the text. “Due to severe injuries suffered during an explosion, the body’s identity is unclear. The explosion occurred after the victim’s death. Two knife wounds in the chest area extend all the way to the victim’s back. The second wound occurred after the victim’s death. There are also signs that the victim was exposed to a fatal dose of airborne poison. There are also signs of many other wounds on the body. However, these are old wounds that were not inflicted in the last few days.” When he’d finished reading the file aloud, he looked back up at the other students.

“And is that the entire document?” Kirigiri asked, quirking an eyebrow in Naegi’s direction. “Does it sound accurate to your recollection?”

“Huh?” Naegi blinked. “Sure, that’s the whole thing. Like he said already, there wasn’t much to it — the file describes the injuries but not which one killed her. And since we still didn’t know for sure who the body belonged to at the time we got the file, it doesn’t even say her name on it.”

“That’s right, Kirigiri was still missing at the time, wasn’t she?” Ogami said.

“Yeah.” Naegi swallowed back against the tightness in his throat at the memory of that fear. “We knew it had to be one of the two, but — well, it took us a while to figure out for sure which girl it was. The bomb really made a mess of the body.”

“Sounds like a waste of a perfectly good murder scene to me,” Jill said. “How are you supposed to check their technique if you blow it to bits? Whoever did this needs to learn the art of subtlety!”

Togami’s eyebrows shot up. “Are you suggesting you have any idea what that word means?”

“Oh, come on, White Knight, you know I’m all about the tiny details!” Jill flashed him a wide grin. “Good bladework takes a delicate touch — you can’t just hack away like you’re sawing through an overcooked steak! You don’t get the perfect artistic effect if you aren’t precise about it!”

“I don’t think the culprit was as concerned about artistic effect as you are,” Naegi said, trying his best to be diplomatic about it. He didn’t particularly like it when Jill talked about murder techniques — but as long as she was content to confine herself to talking, he didn’t want to discourage her.

“Of course not!” Jill tossed her braids. “Anyone who’d blow their finest work to smithereens instead of showing it off obviously doesn’t care about the art of corpse arrangement!”

“But the explosion did destroy the evidence of how the injuries occurred,” Kirigiri pointed out. “With the body burned and ruined by the bomb, there was no way to confirm anything about the death by examining it. And the Monokuma File is equally unclear. It only specifies that one of the stab wounds occurred after death. Other than that, it leaves things unresolved.”

“Did either of you see anything before the bomb went off that might tell us more about what
happened?” Ogami asked, glancing from Togami to Naegi.

“Actually, I didn’t go into the room until after the bomb went off,” Naegi said. “So I guess Togami’s the only one who was able to get a good look at the injuries.”

“Really? Well, come on, baby, don’t hold out on us!” Jill said, her tongue curling out towards Togami. “Let’s hear how it went down!”

Togami scowled. “It’s not as though I had the opportunity to make an in-depth examination,” he told them. “When I first discovered the body, the room was still full of poison gas. I had to leave almost immediately to escape the effects. And when I returned, I was trying to move quickly to identify the body, since I’d assumed the gas would still be a threat.”

“So you didn’t observe anything useful?” Kirigiri asked, raising a single eyebrow. Togami wouldn’t have been able to hear the hint of scorn in her words — but with the faint smirk twisting her lips, he wouldn’t need to. “You managed to look at that corpse twice without noticing a single thing that might be relevant to this discussion?”

A sneer curled its way across Togami’s face. “Oh, I noticed quite enough. It only took a glance to realize that some of the elements of this murder were a little too familiar.”

“Oh? So you don’t plan to omit the fact that the knife was the same one that you confiscated from that very room a few days ago?” Kirigiri asked.

Togami narrowed his eyes. “And how would you know that?”

“Naegi suggested that I go upstairs to examine the body before the trial started.” Kirigiri gave him a bland smile. “The additional time was very helpful in gathering information for the trial.”

“I’ll just bet it was.” Togami’s words sounded unaccountably venomous, considering that as far as Naegi could tell, Kirigiri hadn’t said anything too unreasonable. “Well, as long as you’re gathering information, take note of this — I never intended to hide that I recognized the knife. It certainly is the same one I took possession of, and the fact that someone was able to retrieve it is a vital clue to this murder.”

“Is that so?” Kirigiri tapped one finger against her chin. “Your hiding place for it must not have been very good.”

“My hiding spot was fine,” Togami snapped. “It was perfectly secure hidden in my room — until I had to leave the door unlocked so Ogami could take care of Naegi when he was injured.”

“Wait — are you saying that’s what happened when I was knocked unconscious?” Ogami asked, horror dawning across her face. “The culprit entered the room to get the murder weapon?”

“And that’s not all they did,” Togami said grimly. “The culprit left behind evidence to make it look as though you were the one who stole the knife and killed Mukuro Ikusaba.”
Chapter 223

Chapter Summary

The students try to figure out how Ogami was involved in the murder.

Naegi winced at Togami’s callous words, spoken without any regard for how the other students would react. Across the circle in her place beside Kirigiri, the color drained out of Sakura Ogami’s face as the full meaning sank in, and she had to lean one hand against her podium to brace herself. Naegi knew she would have been upset by the idea no matter how she’d heard it… but even so, he wished he could have been the one to tell her, with a little more empathy than Togami used.

“We know it wasn’t really you,” Naegi assured her, taking a moment to meet her horror-stricken eyes before turning back towards Togami. It felt so strange and unnatural to look away from a friend who was in so much distress, instead of trying to show her that she had his support — but Togami needed his support, too. The other boy wouldn’t be able to follow the conversation if Naegi looked anywhere else. Naegi couldn’t leave his boyfriend isolated… not just minutes after promising to be on Togami’s side.

He tried to pour as much of his feelings into his words as he could, trying to make sure Ogami would still understand his meaning even though she couldn’t see his face. “We know you wouldn’t kill someone after everything you’ve been through. And besides, you were unconscious at the time — Togami and I both saw that you were. You couldn’t have done it.”

As soon as he was done speaking, Naegi twisted around again to look at Ogami, doing his best to give her a reassuring smile. It wasn’t much under the circumstances, shaky and weak — but it seemed to make her feel a little better. Some of the tension eased in her shoulders, and she seemed to breathe again for the first time since Togami’s words.

“I never said she couldn’t have done it.” Togami’s annoyed voice drew Naegi’s gaze back to him with a startled snap. “There was nothing absolutely eliminating the possibility that she might have killed Ikusaba and then drugged herself in some sort of ploy to draw away suspicion. But given the circumstances, I think it’s far more likely that we’re dealing with an inept frame job by someone else.”

“Oh? That’s quite a change of heart,” Kirigiri said, crossing her arms as she looked between Togami and Ogami. “I was under the impression you harbored some quite venomous feelings towards traitors, former or otherwise.”

Togami snorted. “Well, that’s what you get for disappearing for days at a time — you fail to notice critical events. Ogami did work against us in the past, but she’s since proved her new loyalties. I’m willing to believe that she’s on our side — certainly more than some other people might be.”

Those words brought a smile to Naegi’s lips without any conscious thought on his part — a smile that was much brighter than the one he’d failed to summon for Ogami. He’d noticed that Togami’s feelings had softened a little towards Ogami from the vicious fury and carefully-concealed fear he’d felt at the revelation that she’d worked for the mastermind — but he hadn’t realized just how far the change had gone. It sounded like Togami was finally ready to trust Ogami again, and start counting her among their friends once more. That had only been one bleeding wound of suspicion
among so many… but at least it was beginning to heal.

“I see. Quite a fortuitously timed change,” Kirigiri said, before Naegi could express his relief. “It’s such a valuable skill to know who you can trust… as long as you can be confident in your judgment, of course.”

“I’m always confident in my judgment.” Togami glared across the circle at her.

“I thought as much.” Kirigiri sent him a chilly smile. “So am I.”

The air hung heavy and dangerous between them, until it was almost an effort for Naegi to draw breath. He wasn’t quite sure what the pair were trying to say to each other, but he knew he had to interrupt before it could escalate from pointed words to a genuine fight.

“So like I said, we’re all in agreement that Ogami didn’t really commit this murder,” Naegi said loudly. Togami wouldn’t know he was talking, not while he was glaring at Kirigiri instead of reading Naegi’s lips, but Kirigiri could still hear him. “The culprit just tried to plant evidence to make it look like she did.”

“How?” The word rasped out of Ogami’s mouth before either Togami or Kirigiri could respond. “What did they do to try to make you all believe I murdered someone?”

“Well… when Togami got back to the dorms, he checked the hiding spot where he’d left the knife,” Naegi said. “He confirmed it really was missing — but he also found a strand of your hair in the hiding spot.”

“Hold on, Big Mac, are you telling me you jumped all the way to a frame job from one lousy piece of hair?” Jill demanded. “Sure, you don’t want to leave your DNA at a crime scene if you want to fake an alibi — but the Ogre was actually in the room! Her hair could’ve gotten anywhere without someone framing her!”

Naegi frowned hesitantly, wondering how to explain it. Togami hadn’t actually told the other students that he’d kept the knife in the air vent, and if that was where he wanted to keep important things, he might not want Naegi announcing it to everyone. “Well… the hiding spot is pretty out of the way, not somewhere that she’d have any reason to go if she was just looking after me. And it was sealed off, so I don’t think hair could’ve gotten into it by accident or anything.”

“Still sounds pretty pointless to me!” Jill said. “If you’re gonna give someone else the credit for your work, at least make it worthwhile — cover them with blood, plant a weapon on them, something with some showmanship! I bet that one little strand didn’t look impressive at all!”

“I don’t know,” Naegi admitted. “I didn’t actually see it — only Togami looked at it.”

“Is that so?” Kirigiri asked, the disappointment in her tone stinging. “I would have thought you would take the investigation a little more seriously, Naegi. It’s important that everyone examine the scene if they’re able to do so.”

“Yes, and we’re all well aware that you don’t consider risk of life and limb to be a barrier,” Togami snapped. “In case you haven’t noticed, Naegi is quite badly injured. When this all happened, it was the first time he’d tried to get to his feet after hours of unconsciousness. Examining the scene properly required two working hands and the ability to stand without external support — neither of which Naegi currently possesses!”

“So I see.” Kirigiri’s gaze darted to Naegi’s sling, and her lips tightened briefly as she looked back at Togami. “Very well, since you were the only one to observe this important piece of the puzzle, it
seems that we’ll have to take your word for it. Why don’t you explain just what makes you so sure this was more than a simple series of misunderstandings?"

“What exactly do you think I’ve misunderstood?” Togami shot back. “Are you suggesting that Ogami just accidentally drank a sedative and knocked herself out in the middle of a murder by coincidence? The culprit clearly needed her out of the way so that they could steal that knife — and she’s a much better choice of victim to frame for this particular murder than any of the rest of us.”

“You don’t mean simply because I was in the room with the knife, do you?” Ogami closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “You’re referring to the time I spent working for the mastermind. That makes it more believable that I would act against you all now — because I’ve already done so once.” She shook her head. “How could I blame any of you for believing such a reasonable claim?”

“If you want to wallow in guilt, do it on your own time,” Togami snapped. “Yes, you worked against us, but that isn’t the point. In order to kill Mukuro Ikusaba, the culprit had to know that she existed in the first place — so if they intended to try to shift the blame, they had a limited pool of options.”

“And you did mention once already that you thought there might be a sixteenth student in the school,” Naegi added, seeing where Togami was going with it. “I guess we could have thought you might have known even more about Ikusaba that you hadn’t told the rest of us.”

“Exactly.” Togami nodded. “The fact that you also would have had access to the knife only made you a better target. The killer presumably intended for you to awaken before anyone found you, so that you would simply assume you’d fallen asleep.”

“If you didn’t know you’d been drugged, you wouldn’t have had an alibi for when the knife went missing,” Naegi said. “It would have made you look really suspicious once we realized it was the same knife from Togami’s room!”

“Which would explain why the culprit chose to steal it in the first place,” Togami went on. “They could have simply taken one of the kitchen knives that have been sitting out in the open since we were trapped here — but instead, they went through all this trouble to get hold of a knife that was under observation.”

“But even if you’re right about that…” Ogami shook her head. “I don’t see how it could have happened the way you’re describing it.”

Togami frowned sharply. “What are you talking about?”

“You and Naegi both keep saying that someone drugged me,” Ogami explained, “but I don’t see how such a thing could have happened. I already told Naegi — I never saw anyone enter the room, and the only thing I consumed was bottled coffee that I brought in with me. There’s no way that the culprit could have drugged me.”
The students try to figure out how Ogami could have been drugged.

Naegi hadn’t forgotten the puzzle of how Ogami had been drugged, but it had slipped to the back of his mind in the midst of other, more pressing problems. But now… thinking about it again, he frowned. Ogami had certainly been drugged by the time Togami had come down from the fifth floor to find her unconscious. How could it have happened?

Across the circle, Togami was already shaking his head. “You must have missed something. You brought in quite a few bottles before the kitchen closed. One might easily have been adulterated before you took it.”

“No, I checked quite thoroughly for that,” Ogami said firmly. “We’d just seen someone die of poison only a few days ago, after all. And…” Her eyes flickered up towards Monokuma’s throne for a moment, and she swallowed visibly before continuing. “Well, with the mastermind missing, I felt I ought to take as many additional precautions as possible. I made certain that the bottle hadn’t been tampered with in any way before I drank it.”

“Maybe you were dreaming up something way more interesting than staring down at a sleeping boy all night!” Jill suggested, a wide grin curling across her lips. “Come on, you know that all those hours by your lonesome just make the fantasies better! And hey, all it takes is one little moment of inattention to lose it all, you know?”

“It’s not a question of attention,” Ogami said, looking rather put off by having Jill’s leer directed at her. “Even if I’d been distracted, I would have noticed if someone had entered the room.”

“That’s right — you said you can feel it when people get close, didn’t you?” Naegi said, remembering the conversation he’d had with her on the topic. “It’s part of your martial arts training.”

“More or less,” Ogami agreed. “It isn’t infallible, of course, but someone would have to be quite skilled indeed to sneak past me. And after spending so much time around the four of you over the last few weeks, I’m familiar enough with your movements that I’m sure I would have noticed if one of you had entered the room.”

“And even if someone got through the door, they’d still have to get across your field of vision without any cover if they wanted to get near something you were going to drink,” Naegi added, thinking over the layout of the room. “You had the bottles on the table next to the bookshelf, right? So someone would’ve had to walk across all that empty space right in front of you to get to it.”

“That does sound like it would be difficult to miss,” Kirigiri said pensively.

“But obviously not impossible,” Togami snapped. “Naegi wasn’t drugged, so it can’t have been...
something that spread through the entire room — it had to be unique to you. And we found the bottle broken at your feet while you were unconscious. If you’re certain that’s the only thing you drank, then it must have been the vehicle for the drug. Perhaps you’re simply not as observant as you believe you are!”

“Or maybe we’re all missing something,” Naegi said, breaking into the conversation before things could deteriorate further. After all the sniping he’d been doing with Kirigiri, Togami definitely didn’t need to make another one of the girls mad at him. “I mean, you were sitting with me for an awfully long time. Did you ever get up or walk around or anything?”

Ogami shook her head. “Too much movement seemed like it could disturb you. I occupied myself with some minor strength training exercises that can be done while sitting, so that I could keep an eye on you.”

“Oh. You mean… you were just watching me sleep?” Naegi wasn’t quite sure how he felt about that idea. He knew she would never do anything to him while he slept, but… even so, there was something disconcerting about it.

“You were unconscious after a possibly serious head injury,” Ogami reminded him. “So yes, I was watching you for any signs of danger. I’m not sure I would have been able to help if anything had happened… but even so, it would have been worse to miss a warning.”

“Right.” Naegi swallowed, dropping his eyes to the ground instead of looking across the circle. He kept his face directed towards Togami, but he found that he couldn’t bring himself to look the other boy in the eye when faced with a reminder of how very close Naegi had been to dying. “So… I guess you weren’t moving around much.”

“But that isn’t the right treatment for a head wound,” Kirigiri said, frowning. “If you were genuinely concerned about the head wound, you should have been waking him up every hour or so to check for any signs that he wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“She did, at least a few times,” Naegi said, thinking back to the somewhat groggy handful of times he’d been woken up. “She asked me about names, dates, where we were, stuff like that.”

“He showed a little bit of disorientation at first, but it seemed to clear up as time passed,” Ogami said. “I don’t think it was anything to be worried about.”

“That wasn’t what I meant.” Kirigiri crossed her arms, tapping one finger against her elbow. “If you were following the standard procedure for watching someone with a head injury, that would have meant that there was one moment every hour when someone could count on you to be distracted from anything else in the room.”

“So you’re suggesting someone chose to sneak in when there would be two sets of eyes to observe them instead of one?” Togami asked, lip curling up in disdain. “Half-asleep or not, Naegi is more observant than he seems.”

“True… I’ve certainly learned not to underestimate him.” Kirigiri glanced in Naegi’s direction, a hint of a smile flickering across her lips so briefly he almost missed it. “It would have been a risk, and I don’t believe our killer is the type of gambler without some kind of insurance.” She studied Ogami for a moment. “Describe exactly what you did when you woke Naegi.”

“All right, if you think it will help.” Ogami frowned for a moment. “I was seated in a chair beside the bed, turned so I could watch both Naegi and the rest of the room. I didn’t have an alarm on hand, so I kept an eye on the clock and woke him once every hour. I thought it would be best if he
rested as much as possible, so I tried to have everything ready and on hand before waking him up.”

“And what exactly do you mean by *everything*?” Togami demanded.

“Nothing too unusual,” Ogami said. “Water, food, medicine, things like that. After all the blood Naegi lost, I was very concerned about keeping him hydrated, so I had him drink a glass of water each time he woke.”

“But the water was shut off after the nighttime announcement,” Kirigiri pointed out.

“I’d brought a few thermoses from the kitchen,” Ogami explained. “But I washed them out first, then filled them from the tap. I don’t think those could have been drugged — not unless our entire water supply has been contaminated.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Jill said. “Makyutie’s not the one who got a dose of the good stuff!”

“There’s nothing wrong with eliminating possibilities,” Kirigiri said calmly. “So you had a supply of water prepared before the announcement. Very forward-thinking of you.”

Ogami shrugged. “Well, Togami came down from the second floor and sent me to get supplies. It seemed like a reasonable thing to have on hand.”

Kirigiri’s gaze never wavered from Togami. “I see. That was quite unexpectedly thoughtful.” She tilted her head to one side. “Or perhaps not, considering what you had at stake.”

“Do you have a point, or are you simply trying to derail the trial by being irritating?” Togami was clearly doing his best to look bored and untouched by her remarks… but Naegi could see that it bothered him. Why was Kirigiri making digs about their relationship now? He’d thought that she’d gotten over that after they’d resolved their argument at the end of the last trial… had he misunderstood? Was something still upsetting her?

“Believe me, derailing the trial is the last thing I intend to do,” Kirigiri told him, before glancing back at Ogami. “So you were saying that you poured the water before waking Naegi up?”

“That’s right,” Ogami said. “I wanted to have everything on hand. I got a cup of water, prepared the supplements, and set out a dose of pain killers.”

A sharp frown crossed Togami’s face. “You were giving him supplements?”

“Just iron,” Ogami hastened to assure him. “I thought it would help with the blood loss. I checked the bottle’s seal, and I was very careful to measure the dosage of the powder when I mixed it.”

Naegi frowned. Something about that was nagging at him… “So wait, you were mixing this over at the table?”

“Hmm?” Ogami blinked. “Oh — no, it was a little messy, so I mixed it over the bathroom sink.”

“Right… I remember watching the first time you made it.” Naegi bit his lip as he thought. “It took you a couple minutes, didn’t it?”

“Yes, but I knew I’d notice if you’d been in any distress,” Ogami said. “I still had a perfectly clear view of the bed.”

And then it hit him. “But not of the table!” Naegi’s eyes shot open wide, and he leaned forward
towards the startled Ogami. “When you’re in the bathroom, you can’t see what’s happening on the other side of the room. Someone could have gotten in and drugged a bottle of coffee on the table while you were mixing the iron supplements!”

Chapter End Notes

Scheduling Update: The winter holiday season is nearly upon us, far sooner than I expected! At some point in the next couple weeks, I will probably take another break. However, I'm still pretty busy now, and I'd like to put off the break as long as possible. With that in mind, I think that I'm going to be posting shorter chapters through the rest of December, until whatever point I go on break. Hopefully it won't be too noticeable! Have a lovely winter, and happy holidays!
Chapter 225

Chapter Summary

The students debate whether someone could have gotten into Togami's room to drug Ogami while she wasn't watching.

Naegi didn’t need to see the rest of the students beginning to nod in understanding to know that he was right about what had happened. It all made perfect sense — Ogami said herself that she woke him regularly once every hour, and she’d prepared the iron supplement first. That meant that every hour, almost as regularly as clockwork, there would have been a few minutes when no one was watching the table. That was at least one puzzle solved!

But when he looked over at Ogami, she didn’t look relieved to have a solution. Horror spread over her face, pale and shaky — the cold terror of knowing for certain that someone had been in a room where she’d believed herself to be alone. Looking at her now, Naegi’s satisfaction at finding at least one answer drained away, leaving only the chilly reality that he’d uncovered.

Someone really had been sneaking around Togami’s room, where Naegi himself had been unconscious… and whoever had done it was probably the same person who’d gone on to commit murder. It wasn’t the most frightening thing that had happened here in Hope’s Peak, with the elaborate executions and constant threats of death… but the very mundanity of the danger made it all the sharper.

“So you’re saying that it would have been possible after all.” Kirigiri’s voice sliced through Naegi’s thoughts like the edge of a bloodied knife, drawing his eyes to where she stood, tapping one calm finger against her chin. “Someone could have gotten into Togami’s room and drugged an open bottle of coffee without either of you noticing — provided that they knew when Ogami would get up to mix the iron supplements, of course.”

“Because someone would have had to be in the room in order to know when she was going to start,” Naegi realized, picking up Kirigiri’s train of thought. “It wouldn’t be any good just knowing that she was going to be out of sight every hour — the culprit would need to know exactly when the window would be.”

“Then… the killer was observing us?” Ogami asked. “Waiting for their moment to strike?”

“What, through the closed door?” Togami asked, sarcasm thick. “Don’t be absurd. Your entire argument up until this point has been that no one could possibly have gotten into that room while you were on guard. If the killer could have gotten in for long enough to learn your movements, they’d hardly have needed to take advantage of the window in the first place.”

“Then was there some other method the intruder might have used to learn the pattern of your actions?” Kirigiri asked, raising an eyebrow in Ogami’s direction. “Can you think of a way that an observer could have watched without being noticed?”

Ogami shook her head slowly. “I can’t see how. There was no one in the room but Naegi and myself. I didn’t even start using the iron supplements until after Togami left at the nighttime announcement, so the door would never even have been open while I was mixing them.”
“So only someone inside the room would have known?” Naegi frowned, the words feeling wrong on his lips even as he spoke them. “That can’t be right — there isn’t anywhere that someone could have hidden without one of us seeing them.”

“Not unless you’re proposing that we all missed a sneaky intruder crouching under the bed,” Togami said acidly, glaring Kirigiri’s direction.

She remained as unruffled as ever, in spite of the other boy’s nasty expression. “I couldn’t say what you might have missed… but considering how distracted you appear to have been, I wouldn’t be surprised to know that you failed to catch something considerable.”

Togami’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not as unobservant as you seem to think. In fact, I’ve learned quite a few things that you don’t know about.”

“Oh, baby, I bet you know all kinds of things!” Jill said, her bright voice sounding louder than ever in contrast to the quiet tension of the conversation. “If you’re gonna play teacher, maybe being a student wouldn’t be so bad — but I can’t promise I won’t need some discipline!” She threw her head back and laughed, brash and wild and completely out of place.

In fact, her cheerful tone was such a sharp contrast to the tense glares ricocheting around the circle that Naegi almost wondered if she might have done it on purpose. She didn’t often seem to care much what the rest of them did — but she couldn’t have missed the menace lingering in the air after every word Togami and Kirigiri uttered to one another, not when it involved her beloved White Knight. Had she been trying to help calm things down, in her own way?

Well, if so, it hadn’t worked. Kirigiri didn’t look as though she’d heard a word, and Togami hadn’t bothered to so much as glance in Jill’s direction to read her contributions from her lips.

“Then do you have an answer, if you’re so sure you notice so much?” Kirigiri asked, her icy gaze piercing into Togami as if Jill had never spoken. “Do you see how our killer managed to learn a fact that only two people were in a position to know?”

“Oh — is that all? You mean you haven’t spotted it yet?” Togami’s lip curled into a sneer. “Or is it just that you only share information when it benefits you?”

She raised one eyebrow. “So you have worked it out?”

“It’s fairly obvious,” Togami said, crossing his arms. “I think we’ve all figured this one out without your condescending prompting — haven’t we, Naegi?”

Naegi jumped as both pairs of eyes turned to stare at him, steely gray and icy blue on either side of the circle. Kirigiri and Togami both watched him like they expected him to figure out the answer on command — no, like they thought he already knew it. But it still seemed impossible. How could someone have known what was happening behind a closed door?

And then it came to him, so blindingly clear that he couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of it sooner.

“The cameras!” His gaze turned to the throne sitting outside the circle, where Monokuma watched them all with his unsettling grin. “Whoever sneaked into Togami’s room must have had access to the mastermind’s cameras!”
Seconds after Naegi had spoken the words directing his friends’ attention to the mastermind’s cameras, he almost wished he hadn’t. He watched their gazes turn from the cameras to Monokuma and back again, doubt and confusion flickering across their faces in a way that was all too familiar. This was exactly what happened whenever the mastermind chose to involve themselves in the affairs between the students… but this time, they hadn’t had to act through Monokuma to send the students reeling in discord. This time, Naegi had done it himself.

And worst of all, when the others finally looked away from the cameras to glance around the circle again, Naegi could see the one thing that he’d hoped would never cross their faces again — suspicion. Jill’s wild red eyes darted from person to person, her scissors a whirl of silver in either hand. Ogami looked as stricken as if someone had actually managed to land a blow on her, hands clenched into useless fists. Beside her, Kirigiri seemed as cold and untouched by events as ever… but her gaze was locked across the circle, where Togami glared back at her in a blaze of fury.

“I knew it.” Togami’s vicious words scorched through the air, as much an attack as if he’d used a physical weapon. “I knew all along that we had another of the mastermind’s snakes lurking among us. Why plant just one agent in a group of fifteen, especially when she’s proven to be the type to change her allegiance given proper incentive?”

Kirigiri tilted her head, one eyebrow arching up in a sharp curve. “Are you expecting argument? Because you won’t get it. I’m quite in agreement that it seems likely the mastermind wanted to control our behavior far more closely than they could achieve simply by blackmailing Sakura Ogami. But I don’t see what this particular theory has to do with that possibility.”

“Oh, really?” Togami scoffed. “You can’t think of any possible connection between the mastermind’s spy and a theft that could only have been done by someone with access to the mastermind’s tools? And here I thought you were supposed to be good at deductions.”

Kirigiri paused just long enough for a single blink before shooting a cold smile back at him. “I might say the same. Or are you so blinded to alternate theories that you’ve failed to notice that we already have a perfect candidate fitting all the qualifications you just described?”

Naegi frowned. “Wait, a perfect candidate… to be the mastermind’s agent?” It sounded like Kirigiri was implying one of the students had been working for the mastermind… but she didn’t seem to be acting like she was accusing anyone. Instead, she was behaving as though they all ought to know what she was talking about already. But that didn’t make any sense — Ogami was the only agent they already knew about, and even before she’d turned on the mastermind, she’d never had access to their cameras. There was no one else —

"Access to the cameras."

Naegi almost couldn’t believe the realization that flashed through his mind — but it made too much sense to ignore. Togami wasn’t looking his way to read his lips, so just for a moment, he let himself turn towards Kirigiri so he could face her as he asked the question.

“Are you talking about Mukuro Ikusaba?”

And he had the dubious satisfaction of seeing one corner of her mouth curl upwards as a short, sardonic laugh escaped her. “I thought you’d be the one to work it out.”
“Work what out?” Togami demanded, his eyes widening with alarm as he spun towards Naegi. “What did you say to her?”

“I said that Ikusaba would have been able to see the cameras, too,” Naegi said, feeling a little more confident in the words now that Kirigiri had confirmed she’d been thinking along the same lines. “She was working for the mastermind — in fact, she told Kirigiri that watching the cameras was one of her jobs! It would have been easy for her to figure out when Ogami wouldn’t be able to see her.”

“Hold it, Big Mac!” Jill snapped, narrowing her red glare in his direction. “I know you wanna show off your smarts for our darling, but don’t shoot your load before it’s ready! Ikusaba’s the corpse here, remember? I’m not gonna let you turn this into some third-rate horror flick where a body can stop rotting the second the hero looks away — either a body’s dead or it isn’t!”

“Yes, that’s true,” Naegi said slowly, working the idea out in his head as he was speaking it aloud. “Ikusaba’s definitely dead now — but we don’t know when exactly that happened. The Monokuma File didn’t give a time of death, and after the bomb destroyed her body, there’s no way for us to be sure when exactly she died. And since we don’t know exactly when the knife was stolen, either, Ikusaba could have been the one who took it.”

“That would explain how someone was able to move through the room without alerting me,” Ogami said, her forehead wrinkling as she considered the idea. “You said Ikusaba was a soldier, did you not? My ability to sense the presence of others is merely a side effect of my martial arts abilities, not a skill I have trained on its own. If Ikusaba possessed training in stealth and combat, she would likely have the skills to evade my notice.”

“Before you waste any more time on this, try to remember where we found that knife,” Togami snapped. “In case it’s slipped your mind, let me remind you — it was buried in Ikusaba’s chest! Are you suggesting that one of us managed to disarm a Fenrir mercenary and use her own weapon against her?”

“I don’t know what happened after the knife was stolen,” Naegi said, “but I think she must have been the one who took it. I don’t see how anyone else could have done it.”

Togami’s lips thinned, but he didn’t snap out another angry retort — that was something, anyway. Instead, he crossed his arms and eyed Naegi. “All right, then, if you’re so sure, tell me this — why do you think she wanted that knife? It was a lot of trouble on her part to get it. Why would the mastermind’s agent bother with all that effort?”

Naegi thought over the possibilities… but if he was going to proceed along this road, then there was really only one possible answer. “She must have wanted to kill someone… and frame one of us for it.”
Standing in the trial room, Naegi felt a strange kind of deja vu, echoing all the way back to their first murder investigation. He’d stood at a podium just like this one, a crossed-out portrait of Maizono looming to his right as he came to the horrible conclusion that she’d been killed during a failed murder plot. And now, so many deaths later, here he was again, speaking ill of another dead girl by implicating her as a would-be killer.

Not that it was the same, of course. Maizono had been another victim of the mastermind’s, pulled into this gruesome game and given no options but survival… and before she’d chosen to put her desperate plan into motion, she’d been one of his friends. He still had to believe that much was true.

But Ikusaba, on the other hand, had been at least partially complicit in keeping them all trapped in the mastermind’s killing game. If she’d really plotted murder, the way it seemed she must have, then her actions were cruel… but they weren’t the same kind of betrayal that Maizono’s had been, even if they still felt similar. He’d never even gotten a chance to meet her these past few weeks, since she’d been hidden away as the mastermind’s agent. He liked to think that if they’d really gone to Hope’s Peak Academy as planned, she would have been one of his friends… but he supposed they’d never know.

“Naegi?”

He jumped at the sound of a familiar voice calling his name, snapping him out of the dark thoughts that had distracted him. Had the others gone on talking while he was thinking? He couldn’t quite be sure, not when the growing ache in his head made his thoughts spin dizzily as he tried to concentrate. He took a deep breath and looked up into Togami’s impatient eyes, nodding slowly to reassure the other boy that he was still with them. “Sorry. Did you say something?”

“Yes, several times now,” Togami informed him, crossing his arms. “If we accept your theory, then are you suggesting we believe that Ikusaba is the one who attempted to frame Ogami?”

Naegi frowned. “Well… I guess she must have been, right? I mean, if she was the one who broke into your room, drugged Ogami, and took the knife, she must have planted Ogami’s hair in the vent, too. No one else could have done it.”

“Yes, several times now,” Jill said. “If all our super-soldier gal pal wanted was to get the Ogre blamed for offing someone, what would she screw around with stealing and planting hair and all that other crap? Why not make it easy and use the victim on hand?”

Naegi frowned. “Well… I guess she must have been, right? I mean, if she was the one who broke into your room, drugged Ogami, and took the knife, she must have planted Ogami’s hair in the vent, too. No one else could have done it.”

“Yeah, maybe that all checks out in your head, baby, but you gotta give it a try in the real world to work out the kinks!” Jill said. “If all our super-soldier gal pal wanted was to get the Ogre blamed for offing someone, what would she screw around with stealing and planting hair and all that other crap? Why not make it easy and use the victim on hand?”

The victim — oh.” Naegi swallowed hard, clutching at the edge of the podium to keep his knees from buckling. “You mean me, don’t you? If Ikusaba just wanted to kill anyone and frame Ogami for it, she could have killed me.”

“It would have been very difficult for me to refute an accusation if you were found dead while under my care,” Ogami said, her lips so tight as to be bloodless in her already-pale face. “Considering the ease with which she incapacitated me, I believe she would have been able to take the next step quite easily.”
“But she didn’t.” Togami’s voice vibrated with suppressed emotion, strung as tight as a quivering wire. “Even if Ikusaba was the one to steal that knife with murder in her heart, she left you alive.”

“So… someone else was the target,” Naegi realized. “Someone other than me or Ogami.”

“Apparently so.” Kirigiri didn’t sound as though the conversation had interested her at all — but when Naegi turned her way, he found that her steel-cold gaze had moved away from Togami to lock on him. The pressure of her stare pierced through him like a knife through the heart, demanding things of him that he didn’t quite understand. She expected something of him, something important enough that she’d broken her ongoing staring contest with Togami to make sure he knew it — except that it wasn’t working. He didn’t know.

Did it have something to do with the conversation they’d had away from the cameras, about her plan to unmask the mastermind? He didn’t see how Ikusaba’s intended victim could have anything to do with the mastermind’s identity.

But on the other hand… that hadn’t been all that he and Kirigiri had talked about. Naegi bit his lip, thinking back to the rest of that conversation. The mastermind was targeting her — that was what Kirigiri had said. If that was the case… then was it possible that Ikusaba had wanted to kill her?

Chapter End Notes

Scheduling Note: And I’m afraid that’s where I’ll be leaving you for the rest of the holidays! Sorry to stop mid-trial, but unfortunately timing is not on my side right now. I’m traveling, and I don't have enough time to write from now through the new year. The next chapter will be posted in two weeks, on January 5. Happy holidays to those of you who are celebrating! See you in 2017!
Chapter 228

Chapter Notes

And I’m back, after a lovely holiday with my family! I’m now rested up and ready to get this trial moving again. We have one more short chapter as I get back into the story, but things will be back on the normal schedule of Sunday/Thursday updates now.

As Naegi stared across the circle at Kirigiri, Junko propped her chin on her hands, smiling fondly at the boy’s wide open face. He really was such a nice boy, wasn’t he? Too nice to hide any of the vibrant emotions playing out in his changing expressions! Why, everything he was thinking was right there for anyone to see!

Well… maybe not just anyone. You had to know what you were looking for, after all, and a few key players were still terribly in the dark! Junko’s gaze slid around at her other classmates, a hint of mischief curling through her grin as she considered what each of them must think they were seeing.

Poor Ogami, the bulk of it had all whooshed right over her head, hadn’t it? It looked like the only thing she saw when she looked Naegi’s way was how close the kid was to collapsing. Well, that was only to be expected! Really, it was such a waste that she’d been one of the ones to make it this far — Ogami wouldn’t have noticed much even if she weren’t blinded by guilt and grief.

Not that Ogami was the only one of the students with a penchant for missing the crucial details. A flash of glittering silver drew Junko’s attention across the circle to the third most prolific murderess in their class. Genocide Jill had always been a lot sharper than Ogami — and much sharper than Fukawa had ever been, hah! Junko grinned to herself, then sighed. Too bad Fukawa wouldn’t get a chance to hear that pun — no one got mad like she could! Man, Junko sure would miss being able to rile her up into a rant!

But hey, getting the genocider was a heck of a trade-off! Junko had never met Fukawa’s other half during the school year, and it was a crying shame they wouldn’t get to chat face to face! It was probably for the best, though — after all, her memories hadn’t gotten wiped with Fukawa’s, and a short attention span could only distract her for so long. If Jill had cared enough to pay attention to something other than her beloved White Knight for more than thirty seconds, she might’ve put together some pretty dangerous conclusions! For sure she would have spotted that her classmates were acting strange. The constant risk that the girl could destroy everything that Junko had been working towards sent a delicious shiver of uncertainty down her spine, and she rewarded Jill with a grateful grin. Way to keep things interesting!

And speaking of keeping things interesting… Junko smirked over at the most volatile star in her show. Togami’s eyes were locked on Naegi, and steam practically rose up from the top of his not-so-perfectly-styled-anymore head as he failed to catch his precious little boyfriend’s eye. Naegi’d gotten himself way too wrapped up in his worries about Kirigiri to see the countdown to an explosion ticking through the heir’s expression… and happily enough, he had exactly the right ammunition to make it count.

Junko snickered to herself as Togami’s eyes narrowed in Naegi’s direction. It sure would be fun to enlighten him about just what was going through his sweetheart’s head right now — but of course
she knew she couldn’t. Switching plans too soon was a surefire way to failure! Besides, how could she possibly expect her friends to learn anything if she went around handing them the answers all the time? She’d been so very generous with the hints lately — if she wasn’t careful, she’d start spoiling them!

At least, the ones who weren’t making an effort to spoil things for themselves. Junko’s bright red fingernails tapped out a sharp staccato rhythm as she turned to watch Kirigiri. Man, she really had underestimated just how fast their resident Nancy Drew would manage to get enough information to make trouble! She had to hand it to the girl, Kirigiri sure knew how to get things done!

Pity she hadn’t thought just a little bit harder about what it was that she was doing.

As Junko watched, Kirigiri let her gaze lock with Naegi’s for a few oh-so-significant seconds, one of her eyebrows twitching upward as she tilted her head in the barest hint of a nod. Junko let out her most theatrical gasp — surely her beloved classmates wouldn’t be using prearranged signals during an exam, would they? Why, that would be nearly as bad as if she’d caught them passing notes! As a conscientious headmaster, she couldn’t possibly allow such a thing to stand.

Except… as Junko looked from Kirigiri to Naegi, she let her shoulders slump with dramatic relief. Whew, that was a close one — she would’ve hated to have to institute a new punishment mid-trial! But fortunately, it looked like that signal couldn’t possibly have been prearranged.

Not when they both thought it meant something different.

As Kirigiri watched Naegi, it was almost impossible to read any reaction from her stoic iron mask — or at least it would be for anyone who’d never had a chance to practice interpreting “emotionless automaton detective” expressions. But since Junko had had years to perfect her technique, she could see through the facade without a problem.

Poor Kirigiri was feeling awfully frightened, now that she could feel the lovely trap closing in on her — but it wasn’t just that. She was angry, all cold and sharp beneath the smooth mask. A giggle burbled up as Junko considered what that could mean.

But Naegi, dumb as a post when it came to female emotions, didn’t see a speck of it. He gave Kirigiri a small nod in return, agreeing to whatever it was she’d told him she was doing. Junko let out a wistful sigh. Naegi was always so willing to go along with his friends, even when he didn’t remember why he ought to trust them — she did miss that about him. Watching other people manipulate her friend just wasn’t the same!

But as Naegi geared up to begin speaking again, Junko turned her attention back to the trial. She didn’t want to miss a minute, not now that she could see what was coming. She grinned. This ought to be fun!
Naegi looked across the circle at Kirigiri, wishing yet again that she would let him see some indication of what she might be thinking. Now that it had occurred to him that she might have been Ikusaba’s target, it put his conversation with her in the bathhouse in a whole new light. The mastermind was targeting her, that was what she’d said… and maybe she’d meant more than what would happen in the trial. After all, Togami had believed from the start that Ikusaba’s claims of an alliance were nothing more than a trap. It looked like the other boy had been right to be so suspicious.

But if that was the case… if Ikusaba really had planned to kill Kirigiri… then why wasn’t she speaking up about it? Naegi couldn’t believe that the clever girl who’d been several steps ahead of him in every trial so far wouldn’t know exactly what had happened. Sure, she didn’t like to spell her conclusions out to the others herself — but usually she asked key questions and encouraged him to share his ideas.

But not this time. Now she was silent, her gaze devoid of any warmth as it crossed the distance between them. She seemed to be waiting for something… but without prompting, Naegi wasn’t sure what she wanted him to do. She wasn’t telling him anything —

No, wait. That wasn’t quite true. Maybe she wasn’t telling him anything now — but that was because she’d already done it.

*By the end of this trial, I intend to unmask the mastermind.*

That was what she’d said in the bathhouse, confident and calm. She hadn’t told him her plan… but did she really need to? She’d assured him that she had one, and that she believed it could work. And then, at the very last moment… she’d asked him to trust her. She had to know that he already did… but she’d asked him to reaffirm it anyway, like she’d thought he might have some reason to say no.

As if he ever would. Kirigiri had fought harder than any of the rest of them to find a way out of Hope’s Peak, never getting distracted or sidetracked. She’d helped him find answers during the class trials, believing that he would eventually fumble his way to the truth. And after that very first trial, when he’d nearly been convinced that Maizono had only wanted to use him as a scapegoat for murder from the start… Kirigiri had proved to him that it wasn’t true. She’d made sure he understood that Maizono had cared, giving him a reason to keep believing in his connection to the pop star even though it wouldn’t impact the trial. Kirigiri might be mysterious and a little standoffish, but she’d still been his friend ever since they’d arrived.

She’d been his best friend.

The thought made Naegi blink in surprise — but it felt right. He felt like he could trust Kirigiri, like he could rely on her, and he wanted to do the same for her. He hadn’t really had that kind of friendship before, even with the other friends who’d drifted in and out of a more casual sort of “best friend” position over the years. He’d liked them well enough, but he wouldn’t have trusted any of them to take on the mastermind just because they’d said they thought they could.

But when Kirigiri said it… he believed her.

Naegi looked across the circle one more time, met Kirigiri’s eyes, and nodded once. Yes, he’d follow her lead. Yes, he’d do what he could to support her plan. Yes… he trusted her.
And as he nodded, he could see the tension in her shoulders relax, just a little. A small smile crossed his face at the realization that his support had made her feel a little better about what she had to do. If it helped her, then he was glad she knew he was behind her in this, and that they’d been able to understand one another. If she was going to go up against the mastermind, she’d need all the support she could get.

But he couldn’t just tell her that he was on her side. He knew he had to follow through.

“Ikusaba’s intentions probably don’t matter much for now,” Naegi said, breaking his gaze away from Kirigiri to look back towards the others. “I mean, she never got the chance to follow through with whatever she was planning, so we should probably try to think more about what actually did happen.”

“Sounds pretty obvious to me!” Jill said, one hand on her hip. “Someone caught the toy soldier mid-plan and jumped on the chance to steal her thunder!”

“Yeah, maybe,” Naegi said, shrugging. “But we don’t know for sure. Isn’t it better to try to fit together the facts we have before we do too much guessing about the things we don’t know?”

“An excellent point,” Togami agreed, crossing his arms. “And if we’re going to talk about facts, it seems to me that there’s quite a glaring one that we haven’t addressed yet.”

At those words, Kirigiri’s attention snapped back to the other boy, a faint smile touching her lips. “You’re talking about the cause of death, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” Togami sneered. “You couldn’t possibly have thought that I’d miss it.”

“Miss what?” Ogami asked, frowning as she looked between the two. “Were we not just discussing how Ikusaba was stabbed with the knife she stole from Togami’s room?”

“That’s the problem,” Naegi explained. “Sure, she was stabbed with it — but we don’t actually know that the knife is what killed her. After the bomb, we couldn’t tell for sure if it was a fatal wound or not, and the Monokuma File doesn’t say either way.”

“And that’s not all it says,” Togami added. “Or have the rest of you already managed to forget the other potential means of murder the file mentioned?”

“According to the Monokuma File, Ikusaba was also exposed to a fatal dose of poison,” Naegi said. “It doesn’t say if that was the actual cause of death, either — but from the way it’s worded, it sounds just as likely as the knife.”

“Then… do you mean that the knife blade was poisoned?” Ogami asked, frowning. “That hardly sounds necessary for a knife of the size you’ve described.”

“Hey! If you’re not even gonna listen when my White Knight speaks, what’re you even using your ears for?” Jill demanded, her scissors stabbing out as she pointed in Ogami’s direction.

“What are you talking about?” Ogami eyed the silver blades warily, as though she half-expected them to come flying her way.

“I already said that I first found the room filled with poison gas,” Togami snapped, giving Jill an irritated look for the interruption. “That’s the poison the Monokuma File means.”

“And it sounds like a yawn-fest to me,” Jill added. “Sure, you can stab a corpse all you like, but who’d bother giving it to something that’s just lying there getting ready to rot? If you’re not gonna
get the blood all hot and fresh from their veins, you’re just wasting your time!”

Naegi grimaced. “Yeah, that’s a good point,” he said, doing his best to ignore Jill’s colorful way of describing the murder. “The culprit wouldn’t need to poison Ikusaba and stab her. Using two weapons would mean they’d risk leaving twice as many clues for us to find.”

“Not necessarily,” Togami said. “There was poison in the room when I first found the body — but by the time you and I returned to inspect it a second time, the poison was gone.”

“That’s right!” Naegi had nearly forgotten about that part. “Because someone used a reagent from the chemistry lab to neutralize the poison.”

“Exactly.” Togami leaned forward, eyes glittering sharply behind his glasses. “If I hadn’t entered the room earlier, we might never have known that the poison gas had been present at all. The only murder method we’d have seen would have been the ostentatious knife piercing the corpse.”

“And after the bomb went off, there wouldn’t have been any clues left to tell us the body had ever been poisoned,” Naegi finished, nodding slowly. “The culprit might have set it up that way hoping that we’d believe the knife was the only thing they used.”

“But surely they couldn’t have expected to get away with such a ploy,” Ogami said, frowning. “After all, even if none of us had noticed that Ikusaba was poisoned, it’s quite clearly stated in the Monokuma File.”

Togami shook his head. “The Monokuma Files have never been written to give us new information — in fact, whenever they refer to a detail critical to the murder, they’re deliberately vague. If we hadn’t found clear evidence that the body had been poisoned, I’m sure the report would have left that detail out.” He crossed his arms and glared up at Monokuma. “Well? That’s what you would have done, isn’t it?”

“Huh? I’m being called to the witness stand?” Monokuma tilted his head, looking puzzled. “I’ve heard of kangaroo courts calling talking parrots to the stand, but what kind of trial do you think we’d get with a talking bear?”

At this, Togami looked back with a raised eyebrow, but Naegi had to shake his head apologetically. “He’s not answering.”

Togami glared up at Monokuma’s innocent face. “It doesn’t matter — not after we’ve seen him do it with the other files. We all know I’m right.”

“Course you are, darling!” Jill said, when Togami finally gave up on glaring and looked back at the others. “So what’s your point?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Togami said. “The knife was just a decoy, meant to distract us from the fact that Mukuro Ikusaba really died by poisoning. The culprit wanted desperately to hide the real cause of death from us — because it would point all too clearly to their identity.”
Naegi had really hoped that this wouldn’t be the point Togami was trying to make. If he wanted to focus on the poison… if he thought that the poison pointed to the true culprit… then he had to be headed somewhere that Naegi could hardly bear to consider.

He should have been expecting it. After all, Togami had made the point all too clearly during their investigation — everything they’d found came down to either Mukuro Ikusaba or Kyoko Kirigiri. He’d been willing to consider the possibility that the headmaster might have been involved before they’d learned all the facts, but once Monokuma had made it clear the game was still on, Togami seemed to have returned to his original theory. Ikusaba or Kirigiri were his only choices… and with Ikusaba incontrovertibly dead…

It wasn’t true, Naegi knew that much for certain. What Togami believed about Kirigiri couldn’t possibly be true… but he supposed that he could understand why Togami might think it could be. From their first moments in Hope’s Peak, the heir had been inclined to believe the worst of everyone even with very little provocation — and Kirigiri most of all. With this many coincidences piling up in her direction, of course her most vocal antagonist would be convinced.

Well, if that was the case, then Naegi would just have to help Togami see the truth. That was the only way forward — figuring out what had really happened. Since Naegi knew Kirigiri couldn’t be the culprit, there had to be evidence somewhere that would prove it. If he could find that proof, if he could put together a chain of logic based on something more solid than just his own certainty, then he knew Togami would hear him out.

And that would mean letting the facts come to light, no matter how damning they might seem at first. Nothing good could come of hiding what their investigation had uncovered, especially not when Togami was clearly determined to reveal it with or without his help. Naegi would just have to believe that he and the others would be able to find their way through whatever traps were waiting for them in the rest of the trial. They’d figured out all the other mysteries, even when things had looked almost as impossible as now — so they’d solve this one, too. They had no other options.

Naegi took a deep breath and met Togami’s eyes, refusing to shy away from the hint of challenge he found there. “You think the poison points to the culprit’s identity because of the type of poison that they chose to use, right?”

Satisfaction flickered across Togami’s face as he nodded — and a little relief, too. He hadn’t been sure, Naegi realized. Togami had thought there was a chance Naegi would fight him about bringing up the poison.

“I’m depending on you to be on my side.”

The echo of Togami’s words just before the trial made Naegi frown. Was this what the other boy had meant?

Well, whether it was or not, Naegi stood by his answer. He was always on Togami’s side — and he’d protect his boyfriend from leading them all down the wrong path of the trial. He had to.

“You’re exactly right, Naegi,” Togami said. “After all, this wasn’t just any poison — it was the only poison available to us that can be effectively administered as a gas.”

“There was only one poison it could be?” Ogami asked, surprised. “Are you certain? The
chemistry lab appeared to have quite a collection of different types.”

“Well… it’s not like I checked all the bottles to make sure,” Naegi admitted. Kirigiri had been the one to tell him about the poisons — but when he glanced her way, she didn’t look as though she planned to say a word.

“Huh? Are you saying that you don’t feel like your classrooms have been adequately stocked for your daily needs?” Monokuma asked, paws flying to cover his mouth in mock horror. “Wow, what a blow to my pride as headmaster — I had no idea you’d all gotten so advanced that you’d want more than one airborne poison! You should have told me sooner — I would have made sure you had a whole range to choose from!”

Naegi looked up at the bear, the corners of his mouth twisting downward to a frown without his conscious input. “So you’re saying that this really was the only airborne poison in the school?” he asked, mostly for Togami’s benefit.

“Afraid so!” Monokuma beamed at him. “But I’ll be sure to rectify the situation ASAP!”

“I see… so your assessment of the poisons was correct,” Ogami said, a deep line still creasing its way across her forehead. “Then… are you trying to say that the killer was the only one who knew of it?”

“No way, my White Knight has something way slicker than that up his sleeve!” Jill said brightly, her tongue curling out in Togami’s direction. “I mean, come on, he and Makyutie both knew, even if it wasn’t sitting right out there for any old hack to grab! Nope, my darling Byakuya will have a real reason, all solid and hard!” She licked her lips far too enthusiastically for Naegi’s peace of mind.

“Knowing about the poison is certainly damning, but by itself the knowledge wouldn’t be decisive enough,” Togami said, acting as though the genocider hadn’t said a word. “No, the real point here is access to the poison. After the end of the last trial, there was only one bottle of it left.”

“The last trial…” Ogami paled, her hands reaching blindly down to grasp the edges of her podium. “But… then you mean…”

“Yes.” Naegi hated to speak the words that he knew would hit his friends so hard, but he couldn’t see any other choice. “The poison that killed Ikusaba is that same poison that was used in the last trial.”

He didn’t say Fukawa’s name — it felt wrong to link his dead friend’s memory so strongly to the poison that she’d felt forced into using — but even so, it hung unspoken in the air among them. The force of it drew his gaze towards the only part of Fukawa that remained among them.

Jill stood motionless, a pair of scissors clutched in each white-knuckled hand as her blood-red eyes burned unseeingly into the empty air. Her lips still curved up, but the expression on her face now had fractured into twisted shards of her cheerful grin. This wasn’t the girl who’d been teasing Togami a few moments ago — this was the serial killer who’d torn apart the library at the sight of her alter ego’s books, who’d gouged line after bloody line into her arms and legs as her own dying terror echoed through her head.

“Her poison?” Jill’s words rasped out of her throat, deeper than her voice should have been. “So what, you’re saying that her little sewing circle gone wrong wasn’t enough? Her leftovers are gonna come roaring back for another round like a bad plate of beans that just won’t quit?”
“Yes.” Naegi knew there was no point in trying to dodge the question just to spare Jill’s feelings, not when the poison was so central to the murder. The truth was the only way to move forward. “Remember when we read the label? It said that it could be administered by eating it, injecting it — or by breathing it. That’s the one poison that can be used as a gas.”

“But that — that can’t be right,” Ogami protested. “All the bottles of poison were taken during that trial. None of it remained to strike another blow.”

“Not quite,” Togami corrected her, looking unmoved by the horror in her eyes. “All the poison was taken from the chemistry lab before the last trial — but only two of the bottles were accounted for when we resolved the case.”

“That’s right — the unopened bottle from Ogami’s room and the broken bottle in the kitchen,” Naegi said. “The third bottle wasn’t related to that death, so it never turned up during the trial. All we knew was that it had gone missing at around the same time as the other two.”

“So you’re saying… you’ve learned where it was?” Ogami’s eyes darted from Naegi to Togami. “If you believe the poison itself points to the killer’s identity… then you must know who had it.”

“Of course we know,” Togami said, rolling his eyes impatiently. “And so would you if you’d been paying any attention to this conversation — or hadn’t you noticed that our resident know-it-all has been suspiciously silent ever since the topic of the poison came up?” He looked straight across the circle, a smirk crossing his lips. “Or are you going to deny you had the poison, Kirigiri?”
If there was one thing that Togami truly wished that he could hear in this trial, it was the tone of Kirigiri’s voice as she answered his question.

“Of course I don’t deny it.”

He could see the words flying across her lips, almost too quickly for him to be able to read through the dry prickles of exhaustion in his eyes, but there was only so much he could learn from watching her speak. She’d always been so very good at keeping her feelings off her face that he couldn’t see a single trace of whatever she might be thinking, now that he’d cornered her into admitting her knowledge of the poison. But if he could hear her answer, woven through with surprise or dismay or anger, he knew he’d have a better idea of just how close to breaking she might be.

But with his hearing still nothing more than winds rustling thick and heavy in his ears, he could only watch as she pasted a cold hint of a smile across her face. Her attitude suggested that this had been part of her schemes all along — but he knew she had to be pretending.

“I’m perfectly willing to admit that I was the one who took the third bottle of poison from the chemistry lab,” Kirigiri went on, crossing her arms and meeting his eyes in could only be a show of bravado. “I said as much to you and Naegi a few days ago, in case it slipped your mind.”

“Oh, I remember,” Togami snapped, the whole conversation about her supposedly fake murder plan flashing through his mind. “Believe me, I haven’t forgotten a single word of it.”

“Is that so?” Kirigiri raised her eyebrows, pretending that she genuinely meant the words. “Then I’m sure you also remember why it’s no longer important that I’m the one who took it.” Her gaze slid away from him. “You know, right, Naegi?”

The sight of his boyfriend’s name on that girl’s lips sent red-hot fury blazing across Togami’s vision. How dare she ask for his help now, when she could feel the force of Togami’s accusations tightening around her? She had no right to act like she had any claim to Naegi’s aid during this trial, not when she’d betrayed his trust and manipulated his actions time and again.

But when Togami finally forced himself to turn and look in Naegi’s direction, of course he found the other boy already frowning, reaching back into his memory for the answer to her question.

“You mean… because you didn’t have the poison anymore,” Naegi said, too focused on Kirigiri to notice Togami’s scowl. But at least he’d remembered to keep standing so that Togami could read his lips even while he addressed the other side of the circle — there was some satisfaction in that. “You put it in one of the dojo lockers and got rid of the key — that’s what you’re talking about, right?”

Togami tore his gaze away from Naegi’s too-pale face just in time to see Kirigiri nod. “Of course,” she said, her expression far calmer than she had any right to look. “I can’t imagine it would have slipped your mind, since you and Togami were both there to confirm the poison bottle was still sealed when we locked it away. As I recall, Togami even burned the locker key himself.”

She would try to bring that up as some mockery of a shield now. Togami’s lip curled into a sneer — but before he could answer, he saw the others glance to his left. He looked over, just in time to catch most of the nonsense Jill spewed his way.

“— going all pyro now, baby? Cause hey, maybe a prison cell wouldn’t be so bad if I had my
White Knight there to keep me warm!” Jill’s piercing gaze scorched his skin like a sunburn, and he found himself a little relieved that he couldn’t hear her laughter as she threw back her head with wild hilarity. “So what, you couldn’t bear the thought of anyone else trying to kill you the same way she did? Wanted to keep it a special link between you and her? I never thought you’d be such a romantic!”

Togami grimaced. “Don’t say that kind of garbage, you’ll make me ill. I wouldn’t share anything with that lunatic — and even if I were forced into it, that poison wouldn’t count. She had plans for it before Fukawa ever did.” He pointed a sharp finger across the circle.

Kirigiri had the nerve to look bored. “I don’t see why you’re acting as though I’ve been hiding it. You only know about it because I told you.”

“Told you what?” Ogami asked, her bewilderment plain. “What are all of you talking about?”

Togami scowled at the girl — why was she delaying them from finally pinning Kirigiri down on all the crimes she’d committed? He would have liked to unleash his frustration on the issue of trial participants who couldn’t even be bothered to keep up with events — but he forced himself to swallow back the angry words. Ogami wasn’t the true target of his ire, and it wasn’t her fault that she didn’t possess the natural abilities to keep up with his deductions. And besides, he would need her on his side to take Kirigiri down at the conclusion of the trial, so it would behoove him to make sure she could follow along with what he was saying.

“The night before the last class trial, Fukawa wasn’t the only one concocting a murder plot,” Togami announced, looking from Ogami to Jill. They were the only two who hadn’t been present for these events, after all, so they were the ones who needed to hear this information. “That same night, Kirigiri was gathering the components she would need in order to enact a plan to murder Naegi.”

He could see Jill’s scissors flashing through wild gestures in the corner of his eye, but he didn’t bother turning to see what idiocy she was saying. He kept his narrowed gaze on Kirigiri, watching for any cracks in her perfect mask of composure. But no, he hadn’t broken her yet — she didn’t even flinch in reaction to his words.

But when he looked to the side, he saw that Naegi had reacted enough for them both, looking as though someone had driven a fist into his stomach. Togami’s heart twisted at the sight, squeezed too tight within his ribs. His words had put that look on Naegi’s face —

No. No, it wasn’t his actions, not really. Kirigiri had done it, by her betrayal of the boy who’d called her his friend. All Togami was doing was to reveal her treachery. He gritted his teeth against the pain, trying to harden his heart against it.

He couldn’t let his love for Naegi weaken him now, not if he wanted to protect the other boy. He had to think past the softness of those emotions and force back the urge whispering through his mind that he should just give in to what Naegi wanted. If he could just get them through this trial, there would be more than enough time for gentleness later.

For now, he had to focus on the feelings that could give him the strength to soldier through exhaustion and bring this trial to the conclusion they needed. He turned away from Naegi to look back at Kirigiri, embracing the hatred that boiled through his veins at the sight of her cool, collected gaze. He wouldn’t let her hurt the boy he loved again — and he would wipe that smug look off her face, no matter what the cost.

“Yes, I thought you’d probably bring the murder plot up,” Kirigiri said, shrugging as if his words
didn’t even matter to her. “You seem to have quite conveniently forgotten the key part of it, though — the fact that it was a fake murder plot.”

“According to you,” Togami shot back.

“Not just me.” Kirigiri let her thin braid coil around one finger in a twisting spiral. “Naegi confirmed it, as well.”

Togami’s lips pressed tightly together as he looked over just in time to see Naegi agreeing with almost pathetic eagerness. “That’s right — Kirigiri didn’t really want to kill me. I told you already, we worked it out ahead of time that she’d just pretend to do it.”

“And what, were you gonna pretend to be a corpse?” Jill demanded. “Why bother faking it? No one would go for the knock-off brand when the real deal’s sitting there for the taking!”

As much as Togami hated agreeing with Jill about anything, he had to nod. She’d zeroed in on the key point immediately — but of course she would when it was a question of killing. “Whether you convinced Naegi of your intentions doesn’t matter — the point is that you’ve had all the ingredients for murder prepared ever since that night!”

“But Naegi wasn’t killed,” Ogami protested. “Ikusaba was the victim in this murder.”

An involuntary jolt of horror shuddered through Togami at the thought of Kirigiri actually succeeding in her scheme against Naegi. Thank god it had only been Ikusaba instead. “The choice of victim might have changed, but the method didn’t. Kirigiri used the same method she’d already prepared for Naegi to kill off Mukuro Ikusaba.”
Chapter 232

Togami would have liked his announcement of Kirigiri’s guilt to be greeted with gasps of outraged comprehension — but Jill and Ogami were apparently having difficulty following along. The confusion didn’t clear from either girl’s face as they stared at him, one set of eyes blank and quiet, the other wild and impatient. Kirigiri continued her facade of cool indifference, of course, but Togami had expected no less. And as for Naegi — well, after that first glance in the other boy’s direction, Togami had to turn his eyes away. If he intended to continue down this path, he couldn’t allow himself to focus on the fact that Naegi couldn’t have looked more hurt if he himself had been the one accused.

He tried to push Naegi out of his head as he looked back to the other girls — just in time to see Jill open her big mouth.

“If we’re talking murder methods, it takes more than just the same kind of poison to line it all up,” the genocider said, one hand on her hip. With her usual disturbing grin wiped from her face by the reference to her alter ego, there was nothing left to moderate the bloody intensity in her eyes as her stare knifed through him. “Come on, baby — you know I’ll follow you anywhere, but you gotta lead the way!”

Togami nodded sharply. “Of course there’s more to it than simply the type of poison — the entire method was identical. The fatal dose of poison was administered as a gas — but if you recall the last trial, this particular poison’s natural state at room temperature is a liquid. In order to use the poison as a gas, Kirigiri constructed a makeshift humidifier using a fan from the storage room and sponges from the clinic — the very same items that were missing during the last investigation.”

Jill cocked her head. “Something pretty big sure went missing from the storage room right around then, and no one’s fessed up to nabbing it.”

“That was the fan,” Togami confirmed. “The shape left in the dust on the storage room shelf exactly matches the base of the fan Naegi and I found at the murder scene, along with the poisoned sponges.”

“And you believe this would have been capable of filling the room with poison gas?” Ogami asked, frowning. “I’m not certain that I understand how such a device would be possible.”

“It would be simple enough,” Togami said, shrugging. “Attach the soaked sponges to the front of the fan, and as the air blows through them, it would create a mist of liquid in the air. Crude, but clearly effective.”

“Sure, as long as you breathe it all in,” Jill said, tapping her scissors against one palm with a faint clacking sound. “But who’d stick around in the killer air? If you noticed it and got out before it could take you down, what stopped GI Jane from catching on?”

A hint of motion drew Togami’s eye to the left, and he turned to see Naegi leaning as far forward as he could without jarring his sling. “That’s right — the lethal dose for administering the poison as a gas was much higher. You’d need to breathe in half the bottle for it to work. Why didn’t she just leave?”

The fevered brightness in Naegi’s eyes at this potential crack in the argument filled the back of Togami’s throat with sour bile. Was Naegi really going to go so far as to fight him on this? Couldn’t he just wait and trust Togami to make his case effectively?
Hadn’t he meant it when he’d promised to be on Togami’s side?

No… he couldn’t let himself think like that. Togami thrust the creeping doubts to the furthest reaches of his mind. Naegi wouldn’t lie to him, he knew that. The kind-hearted boy wasn’t capable of giving a promise unless he fully intended to keep it. Circumstances might force him into breaking it, the situation with the hidden room had certainly proved that quite painfully true — but that fault could be laid squarely at a more malevolent door.

And so even if Naegi fought against him now, it wasn’t because he didn’t care. Every word that Naegi spoke in opposition to him was nothing more than another piece of evidence demonstrating just how cruelly Kirigiri had deceived him. He would understand that in the end, once Togami had proven her guilt beyond all doubt.

Togami tightened his jaw until it ached, raising his chin with the haughtiest expression he could muster. He met Naegi’s eyes with renewed determination, and this time he didn’t allow himself to falter at the emotions he found there.

“Obviously there must have been something that prevented Ikusaba from leaving the classroom,” he declared, doing his best to infuse his words with a measure of his old confidence. “If she’s a part of the game, then all the rules would apply to her as well — including the one about locked doors.”

“But the door couldn’t have been locked — could it?” Ogami asked, frowning. “You and Naegi were able to enter, after all.”

“It might have been unlocked before we got there,” Togami retorted. He would have gone on explaining to Ogami — but next to her, Kirigiri’s lips curled into a smile so obnoxious the words boiled right out of his head.

“You sound determined to turn this into a locked room mystery,” the girl said. “But so far, you’re the only one making that argument. Any of us can speculate on what might have happened — but you and Naegi were the first ones on the scene. Do either of you have any actual evidence proving the door was sealed?”

Calling on Naegi again, just because she was unable to answer these questions on her own… Togami shot Kirigiri a venomous glare before looking over to see Naegi shaking his head.

“No… I don’t remember anything like that,” the other boy said. “But I never really looked at the door. The body was all the way over on the other side of the classroom, so that’s really where I was focusing. And besides, the door was already open by the time I got there — I don’t think I ever touched it.”

Togami frowned, thinking back. That was right… he’d left the door standing open after he’d fought his way free of the classroom’s poisoned air in that first terrible search of the room. It had been exactly as he’d left it when he and Naegi had returned later, so Naegi wouldn’t have had a reason to think about the door at all. And that meant that he himself was the only one who could answer this question.

Was there something he’d missed, back when he’d first entered the ruined classroom? Had he forgotten some key fact about those early moments, in the dizzying whirl of events that had followed after? He cast his mind back to before he’d even known there had been a murder, when the only mystery he’d been trying to solve was why Monokuma had suddenly gone silent. He’d followed the blinking light of the device from the robot’s eye up to the fifth floor, all the way to the furthest classroom. The door had been shut when he’d first reached it… and then…
“There was something holding the door in place!”

He could feel it now, the smooth metal of the door handle resisting his grip as he pulled at it. That had been strange, hadn’t it? After all, when he’d entered the room during his first exploration of the fifth floor, he’d been able to open the door without any trouble. But this time, it had been different — crucially so.

“When I tried the door for the first time, it stuck for a moment before it opened,” he went on, too intent on his recollections to bother checking whether anyone else was trying to speak at the same time or not. “The handle turned, so I knew the rule about locked doors wouldn’t be in play. But something caused that door to take more effort to open than it should have.”

To his annoyance, none of the others looked appropriately impressed by this information.

Naegi frowned at him, a vertical line creasing between his eyebrows. “You didn’t say anything about that before.”

“It didn’t seem relevant,” Togami said, shrugging. “I’m saying it now.”

“With quite convenient timing.” Kirigiri said, and Togami just knew her voice would be so dry it would set his teeth on edge. “Does your sudden flash of memory include any other explanation of what could have held the door shut like that?”

“There was quite a lot more to look at in that classroom that the door.” Togami snapped. “The body was on the other side of the room entirely — the door was fairly low on my list of priorities.”

“Hang on… if the body was on the other side of the room from the door…” Naegi said slowly, pressing his fingers to his chin, “then what was Ikusaba doing over there instead of trying to get out of the room?”
Chapter 233

Togami frowned, considering Naegi’s question. Even fighting a losing battle for a girl who’d deceived him, the other boy still made a good point. The poison had been quick-acting, but his own survival was proof that it didn’t kill instantaneously. Why hadn’t she been next to the door when she’d succumbed?

While he was lost in thought, a flash of silver drew his attention, and he looked over to see Jill twirling a pair of scissors with bored exasperation. “Oh, come on, Big Mac, it’s not like we’re talking about the Ogre! Once the poison took the fight out of her, the killer could’ve had their way with the super soldier anywhere they liked!”

But Naegi was already shaking his head before she’d even finished speaking. “No — I don’t think they could have. The first time Togami found the body, the room was still full of all the poison gas. And with how fast Togami said it starting taking effect, I don’t think someone would’ve had time to move the body before the gas starting affecting them, too.”

“Exactly!” Togami said, a flicker of pride warming his heart in spite of the fact that Naegi was still technically arguing against him. “The body was already on the far side of the classroom when I went in there the first time. The culprit might have had the chance to sneak in and make a few adjustments if they were fast, but moving the body that far would be out of the question. No, the place where we found Ikusaba has to be the place where she died.”

“But why was escape not her top priority?” Ogami asked, her brow furrowing. “Was there perhaps another exit on the other side of the room?”

“No.” Kirigiri was the one to answer, so immediately after Ogami finished that Togami wouldn’t have caught the words if the two girls hadn’t been standing directly beside one another. “I checked that room thoroughly when the fifth floor first opened, and I’m certain that the only way in or out is through the main door.” She smirked in Togami’s direction. “Which was apparently stuck.”

_Hate_ wasn’t a strong enough word for the wildfire that blazed through Togami at the sight of her scorn. How dare she mock his memories of the murder scene? Everything he’d said so far had been a significant contribution to the progress of this trial — what had she done but snipe at other people’s conclusions from the sidelines or undermine perfectly reasonable trains of thought?

“That door _did_ stick,” Togami snarled, feeling his voice vibrating almost painfully deep in his throat. “No matter what you say, you’re not going to change that fact. You’re just going to have to deal with the fact that I caught you out on it!”

“Is that so?” She quirked an eyebrow upward, like she was a teacher quizzing a terribly slow student. “And what exactly is it that you think you’ve uncovered? After all, you managed to open this supposedly _stuck_ door — are you going to tell us you’re stronger than a master class mercenary now?”

Togami didn’t allow himself to look up to meet her eyes, knowing the cold sparks of amusement he’d find there would only make him hate her more. His jaw ached from how tightly he clenched it, and his nails dug sharp gouges into his palms where his fingers curled into fists. He forced himself to take a deep, slow breath, fighting against crushing sense of pressure that seemed to weigh in on him from all directions. He had to master this. No matter what she said or did, he couldn’t allow her to shake him from his pursuit of vengeance against her.
“She must have decided not to open the classroom door for some reason,” he said at last, once he was sure he could speak without screaming. “Something must have distracted her, or —”

But he stopped short, realizing the others weren’t looking at him anymore. Their gazes had all jerked sharply aside — towards Naegi. The other boy’s eyes were alight with realization, and as soon as he saw Togami looking in his direction, the words bubbled out of his mouth.

“It was the locked door rule — it has to be! If Ikusaba really was another student, then the rules must have applied to her just as much as the rest of us. It’s hard to tell the difference between a stuck door and a locked one — and if she’d thought it was locked, she couldn’t have opened it without breaking the locked door rule!”

Togami nodded slowly. That did make sense, now that he considered the possibility. “And after the mastermind’s treatment of Ogami, Ikusaba would have known that she couldn’t expect special treatment in regards to the rules just because she’d been their agent. She had to abandon the possibility of escaping from the poison —”

He stopped short, his eyes automatically seeking out Naegi’s as comprehension dawned across both of their faces.

“So she had to get rid of the poison,” Naegi finished the thought for him, his gaze never wavering from Togami. “She was on the other side of the room because she wanted to stop the humidifier from poisoning the air.”

“Great theory, darling,” Jill said, the toss of her braids drawing Togami’s attention her way. “Now you’ve just gotta tell us why she didn’t.”

“That’s true,” Ogami said. “As you described this device, she would merely need to turn off the fan to disable it. Surely the poison couldn’t have overcome her so quickly that she was unable to do such a simple action.”

“Well, maybe not!” Jill tapped her scissors against her chin, hard enough that the skin went white beneath the points. “The whole thing might’ve worked if the whole fanny pack deal was hidden somewhere — cause hey, if you’re gonna be a cheating sneak of a poisoner, why not go all the way and keep it out of sight, too?”

“Oh, it was out of sight, all right,” Togami said. “But the culprit didn’t have to hide anything — did they, Naegi?”

He had to lock his expression in place to stop himself from cringing at those words. The question had popped out before he’d had the chance to think it through, before he could realize that asking one of his opponents for support was a ridiculous idea.

Or it would have been, if he’d asked anyone other than Makoto Naegi. The other boy barely paused for a moment at the question before launching into a response the same way he always had. “No, not really. The fan would’ve been sitting out in plain sight — except that no one could see it. The lights weren’t working in the classroom.”

The mastermind themselves couldn’t have stopped Togami’s lips from curving up into a faint, warm smile at the way Naegi hadn’t so much as hesitated at his question. So not even Kirigiri’s web of lies could turn Naegi against him, even if she’d tricked the innocent boy into trusting her so much that he’d fight on her behalf. Her machinations had failed in that respect, at least. He gritted his teeth, more determined than ever to ensure that she would fail on every other front, as well.
But it was too much to feel himself smiling like that — it left him too open, too vulnerable. He tore his eyes away from the lines of familiar Naegi’s face, forcing himself to look at the other girls instead.

And it was just in time, too. Ogami had apparently been speaking, and he was only able to make sense of the tail end of her words.

“— cut the power somehow?”

Jill shrugged. “Pretty sure none of us can get at the generators — they’re all locked away tight.”

“They wouldn’t have needed access to the school’s power source,” Kirigiri said. “When I went to inspect the body and found the lights weren’t working, I noticed that the lightbulb seems to have been removed from the lights. The classroom ceilings aren’t unusually high. All it would take would be one of the more stable chairs from the wreckage, and any one of us would have been able to reach the lightbulb.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at Kirigiri, but she just stared off into the distance behind his shoulder, her gaze locked onto the distorted reflections in the mirrors around them rather than looking at him directly. What was that girl thinking — why would she add to the arguments he was making against her? Was she trying to disconcert him and throw him off her trail by pretending to act innocent? Or… was this part of some deeper scheme?

Naegi didn’t seem to notice the inconsistency of Kirigiri’s answer, picking up the thread of her argument as easily as ever. “So if the room was dark, Ikusaba didn’t know exactly where the fan was. And with so much broken furniture and stuff in that classroom, she must not have been able to find it in time to turn it off.”

Togami was about to respond, but a sudden movement from Ogami’s direction distracted him. She’d leaned suddenly forward, her eyes darting around the circle from face to face. “I don’t understand,” she said, a strange sort of apprehension coming across her face. “All of you keep talking about wreckage, and broken furniture, and other things — as though this room was some kind of disaster area. I thought that all this had happened before the bomb went off and destroyed the scene. If that’s so, then how did the room come to be destroyed?”
Chapter 234

Togami sent an annoyed frown in Ogami’s direction. What did the girl think she was doing with a question like that? Didn’t she realize that sending the discussion careening off on another useless tangent would only give Kirigiri more time to craft her web of defensive lies?

But of course Naegi was already responding to the question, with more patience than Togami would have believed anyone could possess. “Oh, sorry — I guess we never actually told you where we found the body, did we? It was in Classroom 5-C.”

The confusion on Ogami’s face only deepened. “I don’t see what that has to do with it. Why should the classroom number matter?”

At that odd question, several memories sparked through Togami’s mind. He saw Ogami slumped broken and defeated on the dark floor of her room — then bending over Naegi’s unconscious body to provide what measure of care she could — then knocked out in a chair with drugged coffee pooling at her feet. When he thought about those events and considered everything that she’d done since the end of the previous trial…

“You haven’t been to the fifth floor at all, have you?” Togami didn’t need to see Ogami’s answer to his question — he knew he was right. She’d hardly cared about anything enough to stand after seeing her friend executed, let alone climbing five flights of stairs and exploring a new area. Naegi’s injuries had shaken her out of her spiral into despair — but they’d also kept her close by the boy’s side to nurse him as best she could. There had been no opportunity for Ogami to venture up to the fifth floor and view the ruined classroom there for herself.

“Oh… well, if you haven’t been up there yet, I guess you wouldn’t know.” Naegi had clearly caught on to the same train of thought. “The third classroom up there, classroom 5-C, is… well, it’s pretty horrible.” The boy’s already-pale face grew even more drawn at the memory, and Togami found himself recalling how Naegi had collapsed the first time he’d tried to enter the room.

“It was apparently already the scene of multiple murders,” Togami said, taking over for Naegi to allow the other boy time to compose himself. “The first time I entered the room the morning the fifth floor opened, most of the destruction we’re referring to had already occurred. The entire room was splattered quite liberally with old blood and —” His eyes flickered in Naegi’s direction, and the hint of clamminess to the other boy’s complexion made him revise what he’d intended to say. “Well, suffice to say that there was sufficient evidence to show us that a number of people died there at some point before we were able to enter the room.”

“That’s right.” Naegi seemed to have gotten a grip on himself, at least enough to continue speaking. “When Kirigiri and I got there the same morning, the room already looked like it had been that way for ages.”

“Is that right?” Jill’s eyes lit with a hungry sort of interest that Togami didn’t like at all. “So you’re saying there’s been a goldmine of a room up there on the top of the mountain this whole time we’ve been screwing around with swimming pools and game tables? Man, why didn’t anyone tell me we had a real masterpiece sealed up with us?”

“I doubt you’d appreciate it,” Kirigiri said, with the gall to look uninterested in the entire conversation. “There are only chalk outlines now. The bodies were removed before we were allowed access, and the remaining blood is long since dried.”
“Hey, being committed doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate the view — especially after someone went to all the trouble of giftwrapping it up for us in here!” Jill threw back her head, her face distended by the wild laughter that had to be filling the room.

Togami rolled his eyes and looked away from the crazy genocider, turning back to the other girl who hadn’t known about the ruined classroom. Unlike Jill, Ogami appeared horrified by the revelation that they’d spent all this time locked in the same building as the scene of a mass murder. Her eyes had gone wide and unfocused, and she leaned forward on arms braced against her podium until her shoulders trembled from the weight. Seeing her so stricken by the explanation… it sent a strangely unpleasant shiver of distaste through Togami. Not as though he were annoyed that he had to see her reaction… but as if he didn’t like that it was happening to her at all.

Which was absurd, of course. What the hell did he care about Ogami’s reaction to a simple description of a room, as long as it didn’t hinder her ability to participate in the rest of the trial? Togami pushed the unsettling thoughts to the back of his mind and resolved to carry on with matters.

“At any rate, that was the room where we found Ikusaba,” he said, in the hopes of hurrying the others past their useless shock. “And since any earlier murders would have no bearing on this particular situation, we might as well disregard them.”

“But… so many other deaths, right here in this school?” Ogami seemed unable to move past the idea. “How could such a thing have happened? Was it —” She turned to finish the sentence, and Togami couldn’t read the rest of it — but with her eyes fixed on Monokuma’s absurd throne, he could guess what she was asking.

Rather than watch the robot’s nonsensical antics as it flailed about in a mockery of innocence, Togami raised an eyebrow in Naegi’s direction. Monokuma said useful things during trials just often enough that he didn’t dare ignore it — and he certainly didn’t trust any of the others to translate the bear’s blabbering accurately.

Naegi gave a one-armed shrug. “It’s what Monokuma told us before, when we asked about what happened — he’s not the one who destroyed that classroom. All he did was seal it off until the fifth floor opened.”

Togami remembered that conversation all too well — it had happened right in the worst of his fight with Naegi, and Monokuma had taken malicious glee in rubbing it in at every opportunity. The vicious little bear had even done his best to make things worse, revealing Naegi’s naive agreement to participate in Kirigiri’s murder plot and —

The murder plot. Monokuma had revealed the murder plot. Togami froze, losing focus on the other students standing around him as the memory resurfaced and found its way into the collection of other facts he’d been assembling. He stared blankly out at cracked mirrors, meeting a bulging and distorted version of his own gaze as he tried to piece things together.

Kirigiri had tried to argue for her innocence by claiming that she’d freely revealed her murder plot to him — but that wasn’t true. Monokuma had been the first to spill the secret, and she’d only confessed once she’d had no other options. If Monokuma hadn’t shared that information… it was possible that her scheme with the poisoned humidifier would never have come to light. Naegi had foolishly agreed to go along with her plan without knowing the details, and he’d hardly be likely to share the little he did know with Togami while the two of them were in the middle of a fight caused partly by Naegi’s clouded view of Kirigiri.

But… why would Monokuma reveal something that would hurt Kirigiri’s chances at committing a
successful murder? Aside from anything specific to this situation, the bear had never shown any
ingclination to protect the students from murder — if anything, he was much more likely to do the
opposite. And surely Monokuma, the mastermind’s mouthpiece, would want to help Kirigiri of all
people —

No. Wait. That wasn’t right, was it? Monokuma might be the mastermind’s mouthpiece… but that
didn’t necessarily mean the mastermind was the one speaking. In fact, Naegi had said they weren’t
— he’d said that Mukuro Ikusaba was the one who’d been speaking to them through Monokuma,
at least up until the point that she was murdered.

Which meant that at the time Kirigiri’s murder plan had been revealed, Ikusaba would have been
the one operating Monokuma.

Togami felt a small hint of a smirk begin to curl across his lips, and the mirrors around the circle
all leered back at him with jagged, sharp-toothed grins. He’d known that girl was guilty from the
moment he’d identified the victim as Ikusaba, and all the evidence they’d found had only
confirmed his beliefs. And now, with this revelation, he’d finally found the one piece of proof he’d
been missing for his case — a motive.
Chapter 235

Togami could feel the last few pieces of the puzzle presented by this murder clicking together in his head. With this motive, he finally had an answer to the one problem that had held him back from attacking Kirigiri with all his strength — the question of why. If Ikusaba had been the mastermind’s agent and Kirigiri had been another mole, why would one of them turn on the other? They should have been allies in a fight against the other students, not true competitors for the title of blackened.

But if Ikusaba had been the first to act against Kirigiri, it all made sense. He couldn’t be sure exactly what Ikusaba had meant to do with her little revelation, but it had certainly forced Kirigiri into revealing information she’d intended to keep secret. It could have been a malicious attempt to reveal Kirigiri’s true affiliation, or it could have been something far more sinister… but either way, she’d given Kirigiri too much warning of her plans. And rather than wait to see it through, Kirigiri had chosen to strike back.

Togami looked back across the circle, his attention focusing on Kirigiri once again as the other students mouthed their way through silent discussion. She just watched the argument flowing past her, taking it all in without so much as a hint to give away what she thought of the speakers. It was all too easy to see her turning on her former ally with the same emotionless mask frozen on her face.

Well, no more. He wouldn’t let her manipulate another supposed ally to their doom — he’d drag her to the execution room himself before he let that happen. It was time to reveal everything she’d done, with enough proof that even Naegi couldn’t argue for her innocence any longer.

“There’s one other part of the murder scene that we haven’t discussed yet,” Togami said, taking care to project his voice loudly enough that it would cut through whatever inane tangent the others had decided to drag the trial down. “And the fact that the bomb destroyed it makes it all the more critical.”

The others all turned to give him their attention with gratifying speed, frowning as they gave his words due consideration. He dismissed Ogami and Jill — they hadn’t seen the scene at all, so there was no way either girl could have any idea what he meant. And Kirigiri still managed to keep her composure, at least for now. But Naegi…

“You mean the note, don’t you?” Naegi asked, the words slow to form on his pale lips. “You said that before the bomb went off, you found a note pinned to Ikusaba’s chest.”

“That’s right.” Togami smiled. No matter how reluctant Naegi had been to speak the words, he’d answered the question in the end — that was what mattered. “Whoever killed Ikusaba didn’t just stab her with that knife to distract us from the poison — they also used it to pin a note to her chest labeling her a traitor.”

“A… traitor…?” Ogami’s eyebrows knit together. “Then… are you saying that it was the mastermind who killed her, after all? I thought we’d determined that it had to be one of us.”

“No, we were right the first time — the fact that we’re at the class trial means one of us has to be the killer,” Togami said, cutting off that train of thought before Kirigiri could seize on the opportunity to hide her crimes. “The killer — and the person who wanted us all to know that Mukuro Ikusaba was a traitor. And there’s only one person among us who Ikusaba had the opportunity to betray.” He crossed his arms and looked straight across the circle.
Kirigiri met his gaze with a calmly raised eyebrow. “That’s quite an accusation from someone without any proof.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her. “Excuse me?”

“I didn’t find this note when I checked the room just before the trial began.” Kirigiri began twisting her thin braid around one finger.

“Oh, I didn’t find it!” Togami snapped. “Didn’t you hear me say that the explosion destroyed it?”

“I’m not the one whose hearing is going.” At the twitch of a smile on Kirigiri’s lips as she made the insult, bloody red bubbled across Togami’s vision.

“Then you ought to know why you didn’t find it!”

She shrugged. “Maybe. It’s quite convenient, isn’t it — that this critical piece of evidence only existed when you were alone in the room with it? It might appear to support your version of events… but with the timeline as you’ve described it, no one can confirm your claims.” Her gaze flickered to her right. “Unless you intend to change your story now. What do you think, Naegi — have you suddenly remembered something differently than you told us before?”

When Togami followed her gaze, he wasn’t at all surprised to find the other boy looking hurt by his supposed friend’s implied accusation. “I wouldn’t do that,” Naegi said, and even without hearing the words Togami could tell exactly how much earnestness would burn in them. “I wouldn’t lie to any of you — especially not about something this important.”

“So you’re saying we can trust you?” Kirigiri asked, and Togami just knew there had to be cruel mockery in her words. “All right, then — did you see this note Togami claims he found?”

Naegi’s eyes flickered between the two of them, and Togami could see the boy’s throat bob as he gulped before answering. “Well… no. I told you, I only went into the classroom after the explosion happened. I never saw Ikusaba’s body before that.”

“So what you’re saying is that we have only Togami’s word on the matter,” Kirigiri concluded. “That doesn’t sound very decisive to me.”

“Oh, I’m sure you’d love to discredit me,” he sneered back. “But unfortunately for you, I don’t need to invent evidence to prove what a manipulative snake in the grass you are.”

Kirigiri seemed to laugh briefly at that, probably in an attempt to ridicule his accusations. “Is that so? I’d say it sounds like more of the same complaints you’ve made against me ever since you stopped hiding on your own. Haven’t you considered the possibility that you can dislike me personally without needing to turn me into an enemy?”

“I didn’t have to turn you into an enemy,” Togami retorted. “You’ve been one from the start — and I have proof.”

And there, finally, he saw the first fissures beginning to thread their way across her stony mask. A hint of uncertainty flickered ever so slightly across her face, faint lines creasing around her eyes and lips twisting towards a slight frown. It only lasted a fraction of a second before she had her facade in place again — but that didn’t matter. He’d seen a glimpse of what lay beyond it now, and he wouldn’t relent until he’d torn her false calm away entirely.

“As we got close to the end of the investigation period, Naegi left the headmaster’s office to check
on Ogami on the first floor,” Togami continued, locking his gaze on Kirigiri with all the single-minded intensity of a falcon preparing to swoop. “But I stayed behind to keep searching. After all, there could have been any number of important clues hidden in there, and we didn’t know if we’d ever get a chance to look again. And it’s a good thing I didn’t give up — because it meant I was able to find this.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the academic calendar with a flourish. The others leaned forward, squinting towards him to try to get a look at the document. Jill seemed to be babbling about something, but he gave that the lack of attention it deserved. Ogami looked wary, and beside her, Kirigiri had her stoic mask back in place. But to his left… Naegi stared not at the paper, but at Togami himself, like he was waiting for an executioner’s axe to fall.

Togami had to look away, turning back to the paper before the sight of Naegi’s pain weakened his resolve. “This is an academic calendar for Hope’s Peak, quite a number of years ago. Since we were all meant to be the incoming class, none of us should have any connection to the school before we arrived — but according to this calendar, that isn’t quite true. This calendar is from the year a brand new headmaster began his term as the leader of Hope’s Peak, and the very first day of the new semester says as much.”

He tapped the writing on the calendar as he read the words aloud. “The Inauguration and Presentation of Keys to Headmaster Jin Kirigiri.”
Chapter 236

Even without his hearing, Togami could feel the change in the room, the hairs on the back of his neck raising as an almost electrical charge prickled across his skin. Tension crackled around the circle, every student more alert, more present than they’d been just a moment ago. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see words moving on Ogami’s and Jill’s lips that he didn’t bother to read in their entirety — but mixed among them, he could see the clearly recognizable shape of the name he’d just spoken — Kirigiri.

And as Togami watched the girl across the circle from him, he drank in the widening eyes, the paling cheeks, the slight flinch backwards — every movement she made a testament to the fact that his accusation had hit home. He’d finally landed a blow on her, and to sweeten his triumph, she hadn’t even seen it coming. She must have believed that she was untouchable, that no one could ever figure out the truth of her connection to Hope’s Peak. Well, she’d been wrong — and now she knew it.

He would have liked to bask in his success a while longer — but he couldn’t give her time to gather her defenses again. Every second he waited was a chance for her to try to concoct a semi-plausible explanation. He might have won this particular skirmish, but if he wanted to see it through to the end of his war against her, he had to stay on the offensive.

“And as damning as this calendar is,” Togami continued, setting it down in front of him, “this isn’t the only document from the headmaster’s office that proves just how deep your deception goes. Before Naegi left, he found something very interesting on the headmaster’s desk. Isn’t that right —”

Togami began to turn automatically in Naegi’s direction — but when his gaze settled on the other boy, the words turned cold and sour in his mouth. Naegi wasn’t looking at him, but he wasn’t looking at Kirigiri, either. He swayed lightly on his feet as he stared forward, head tilted up as if he was meeting Monokuma’s robotic gaze — but his eyes had glazed over like he’d lost the ability to focus.

A chill flooded through Togami’s veins at the sight. The murder, the investigation, the trial, all of it must have been too much for Naegi to deal with in his weakened state. Less than twenty-four hours ago, the boy had been crumpled in a pool of his own blood on the library floor, far closer to death than he should ever be. Just because he’d somehow found the strength to haul himself upright and participate in this horror of a trial, it didn’t mean that he was recovered. He shouldn’t even be on his feet right now, let alone fighting for his life!

“Naegi?” Togami tried to call the other boy’s name, but he didn’t get even a flicker of reaction. He tried again, and this time he felt the rasp of his vocal chords grinding painfully in his tightened throat. “Naegi!”

The name broke through whatever wave of exhaustion had gripped the boy, his head turning towards Togami as if tugged by a marionette’s string. Togami opened his mouth to ask if the boy was all right — but that would have been a stupid question. No matter what Naegi might say in response, he could see all too well what the real answer was.

“Can you keep going?” he asked instead, one hand gripping the podium until its hard edge bit painfully into his hand. “Do you need to rest?”

But Naegi, stubborn and too unrelentingly optimistic for his own good, was already shaking his
head. “I’m fine,” he insisted, as though he weren’t trembling like a leaf in a strong wind. “I was just… thinking. About the headmaster.” He shook his head. “It’s not important right now. I’ll be all right. We can’t just stop.”

And of course he was right, much as Togami might hate it. There was no way Monokuma would let them stop the trial just because Naegi was unwell — especially not now that Togami had shown his hand by revealing Kirigiri’s connection to the mastermind. Stopping now would be suicidal, proving that he knew enough to be a threat without actually using the advantage the knowledge gave him. The only choice they had was to keep going through the trial, forcing their way past all obstacles until they’d made it to the other side.

He nodded slowly, holding Naegi’s gaze. “All right, then. As I said, you and I uncovered another piece of evidence from the headmaster’s office.” He hesitated, since it would certainly present a stronger case if Naegi were the one to explain — but the boy was obviously in no condition to do so. “Just confirm to the others if what I tell them matches up with what you remember.”

Naegi bit his lip, clearly not happy with this suggestion, but Togami moved onward before the boy could exhaust himself further with objections.

“We already told you that we found information about Mukuro Ikusaba in the headmaster’s student roster, but her profile wasn’t the only one we found. The roster contained a great deal of information that the leaders of Hope’s Peak must have collected about all of us as part of our recruitment — including a certain someone who’s been keeping suspiciously silent about her background.”

He turned slowly and deliberately to look in Kirigiri’s direction, making sure that everyone watching would know exactly who he meant. Though it wasn’t as though there was any room for doubt — not when she was the only one of all the students who’d concealed her history and her talent. She’d never revealed a word about herself, and now her closed-mouthed attitude was finally going to come back and —

“You mean you found out that I’m the Ultimate Detective?”

Togami froze, staring at the calm girl across from him like she’d suddenly morphed into another being altogether. Had he just misread the words she’d spoken? He didn’t see how he could have made such a simple error when he’d been looking directly at her — but she couldn’t have said what he thought he’d seen.

“What’s the matter — aren’t you the one who was just complaining that I never talk about myself?” Kirigiri crossed her arms, that obnoxious smirk curling across her face. “Very well, if you’re going to throw a fit and disrupt the trial about it, I might as well confirm that the talent you found listed on my profile is accurate. I told Naegi as much when we discussed it earlier.”

Naegi? Togami’s lips tightened at the unexpected sight of his boyfriend’s name. So the two of them had been discussing this already… and Naegi had told her about the profile they’d found? No, he couldn’t have — no matter how much Naegi wanted to believe in Kirigiri, surely he still understood she had to be a suspect. He wouldn’t have shared critical information with her. He turned towards Naegi, fully expecting to see a denial of those lies already crossing his lips —

But instead Naegi nodded. “Right. That’s what the profile said.”

Togami stared at him incredulously, anger beginning to grip his chest with a suffocating pressure. Then it was true? Naegi really had been stupid enough to give their prime suspect prior warning about one of the few decent weapons they’d been able to find? Insisting that he trusted his friend
was one thing, but dumping all their clues straight into her lap was something else entirely. And he hadn’t even bothered to warn Togami he’d done it! Togami opened his mouth, furious accusations burning across his tongue —

But they died away entirely when he focused back on Naegi’s swaying form. The fury drained away as he realized just how close Naegi was wavering to the edge of exhaustion. How could he be angry that Naegi wasn’t at the top of his game now, just a day after his brush with death? It was no wonder that Kirigiri had been able to get information about the investigation out of him in this state. *That* was the thing to be angry about — not Naegi’s revelation, but the fact that Kirigiri had taken advantage of an injured, defenseless young man in order to get it.

And getting the information hadn’t been enough for her — she’d gone on to *tell* Togami about it. She’d wanted him to know Naegi had let the secret slip and undermined his plan for the trial. Had this been part of a plan to turn them against one another?

Well, even so, it wouldn’t work. He wouldn’t let it. Whatever Kirigiri might say or do, Togami knew she was the one at fault, not Naegi. And he refused to allow her to drive a wedge between the two of them again.
Togami clenched his fists and glared at Kirigiri, his hatred for her seething along his skin like crackling flames. She’d hidden her past, both her connection to the headmaster and her all-too-relevant talent, and she’d been the only one to meet with Ikusaba before the girl had been killed. Her disappearance for a full thirty-six hours left her with no alibi at all. Even the murder weapon had been one of her own design. And now, in the face of all this evidence, she’d actually tried to turn him against Naegi in some cowardly attempt to avoid the truth of her guilt? A person capable of that deserved no mercy whatsoever.

“So you admit you’re the Ultimate Detective,” Togami said. “And you’ve been hiding it for the entirety of this game.”

Kirigiri shrugged, looking bored. “Not all of us are as fond of talking about ourselves as you are.”

He ignored the jab — she’d have to do better than that to distract him. “Yes, very modest. You failed to inform the people trapped here with you, your supposed allies, that you possessed a talent that could make the class trials easier on everyone because you’re so humble.”

“You seem awfully confident that it would have made a difference,” she said. “But my abilities are the same, whether someone knows to call me a detective or not. Any evidence I found or deductions I made were just as solid regardless of whether I’d put a name to my talent.”

“Oh, so it was some sort of professional pride? You just wanted us to judge you on your merits instead of your title?” Togami couldn’t help but laugh at that, and he hoped the sound was as sharp and mocking as he’d intended. “Don’t be absurd. We’ve done nothing but investigate murders since we were trapped in this godforsaken hellhole of a school — obviously it would have made a difference to know that one of us actually knew what she was doing.” He narrowed his eyes at her. “Unless you had a real reason for keeping your mouth shut.”

“This should be good.” Kirigiri looked upwards and shook her head, as though she’d begun to roll her eyes but couldn’t even muster the interest to finish out the motion. “Fine then, since you’re so determined, let’s hear it — what twisted reason have you invented for why I didn’t mention my talent?”

“I haven’t invented a thing I’ve said during this trial,” Togami shot back. “And I’m not going to allow you to obfuscate the facts by acting as though they don’t matter. The only reason you would have refused to use your talent to help us during the game must have been because you intended to use it against us from the start.”

He didn’t let himself look in Naegi’s direction as he said those words, holding his head pointedly towards Kirigiri even as she and Ogami both looked towards the other boy. He knew what Naegi would be saying, and he didn’t think he could stand to see the boy’s desperate attempts to defend the backstabbing bitch he called a friend. Kirigiri had lost the right to let Naegi speak for her — the time had come for her to answer for her crimes herself. She couldn’t be allowed to hide behind Naegi’s soft heart any longer.

She knew it, too. Togami could see as much when she looked back at him, a regretful smile touching her lips as she met his eyes. This battle between the two of them had been coming ever since the start of the game… and now they’d passed the point when she could use Naegi to delay it any further. He knew it, and he could see that she did as well.
“So accusing me of this particular murder isn’t enough for you,” Kirigiri said at last, the veneer of boredom falling away to leave her expression sharp and cold. “You intend to blacken my every action from the start of the game.”

“You did that yourself,” Togami corrected. “You’re the one who chose to keep silent, time and again when you could have spoken up. And let’s not forget the timing — after all, the rest of us all shared our talents when we met in the entrance hall.” He leaned forward, feeling the spark of the hunt in his blood. “Before we learned about the killing game.”

It should have hit her. If the revelation about the headmaster had put visible cracks in her composure, then pointing a finger at the problem with her timeline should have turned them into bleeding wounds.

But the aggravating girl didn’t so much as blink. He must have allowed her too much time to brace herself for the shock, preparing to keep her stoic mask in place. She’d even managed to put a gleam of confidence in her eye, in some absurd attempt to create the illusion that she was pleased with this turn of events. That sort of nonsense couldn’t possibly fool anyone, of course, not in the face of the facts, but it annoyed him to see her even trying it.

“I see. So that’s where you intend to take this discussion.” Kirigiri tapped one gloved finger against her elbow, a steady black flicker that kept trying to draw Togami’s gaze away from the words on her lips. “This accusation isn’t just about the murders. You want to make it about the mastermind’s entire plot.”

She had to be mocking him with those words — Togami knew exactly how sarcasm could twist a sentence like that, using ridicule to turn fact to apparent fiction. “The victim was the mastermind’s agent — I think the connection is obvious. It’s been about their plot from the start. All I did was bring it to light.”

“So you say.” The tapping grew faster, black shadows writhing along Kirigiri’s arms as her fingers flew in a staccato beat. “It sounds to me as though you’ve invented this entire idea. What proof do you have that any of it is connected to the mastermind?”

“Are you serious? Haven’t you been paying attention, or is this some idiotic strategy of useless denial?” Togami demanded. “Either way, it won’t work. Monokuma already admitted that Ikusaba was his agent — not to mention the fact that she was supposed to be hidden from the rest of us! The fact that the killer knew about her at all connects the entire trial back to the mastermind!”

“Mm. Perhaps.” Kirigiri smiled, and a dagger of ice pierced through Togami’s chest. “But before you start coming up with yet another oh-so-convenient document that supports your theories, let’s remember that I wasn’t the only one who knew about Ikusaba.”

“You were the only one who met her,” Togami said at once, trying to deflect this new angle before she took it too far. He didn’t know exactly where she was going with it, but he didn’t like the look in her eye.

“You mean I’m the only one who admitted it.” Kirigiri reached up to tug at her braid again, a pale line twisting around her dark fingers. “I don’t know what happened while I was searching the school… but it was more than enough time for someone else to encounter the mastermind’s agent.”

“Someone else?” Togami sneered, lip curling at her desperation. “So now you’re going to claim that after weeks of staying hidden, Ikusaba decided to reveal herself to not one but two students in as many days?”
“No.”

Togami glared at Kirigiri. He knew he couldn’t have misread such a simple word — but he couldn’t see any reason for her to have said it. He knew she couldn’t be giving up her ridiculous attempts to delay her inevitable defeat… so what exactly was she doing?

“I doubt she decided to do anything,” Kirigiri continued calmly. “But if she learned that another student knew about her, she would hardly have had a choice about meeting them. She would need to learn how much they knew and if her role was in jeopardy.”

“And you had the nerve to accuse me of imagining things.” Togami laughed sharply. “This alternate suspect of yours would have had to know about Ikusaba before we discovered her corpse — and they would have needed some kind of opportunity to arrange a meeting with her. No one else would have had the chance!”

“Yes, because of Naegi’s accident,” Kirigiri said, tugging on her braid with a thoughtful frown. “You all must have been together as you dealt with that. I’m sure it would have made any kind of meeting impossible.”

“Exactly, so —”

“But,” Kirigiri went on, cutting off the rest of what Togami had meant to say, “you all split up again afterward. You abandoned Naegi to Ogami’s care and went off to the library.”

Togami clenched his fists. “What exactly are you implying?”

“You still haven’t worked it out? You’re usually much quicker than this.” Kirigiri dropped her braid and leaned forward, eyes flashing. “I’m saying that there was someone else who could have summoned Ikusaba to the room where she died.”
Chapter 238

Memories of a thousand unspoken words rang through Naegi’s head in the moments after Kirigiri flung her accusation across the circle, turning the moment of stunned silence into a chorus of chaotic screams.

... Only one person Ikusaba could have betrayed...

... I’m the Ultimate Detective...

... I intend to unmask the mastermind...

And last of all, a steady rumbling that he could hear even through all the others...

... Someone else...

The roar of the words sent Naegi’s head spinning, even as he clutched at the edge of the podium to try to keep himself upright. So many facts and ideas battered away at the inside of his skull that he felt as though it might burst open, unable to hold back the flood of information straining his exhausted mind. He couldn’t let himself break under the assault, not when the trial was still going... but he had so little control over his thoughts now that they almost felt as though they belonged to someone else. Part of him wanted desperately to give in to the overwhelming pressure and allow it to sweep him away, washing over him to do what it would...

But no. No. He couldn’t give in right in the middle of a trial, not when all his friends needed him to keep it together. He’d promised to be on Togami’s side, and he’d agreed to support Kirigiri’s mysterious plan — letting this strange side effect of exhaustion wasn’t an option. He clenched his jaw and forced his heavy eyes to stay open, looking beyond the burning dryness of exhaustion to return his attention to the circle.

Ogami and Jill stood in apprehensive silence, one a frozen mountain and the other blurred with silver edges as they looked from Kirigiri to Togami. Kirigiri still leaned forward over her podium, and Naegi almost expected to see the twitch of a tail and flickering pointed ears as she watched the opposite side of a circle like a mouse hole. And as for Togami — the expression on his face turned Naegi’s chest to a pit of ice. He’d never wanted to see an expression like that on the other boy’s face, let alone directed at one of their friends. Why was he —

Someone else had summoned Ikusaba to the circle — that was what Kirigiri had said. It had sounded all right to Naegi initially, because obviously if Kirigiri hadn’t done it, someone else must have. But... who had she meant? He followed her gaze to Togami, and nausea twisted his stomach into knots.

“Dropping to a whole new low to save yourself, aren’t you?” Togami sneered, the faint slur to his voice turning the words low and ugly. “Someone else — hah. You don’t even have the decency to say my name as you stab me in the back.”

“You seem to have understood my meaning regardless.” One corner of Kirigiri’s lips knifed sharply upward. “You can try to say that I’m the only one who had the opportunity to kill Ikusaba, but that isn’t true. The only requirements are the knowledge of Ikusaba’s presence in the school and the ability to move freely last night — and you certainly meet both those criteria just as well as me.”

“Wait — wait, what are you saying?” Naegi tried to shout, but the words caught in his throat until
only a strangled croak emerged. “That can’t be right!”

But neither Kirigiri nor Togami so much as glanced in his direction. With his eyes locked on Kirigiri’s face, Togami wouldn’t be aware of a word Naegi was saying… and although Kirigiri had to hear him, she clearly had no intention of listening. His words couldn’t reach the pair of them, glaring across the circle like they had left the rest of the trial behind. An unexpected pang of loneliness shot through Naegi’s chest at the realization — he might as well be standing in an empty room for all the effect his words could have.

“You’re out of your mind,” Togami said flatly. “Yes, Naegi told me about Ikusaba’s existence — but not until he woke up just before the nighttime announcement. We found Ikusaba’s body less than eight hours later. I would have no reason to enact an elaborate murder plot against a girl I’d just learned about — especially since the entire point of Naegi’s story was that she was supposedly going to work with us.”

Kirigiri tilted her head. “And you believed that she was willing to be a genuine ally? My, you certainly have learned to be more trusting of others. Someone must have been an awfully good influence on you.”

Naegi flinched, even though the barb hadn’t been meant for him. Why would she say something so unnecessarily cruel? He hated hearing his friends accuse one another of murder — but with the mastermind’s class trials, he’d already known that would be inevitable. But hearing Kirigiri mock Togami’s feelings for him… that hurt.

“Of course I suspected a ridiculous story like that,” Togami ground out, his jaw visibly clenched. “Any sane person would want confirmation from a supposed double agent. But turning on her immediately would have been just as stupid as trusting her unreservedly — we’d lose the chance to learn whatever it was she’d been plotting.”

“And you’d never be stupid — we can all count on that.” A strange, out of place smile flickered at the corner of her lips. “So you haven’t been changed entirely, I see — the unpleasant heir we met that first day is still in there somewhere, too paranoid to take anything at face value. How reassuring.”

Naegi’s mouth fell open in shock at the icy venom in the girl’s words. Sure, Togami wouldn’t be able to hear her tone — but that didn’t change the fact that she’d used it. And besides, even without his hearing, Togami could clearly tell exactly what she’d intended. Tension rippled down his shoulders and up his neck like iron cords, twitching all the way up to a visible tic shuddering through one of his eyes. The anger radiated off of him in waves, until Naegi could almost feel it burning his skin. Couldn’t Kirigiri see how bad things were getting? Why would she treat Togami like this when every word she said was only making him more and more furious? It was like she was trying to —

Like she was trying to make him mad.

Naegi stared across the circle at Kirigiri, searching her expressionless face for some clue that could either confirm or deny the bizarre theory that had popped into his head… but no matter how intently he looked, she gave away as little as ever. All he could see was a touch of a smile, a glint of some nameless emotion in her eye — but that could mean anything. He had no way to tell for sure.

Thinking back on the way she’d been acting towards Togami, it did fit together in a strange way… but at the same time, it didn’t make any sense at all. Why would Kirigiri want Togami to be angry? She’d never seemed very impressed by any of the other times he’d gotten mad at her, doing little
more than rolling her eyes and acting as though the outbursts of anger weren’t happening. She had never gone out of her way to antagonize him further — not until this trial, anyway. What had changed?

“I certainly know better than to accept your manipulations as they’re presented to me,” Togami snarled, his entire body a coiled spring poised to snap back on the force holding it down. “You’re the one who told us about Ikusaba in the first place — what’s to say your story about an alliance wasn’t something you fabricated so that you could get away with murdering her later?”

Naegi winced. If Kirigiri really did want Togami to get angry, it was definitely working. He’d never seen the other boy so furious, not even during the other trials. There was something frightening about the way Togami glared across the circle, a nameless dread that Naegi couldn’t quite pinpoint. It was like the anger had swept Togami off to some distant place where Naegi couldn’t follow, leaving him bereft and confused.

“Why exactly would I bother to tell you about Ikusaba if I’d been intending to kill her?” Kirigiri countered. “Are you suggesting that I put considerable time and effort into a murder plan that would point the finger straight at me?”

“Except that it wouldn’t have if everything had gone according to plan,” Togami shot back. “Let’s not forget that the culprit tried to frame Sakura Ogami for her crime. The only reason she isn’t a serious suspect is that I came on the scene before the murderer had finished setting up their plot.”

“Yes, another one of your convenient coincidences,” Kirigiri said, crossing her arms. “You just happened to find the murder scene at the perfect moment to see enough evidence to prove any theory you like. But there’s one piece of evidence I think you’ve left out of your narrative.” She smirked at him. “Just how did you manage to find that corpse all the way up on the fifth floor in the first place?”
Kirigiri’s question made Naegi blink, his mind shooting rapidly backwards through the last several hours. He remembered Togami waking him and telling him about how he’d discovered a corpse in a poisoned room up on the fifth floor… but now that he thought about it, the other boy hadn’t said much about what had happened leading up to the discovery. As far as Naegi knew, Togami had been in the library down on the second floor, taking apart the abandoned Monokuma robot… classroom 5-C would have been really out of the way for him to find Ikusaba by accident.

So what exactly had happened? As the question ran through his mind, Naegi turned to look back towards Togami — only to see the other boy glaring at Kirigiri rather than answering her. Something about that seemed strange to Naegi — after all, if Togami was mad at Kirigiri for asking the question, all he had to do was explain. If he had a good answer, then that would undermine whatever point Kirigiri was driving at.

Did that mean… that Togami didn’t have an answer?

“You already know, don’t you?” Togami growled, his voice deeper and lower than usual. “You figured it out somehow — or maybe you’ve known all along.”

Kirigiri raised her eyebrows. “If I already know the answer, why would I bother asking?”

“Because you know exactly how this is going to sound.” Togami clenched his fists, white-knuckled like he was poised to strike a blow. “You’re trying to discredit me.”

“Is that so?” Kirigiri tugged at her braid, letting it twist and tangle around her fingers. “It sounds to me as though you’re attempting to offer a preemptive defense against a fatally flawed explanation. Didn’t you have time to fabricate a good excuse?”

For a moment, Togami looked like he was about to explode in Kirigiri’s direction — but then he closed his eyes, mouth compressing into a thin white line as his nostrils flared with deep, slow breaths. Naegi bit his lip, hoping desperately that this meant Togami was trying to calm himself down before answering. Whatever Kirigiri thought she could accomplish by antagonizing the heir, Naegi wasn’t sure he agreed. They all needed calm heads to deal with the trials — and he would have told Togami so, if only the other boy would turn and look Naegi’s way.

But when Togami finally opened his eyes, his gaze never even flickered away from Kirigiri. Naegi supposed that this quiet, focused expression was better than the fury that had been bubbling through the other boy, but that didn’t mean he liked it. The corners of his eyes burned a little as a pang of longing echoed through his chest, a useless wish for the soft smiles that crossed Togami’s lips when they were alone. He knew the middle of a trial wasn’t the right time for softness… but looking at Togami’s steely eyes only made him wish it more.

“All right, then. I’ll give you the truth, and we’ll see how you plan to spin it.” Togami planted both hands on the top of the podium and leaned sharply forward, like the first thrust of an attack. “I found that corpse when a tracker inside the Monokuma robot’s eye led me to it.”

Naegi blinked. He hadn’t been sure what Togami was going to say… but that certainly hadn’t been what he’d expected. Without conscious command, he found his gaze drawn away from the circle, up to where Monokuma sat enthroned above them all. The bear’s lightning bolt eye gleamed with its usual fiery red… but as Naegi frowned up at the robot, for a moment it almost seemed as if the light flickered on and off, just once.
“So your explanation is that Monokuma has a built-in corpse detector?” Kirigiri’s single burst of cold laughter rang brittle in the air. “I see you didn’t even try to make your story sound plausible.”

“A generalized corpse detector certainly does sound ridiculous.” Even with the faint slur from his hearing loss, Togami’s words all but dripped with scorn. “But you can’t obfuscate the facts by trying to replace them with nonsense. Why should it have been some kind of imaginary device like that when a preprogrammed signal meant for a single destination would make more sense?”

“Sense? Only if you assume that someone intended to lead you to that corpse,” Kirigiri said. “And while we all know how much you enjoy blaming your problems on me, I think you’re going to need to come up with an alternate candidate this time. You’ve made quite a few accusations based on evidence you supposedly found by coming on the scene before the culprit had finished setting it up — and you can’t very well say that I’m both the murderer and the source of the proof you want to use against me.”

“Well, that depends on how the tracker was meant to work, doesn’t it?” Togami retorted. “This corpse was obviously meant to be discovered, since the killer went to the trouble of trying to frame Ogami. And surely the Ultimate Detective would be aware that the person who finds the body always comes under particular scrutiny. But the fifth floor is so far out of the way that you couldn’t count on someone finding the body — not unless you arranged a way to lure someone directly there. I just found it faster than you expected and made my way to the body ahead of schedule.”

“I see I underestimated your determination,” Kirigiri said, and Naegi didn’t really like the dry tone to her words. It was like she was finding amusement in some kind of private joke — but he didn’t see what about this situation anyone could find funny. “Unfortunately, now you’ve created a new problem for yourself. Exactly what kind of trick do you imagine I used to plant a tracker in Monokuma’s eye? Don’t forget, we’re all forbidden to attack the headmaster — none of us can go around sticking things in his eye on a whim.”

“No? I think there’s one type of person here who could have done it quite easily,” Togami snapped, his glare blazing across the circle. “A double agent who’s been working for the mastermind since the beginning wouldn’t have any problems using one of the Monokuma robots in her schemes.”

At first, Naegi didn’t understand what Togami was trying to say. Some self-defense mechanism in his own brain caught the words as they entered his ears, turning them from real sentences into empty sounds, too meaningless to cause him pain.

But he couldn’t ignore the trial, no matter how much he wished he could shut it out of his head. He heard Ogami’s startled gasp hiss through the air, and he could see the flash of the genocider’s braids in the corner of his eye. Looking at Togami, he could see a satisfied smile twisting his boyfriend’s mouth, like he’d scored a point with those words that Naegi still didn’t want to hear. And on the other side of the circle, when Naegi finally got up the nerve to turn his eyes in that direction… Kirigiri’s eyes had gone almost painfully wide, as if Togami had slapped her.

No… worse than slap her. Naegi felt the blood drain from his face, a dizzying chill snaking its way through his body as his defenses collapsed and the horrible words etched their way through his brain. Togami had accused Kirigiri of working for the mastermind — not as one of several possibilities under discussion while they’d tried to figure out what was going on, but as the final conclusion that he genuinely believed to be true. And he didn’t just believe it — he’d said it to her face.

Naegi’s free hand coiled tight around the edge of the podium, but he barely noticed the sharp pain it sent through his white-knuckled fingers. Saying something like that to Kirigiri… no, to any of
the students, when the mastermind had been terrorizing all of them... making that kind of accusation in front of everyone without real, solid proof...

“You’ve got that wrong!”

The words burst out of Naegi’s mouth before he could think about the implications, as automatically as if this were any other trial —

Except that this time, nothing happened. The echoes of his shout died away, leaving only empty silence behind as if he’d never spoken. Even with this new accusation, Kirigiri still seemed determined to ignore everyone else as irrelevant, and Togami refused to look away from her to see what anyone else might say.

Naegi scowled at the pair of them as they began to argue again, frustration a pulsing ache at his temples. Why were they being so stubborn, acting as if this trial only concerned the two of them? That wasn’t right, and he didn’t think it would lead them to the truth. He couldn’t let them go on like this — he had to do something.

Twisting so that he could balance against the podium with his left side, Naegi quickly slid his good hand into his right pocket. It was an awkward angle, especially since he couldn’t twist much without jarring the sling on his left hand, and he couldn’t quite get a grip on anything. Only his e-handbook was big enough for him to grab, and as he pulled it out it sent his room key and a folded paper tumbling to the floor. He ignored them, turning back towards the circle... and before he could think the better of it, he hurled the handbook in Togami’s direction.
Naegi had been aiming for the podium in front of Togami when he threw the handbook, but even fully awake and uninjured, his aim had never been great. Instead of bouncing harmlessly off the wooden podium, his handbook smacked directly into the heir’s shoulder with a *thwack* that made Naegi wince.

Togami spun immediately, a sharp alertness crackling from every line of his body as he scanned the area for the source of his attack. But when his gaze fell on Naegi, the tension evaporated away, leaving only confusion behind.

Before the other boy could say anything — or worse, decide to look back at Kirigiri — Naegi leaned forward. “I said *that’s wrong!* You and Kirigiri both need to stop talking this way!”

Togami rolled his eyes, huffing out a sigh that struck Naegi as a little too superior, even for him. “I know this must be difficult for you to hear —”

“Do you think that’s the only problem?” Naegi interrupted, eyes narrowing as anger began to fizz along his skin. “I’m not upset because you’re talking about what might have happened — it’s the way you’re talking about it!”

“We’ve been debating what happened,” Togami said, crossing his arms tightly, as if to defend himself. “That’s the entire point of these trials, if you recall.”

“Not like this.” Naegi had to concentrate to keep his words slow enough for the other boy to understand instead of blurring them out in a passionate rush, but the intense effort worsened the dull throbbing at his temples. “The two of you are acting like you’ve both already made up your minds, and you’re ignoring all the rest of us. That’s not right, not when the outcome of the trial will affect all of us, too. You can’t just decide all the answers on your own — you have to include all our friends in it, too.”

“Stop calling them that!” Togami snapped, his eyes flashing. “You’re only making this harder on yourself when you insist on thinking of everyone here as *friends!* You have to accept that wanting to believe the best of everyone can’t make it true!”

“*I won’t!*” Even knowing that Togami wouldn’t hear the volume, Naegi couldn’t hold back the angry shout. In fact, he didn’t want to — not after listening to Togami and Kirigiri snipe at each other for so long with no way to intervene. The frustration and pain at their senseless bickering built up into an unbearable pressure at the back of his throat, one that only screaming could relieve.

Togami started back, eyes widening. Apparently he could understand what was happening even without hearing it — and it didn’t look like he’d expected it. Had he really thought that Naegi would just sit by and listen while two of the people he cared about most tore each other to shreds?

“I won’t,” Naegi repeated, slow and clear so that Togami couldn’t possibly misunderstand his meaning. “I’m never going to stop thinking of all of you as my friends. How can I? How could *any* of us think otherwise, after everything we’ve been through together?” He turned to look around the circle, looking living friend and gray portrait alike in the eye. “We’re all friends, and we can’t ever forget that.”
They all stared back at him… Jill and Ogami, Fujisaki and Celeste, Enoshima and Asahina, the suspects and murderers and victims all tangled together by the same monstrous scheme. They were all connected, both by the life at Hope’s Peak that they’d never been allowed to enjoy and by the horrors they’d undergone during the killing game. If he let himself stop believing in the others — if he gave up on the connections he knew existed between them — that would be like saying their bonds with their fallen friends were meaningless, as well.

“We can’t forget that we’re friends.” As he completed his gaze around the circle, Naegi found himself staring up at Monokuma’s throne, the bear’s red stare burning through him as their eyes met. “We can’t let ourselves forget.”

Red spots flashed in front of his eyes, bloody splatters that turned the whole room to a wound. His vision blurred, and for a moment the world around him twisted into something out of nightmares. He saw buildings collapsing into streets littered with corpses, ruins of houses where loved ones turned on one another under a sky that burned. And above it all, echoing round and round in his head, he heard a wild laugh, a laugh that he recognized, that he could almost remember —

“Naegi?” The alarm in Togami’s voice jolted Naegi back to the trial room, and he looked up to see concern lining the other boy’s face. “Calm down and stop shouting — you’re going to make yourself sick if you aren’t careful!”

“No —” A cough cut short Naegi’s first attempt at an answer, hacking through his lungs as he gulped for breath. He felt as though he’d only just resurfaced into the open air after an eternity of drowning in that bizarre vision, like his lungs had been deprived of clean air so long that they ached. He choked the coughs down as best he could and glared stubbornly back at Togami. “No. I’m not going to calm down until you start listening. You can’t keep leaving the rest of us behind.”

Togami scowled. “I’m not stopping anyone from talking. But you need to understand —”

“Then explain it to all of us,” Naegi insisted. “If you’re right, then — then we’ll have no choice but to see it when you’ve told us what convinced you. But if you’re not right — don’t you want to know before we have to vote on it?”

A tremor ran through Togami’s frown, leaving something a little less unyielding in its place. “As long as you’re willing to believe the truth when you see it.”

Naegi nodded once, then risked breaking eye contact with Togami so he could turn the other way and face Kirigiri. She’d tilted her head to one side as she watched them, stoic mask back in place. He hesitated for a moment as he met her steel-cold eyes, wondering what it was he ought to say to convince her to stop going after Togami so single-mindedly. After all, he couldn’t very well refer to the plan she’d confided in him away from the cameras…

But as he looked at her, a smile twisted one corner of Kirigiri’s lips upward. “You sound very reasonable,” she said at last. “I can hardly argue against listeners staying open to learning the truth.”

Naegi smiled, relief flooding through him at how easily they’d both agreed. Maybe there really could be a way forward from here, if only they could work together to find it.
Junko frowned at the monitor displaying the view through Monokuma’s eyes, tapping one perfect nail lightly on the controls. The mood of the trial room had shifted a little, and not in one of the directions she’d expected when she’d set this plan into motion. Sure, there had been a few minor changes along the way, a couple details that hadn’t been part of the original plan… but even if the path got a little twisted, she’d known the destination was still going to be the same.

Except… was it? She slid her favorite glasses onto the tip of her nose… and as she peered through them, the world realigned itself in a colder light. She could see clever, clever Kirigiri, struggling to defend herself against the relentless pressure of the trap closing in around her, and poor deafened Togami, dependent on the other students’ kindness to participate in the trial even as he attacked them. And between them…

In the arc of the circle directly opposite from Monokuma’s throne, Makoto Naegi stared up at her with the eyes of a boy who had seen despair.

Junko leaned forward, looking past the cameras and lenses to meet the eyes of her darling friend. For a moment it was like there was nothing between them, like he’d looked beyond the games and the trials and the lies to see her where she stood above them all. It was as though…

As though he knew her.

The trial shifted, moving onward towards its ending point, but Junko hardly bothered listening to the individual words her friends spoke amongst themselves. Through it all, her eyes stayed locked on Naegi, watching the hope that bubbled up to mingle with the echo of despair in his eyes. It was so close to perfect, just one little push away from something beautiful… but it wasn’t what she’d meant to happen. Something had changed, and it wasn’t what she’d wanted. And it was starting to get dangerous.

Junko grinned and blew Naegi a kiss through the cameras. How nice of her friend to remember that she liked high stakes games the best!

Chapter End Notes

Apologies to those of you who commented on the last chapter, but I’m not up to responding at the moment. I should be back to normal by Sunday!
Naegi looked from Togami to Kirigiri, trying to ignore the throbbing ache the movement sent through the base of his skull. Whatever strange hallucination he’d had a few moments ago had left his head pounding again, worse than any of the other times it had hurt — but what was a little pain against the possibility that his boyfriend and best friend might finally be willing to make peace?

Even with the opportunity to return to their cutthroat argument, the pair just watched Naegi instead, reigniting a spark of hope in his heart. And even though Kirigiri’s eyes still reflected nothing more than her emotionless walls and Togami looked like he was taking a mental inventory of Naegi’s wellbeing, at least they weren’t glaring daggers at each other anymore. This might be only the first step, but they could build on it — Naegi believed that wholeheartedly.

“Oh, okay,” he said before the fragile moment of truce could end, making sure to position his head so that Togami could read his lips. “I know you both have your own ideas about how things could have happened… but right now, we don’t know for sure what’s right. I think we need to go back to the parts we can be sure about, and work from those. If —” he gulped. “If one of you really is right, then the facts will make that clear.”

“But are there truly still facts that we’ve left unexamined?” Ogami asked, frowning deeply. “I do appreciate your insistence that we should all be involved in this decision, Naegi, but… I must admit I do not see anything that would shed a new light on the situation.”

Naegi shook his head gingerly, trying to avoid another wave of pain. “No — there’s still something. We haven’t figured out what happened yet, not for sure, so there has to be something we missed.” But as he racked his brain, reviewing the different pieces of evidence they’d talked to pieces already, he wasn’t sure what that could be.

“Hey, don’t go counting everyone out before time’s been called!” Jill said, and something in her tone sounded falsely bright instead of her usual genuine cheerfulness. “I’ve got a question that needs answering, if none of you are gonna bother asking it!”

Naegi blinked at her, wondering what she thought they’d missed. But… as he thought it over… there was really only one question that Jill would care so much about. “You mean — who locked you up?”

“Ding ding ding — give the boy a prize!” Jill sang out, but none of the playfulness reached her eyes. “But no point in aiming low, Big Mac — let’s go for double or nothing!” She shot forward, pointing her razor-sharp scissors straight at his heart. “I want their name.

Naegi had the sudden, horrible suspicion that getting Jill the answer she wanted wouldn’t be the safest course. In the midst of a trial, the others might react to accusations differently… but none of them had weapons primed and ready to go. And after Jill had flung two pairs of scissors at him in the garden, when he and Kirigiri had found her slicing open her own skin, Naegi knew all too well just how effective they were as throwing weapons. He didn’t think even the genocider would aim seriously, not right here in front of Monokuma… but she didn’t have the expression of someone willing to stay her hand.

But even if he had qualms about making suggestions, it didn’t seem like the other students shared them.

“Obviously there are only two possibilities,” Togami said, scowling at Jill like he was annoyed to
have to explain something so simple. Naegi expected the heir to spin in his direction and demand that he be the one to finish the answer — but instead, Togami only shot him a brief glance before carrying on with his own conclusions. “The only people with a motive for getting another student out of the way would be the ones who were creeping around the school for some nefarious purpose — the one who committed a murder and the one who only intended to do so.”

“Wait — you mean you think that Ikusaba could have done it?” Naegi frowned, trying to follow Togami’s logic. “So you’re saying that Jill was locked up before Ikusaba got killed?”

“She must have been,” Togami said. “I last saw her when I went downstairs to see you, around the nighttime announcement — before Ikusaba drugged Ogami and stole the knife.”

“But maybe while she was planning to do it,” Naegi said, nodding. “She would’ve had to sneak from the fourth floor down to the first — and she probably didn’t dare let anyone catch her. I mean, as far as we knew, she wasn’t even supposed to be in the school! Even with the mask hiding her face, it still would’ve given away that there was another person in the school.”

“Sure it would — if I’d caught her at it,” Jill said, tossing her braids. “And yeah, a girl’s gotta keep her eyes open for any cuties that might wander by — but the super soldier isn’t the type to ping my radar. She could’ve waited a few more seconds for me to get back in the library and she’d’ve been free to pass go and collect her winnings!”

“But that might have been an unacceptable risk,” Ogami said, frowning. “The stairs going up to the third floor are right beside the library, are they not? If she had exited the stairwell only to hear someone nearby, taking offensive measures would have been a better way to remain undiscovered than gambling that Jill wouldn’t notice her.”

“No… I don’t think that can be right,” Naegi said, starting to shake his head before remembering that it would prevent Togami from understanding his words. “I’m pretty sure there’s a corner between the stairwell and either the library or bathroom doors. She would have had plenty of time to retreat if that was the only reason.”

“Are you certain?” Ogami asked, forehead creasing. “I do not mean to cause an argument, but I have noticed that Jill is able to move far more rapidly than —” She cut herself short, glancing briefly in Jill’s direction with concern. “Well, that aside, she habitually moves swiftly enough to outrun someone not prepared for it. I doubt that Ikusaba would have had the opportunity to hide if a location did not immediately present itself.”

Naegi frowned, doing his best to picture the stairway entrance on the second floor. He was pretty sure something wasn’t right with what Ogami was saying… but when he tried to envision a specific place in the school, a jolt of pain stabbed him right between the eyes. His vision wavered, and for a moment the dingy gray of the trial room turned to a brighter, rawer red as the stairs of Hope’s Peak Academy flashed before his eyes. Blood streamed down the steps, washing over hands and faces and other scattered limbs that weren’t — oh god — weren’t attached —

No. No. It wasn’t real, he knew it wasn’t real. Naegi swallowed hard, forcing back the thick, sour nausea that clogged his throat. He was just tired, that was all. Maybe Togami and Ogami had been right when they said he shouldn’t exert himself this much. These horrible visions were probably just his subconsciousness’s way of telling him that he’d reached his last dregs of energy.

“—not listening! Something isn’t —”

As Naegi did his best to slow his breathing to something less frantic, a voice made its way through the agony pounding through his head.
Even drowning in pain and confusion, the unmistakable fear in Togami’s voice would have cut through to stab Naegi’s heart. Naegi clenched his teeth and forced himself to lift his head from where it had slumped down to his chest. It felt as though he had to fight against the force of a thousand anchors dragging him down to do so… but finally, he managed to straighten enough to meet Togami’s horrified eyes.

“What the hell just happened to you?” Togami snarled, looking like he was mere seconds away from leaving his podium and heading to Naegi’s side, rules be damned. “You — you just stopped moving — I thought —” He shut his mouth with a sharp click, lips pressing together till they turned white as he held back whatever he’d meant to say.

“Sorry.” At the sound of his own wisp of a voice, barely audible even to his own ears, Naegi couldn’t help but feel a little grateful that Togami couldn’t hear him try to speak. “I guess I’m just tired.”

“Huh? Is that the problem?” Monokuma’s voice rang through the trial room, unsettlingly cheery as ever — but this time, Naegi thought for a moment that he could hear something else when the bear spoke. It was almost like hearing double, another voice speaking in perfect time with the robot’s words. Was it some kind of audio glitch? “Are you sure?”

Kirigiri looked up at Monokuma, eyes narrowed. “Are you suggesting that there is some other cause?”

“Well, as you know, the best headmasters always fall into the ‘strict but secretly kind’ character type,” Monokuma said, tiling his head like he was saying something genuinely deep. “So if I’m going to fit the mold, I have to take the worst possibilities into account and make sure none of you are trying to get away with something terrible!” His paws flew to his mouth in shock. “What if cute little Naegi is just trying to avoid the end-of-term exams by pretending to be sick?”

“You’re accusing him of faking?” Ogami demanded, appalled. “He’s obviously unwell!”

“Maaaaaaaybe!” Monokuma said. “Or… maybe he just didn’t study!” He threw back his head and laughed, the sound echoing round and round in Naegi’s skull like ricocheting bullets. In spite of his best efforts, Naegi couldn’t help but flinch away from the noise.

Kirigiri crossed her arms. “If you have a point, make it.”

“Aww… I guess someone isn’t any fun!” Monokuma sighed heavily. “I just wanted to remind Naegi that he doesn’t have to worry if he didn’t finish studying. After all, I made sure he had his very own extra special cheat sheet!”
Naegi could see Togami turning towards him for an explanation of what had just happened, as he’d done the other times Monokuma had spoken to them — but this time, he didn’t know how to translate the bear’s nonsensical ramblings for the other boy. Studying? Cheat sheets? Normally he could figure out what Monokuma was going on about if he thought for a moment — but with his head aching badly enough that the world blurred around him, he couldn’t quite muster the concentration to decipher Monokuma’s meaning.

But at least he didn’t seem to be the only one who was confused. Kirigiri narrowed her eyes at Monokuma, one finger tapping rapidly against the elbow of her opposite arm. “What are you talking about?”

“And this time, behind the unnervingly cute sound they’d all quickly learned to despise, a second laugh rang in Naegi’s ears, gleeful and cruel. It was a laugh he knew… it was… a girl’s laugh?”

But he didn’t know any girls who laughed like that, did he? No… no, he didn’t, he was sure of it. He could never have forgotten a laugh that scraped across his soul like broken glass. “I’m sorry.”

It was so hard to think now, with pain pulsing through his head like a second heartbeat, battering against the confines of his skull with every breath he took. There was something he needed to do, a question he needed to answer… but what was it? He could barely remember any longer.

At the sound of Kirigiri’s shout, the strange wisps of broken thoughts scattered again, blown too far out of reach to reconnect. Naegi looked up at the girl across the circle, not quite certain if it had really been her who had called his name. Even at her angriest, he’d never heard her raise her voice like that.

But the icy glare she was sending in his direction said that this time, she definitely had. “I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but this is not the time. We’re in the middle of a class trial — and I know you understand how important this is.”

Their conversation in the bathhouse flashed across Naegi’s memory, an anchor of quiet sanity in the midst of the confusion bleeding through the rest of his mind. Kirigiri thought she had a way out of this mess of a trial, if only she could succeed in her gamble to unmask the mastermind — and the only thing she’d asked of him was to trust her. It was such a small request in the face of the risk she’d been willing to take on — he couldn’t let her think that he’d forgotten.

“I know… and I’m sorry.” Naegi did his best to smile in her direction, but his mouth didn’t quite seem to remember the motions. “I’ll try not to get distracted again.”

“You’re not simply distracted!” Ogami burst out, sounding too appalled by his choice of words to wait for Kirigiri to answer. “You’re clearly in need of real medical attention, not the little I can do with my first aid! I thought I saw some symptoms of a head injury earlier, and now —”
“What are you talking about?” Togami’s sharp words cut across the circle, and only when he turned back to face his boyfriend did Naegi realize that Togami wouldn’t have been able to read his lips as he faced Kirigiri. “What the hell is going on over there?”

“Nothing,” Naegi started to say — but as he looked into Togami’s eyes, wide with overpowering fear and helpless fury, the words froze in his throat. He’d seen that look before, burnt black into his heart… except that he hadn’t, he knew he hadn’t…

... stay with me... you have to stay with me... promise you won’t leave me alone...

The words whirled round and round through Naegi’s head, a storm of half-formed pleas raging through his entire trembling body. The black tendrils of unconsciousness began snaking their way through his head, and he could feel himself swaying back and forth as he tried to fight them off. But even though he managed to cling to consciousness, his knees buckled and he slumped forward against the podium, clutching desperately at it with his one working hand.

A mechanical buzz filled Naegi’s ears, but he didn’t realize the sound came from outside his head until it mingled with the sound of Monokuma’s laughter. “Sorry, but no one gets to leave their seat until the final bell rings!”

The words sent a chill down Naegi’s spine, alarming him enough that he forced his eyes up just enough to see what was happening. He couldn’t quite lift his head enough to see the rest of the trial room itself… but the twisted mirrors around the edges of the room gave him enough scattered pieces to put the picture together. The buzzing had been the sound of the hidden machine guns descending from the ceiling… and if the reflections didn’t lie, they were pointed straight at Togami.

Terror flooded through Naegi, a sharp new emotion that dragged his awareness back from the darkness that had been encircling him. They’d all had horrible proof of just how deadly those guns could be when they’d torn through Asahina at the end of the last trial… he couldn’t bear it if they took Togami, too. Not because of his own inability to cope with the strain of his injuries.

“Don’t,” Naegi croaked out desperately, struggling to lift his head enough for Togami to read the words. “Please… please don’t…”

He would have liked to say more, to reassure his worried boyfriend that he really was fine and it was all a big misunderstanding — but even that small effort left him breathless, every gasp of air shuddering in his lungs. As he fought desperately to catch his breath and regain some semblance of equilibrium, he prayed that Togami had understood what he meant. No matter how unwell he felt, that was no reason for the other boy to do anything drastic.

“Is this charade really necessary?”

Naegi blinked at the unexpected sound of Kirigiri’s voice cutting through the air like a blade, sharp and impatient. In the ring of broken mirrors, a dozen twisted reflections of the girl crossed their arms into alien tangles and sent distorted glares in Monokuma’s direction.

“What’s that? You want to start a new game before we finish the first one?” Monokuma asked, black and white spinning madly around the room as he tilted his head. “Well, I guess if you’re that determined, I can play along. Are you going to tell me how many words it is, or do you want to jump right into your act?”

“I’m not the one playing games,” Kirigiri snapped. “I’m trying to have a rational discussion — the thing you brought us here to do. And I’m certain we could all do it much more effectively without
“Aww… you mean you’re not having fun?” Monokuma had the nerve to sound like he was genuinely shocked and dismayed at this discovery. “Well, if that’s the case, I guess I don’t have any choice!” He laughed again, but the bright sound was nearly drowned out by the mechanical whirring overhead. As the reflections of the guns disappeared back into the broken images of the ceiling, Naegi felt as though he could finally breathe again.

But from what he could see, Kirigiri didn’t look relieved at all. She turned away from Monokuma, and an entire row of bulging eyes jeered at him from the mirrors. “Now, I want an answer to my question. What cheat sheet was Monokuma talking about?”

Naegi hadn’t expected to be yanked back into the conversation so suddenly, but he was so used to Kirigiri asking him questions to object. She’d never asked him a question that wasn’t important, after all — he had no reason to think she’d start now. But even so… what had Monokuma been talking about? He felt as though he ought to know… but when he tried to search his memory, white-hot agony blazed through his head.

“Leave him alone!” Togami’s voice snarled through the air. “Can’t you see he’s not up to dealing with whatever idiocy Monokuma’s been spewing?”

“He is,” Kirigiri said, calm to counter the other boy’s fury. “I know he is.”

Knowing that Kirigiri had that kind of faith in him brought a little warmth back into Naegi’s veins… but still, it wasn’t enough to dredge up an answer from the aching depths of his mind. He couldn’t even find the strength to raise his head, not when the slightest motion brought a fresh onslaught of pain.

“Looks like he doesn’t want to play!” The sheer glee in Monokuma’s voice made Naegi’s stomach churn. “Too bad! I guess he’s gonna leave everything up to his sweetiepie to answer instead — after all, he already threw the whole thing his way!”

Kirigiri didn’t answer, but Naegi could see her reflections lifting gloved fingers to press against cracked and broken lips. At least she’d found something to think about in Monokuma’s crazy ramblings, even if Naegi couldn’t decipher them.

“What’s he talking about now?” Togami demanded, frustration barely controlled in his voice. “More stupidity?”

“No — not this time,” Kirigiri said. “Togami, I think you ought to take a look at the e-handbook Naegi threw at you. Monokuma seems to be saying that there’s something unusual about it.”
Naegi tried to fight off the pain pulsing through his head long enough to think about Kirigiri’s words. His handbook, that was what she’d said… there was something odd about his handbook. He had the feeling she was right, that there really was something he ought to remember about his handbook, but his own mind seemed to have turned against him. When he tried to think back further than a few hours, everything seemed to jumble together into a mess of pain and nausea, woven through with the echo of that horrible laugh.

But even if he couldn’t find the answer, he knew he could trust Togami to do it for him. He pried his head up a few more inches, gritting his teeth against his muscles’ screams of agony, until he could look at Togami directly instead of in the distorted reflections of Monokuma’s mirrors.

Togami seemed quite involved in his inspection of the e-handbook Naegi had thrown at him. He held it mere inches from his face, turning it round and round until he’d examined it from every angle. After a long moment of this, he scowled and pulled his own handbook from his pocket, placing the two side by side on the podium in front of him. Whatever he was looking for, he didn’t seem to have found it yet, and the annoyed expression on his face struck Naegi with the odd urge to apologize.

Finally, Togami grimaced and reached out to flip both handbooks on, taking a quick step backwards like he expected some kind of explosion. It seemed a little ridiculous, when they all turned their handbooks on and off several times a day — but then again, Naegi wouldn’t put it past Monokuma to have planted some kind of secret bomb in the handbooks that could only be triggered under certain circumstances.

But if the handbooks really did contain explosives, this didn’t trigger them. Naegi could see the two screens glow to life, an unexpected blaze of brightness after his eyes had adjusted to the trial room’s dimmed lighting. Togami stepped cautiously forward again and peered down at the handbooks, their screens reflecting blue against the lenses of his glasses as he slowly scrolled through the different pages.

Whatever he thought of his inspection, it didn’t show on his face — and with his eyes locked on the handbooks, no one could interrupt him with questions, either. Naegi could only watch the other boy’s eyes track across the handbooks, back and forth in an almost hypnotic movement. He knew he ought to use these precious seconds to think about the trial and try to come up with a solution… but his head hurt so much. He needed to let his mind rest, just for a few moments, while he looked at the one person in this school who’d given him any feeling of safety. It wasn’t real, not with Monokuma grinning out at them from his throne… but with a head full of imagined horrors flickering in front of his eyes, Naegi needed to let himself pretend.

But then Togami froze, eyes narrowing down at Naegi’s handbook, and even the illusion of safety shattered. He leaned forward, fingers tapping away at Naegi’s handbook with a renewed intensity as he pushed his own handbook out of the way. Had he found something? It looked as though he must have… and Naegi was suddenly, horribly sure that there really was something to find. But even so, he couldn’t quite find the courage to probe his memory for answers again, not after the crippling terror and agony that had engulfed him just a few moments ago.

Togami’s scrutiny of the handbook seemed to last an eternity, but it could really have been only a few seconds until he looked up, gaze gravitating straight to Naegi like there was no one else in the room. Naegi managed to keep his head raised enough to meet the other boy’s eyes this time, but even that connection couldn’t dispel the chill seeping into his bones. Whatever Togami had found
in his handbook, it had left him shaken, and Naegi’s stomach twisted itself into knots at the sight of uncertainty on the usually confident heir’s face.

“Naegi…” Togami stopped, glancing back down at the handbook in front of him. He took a deep breath, tightened his jaw, and looked up again, eyes flashing with the same determination he’d had in the earlier trials. “Naegi. Why does your map have icons on it?”

Naegi blinked. Icons… there were icons on his map? The words sounded familiar, like something he ought to know. He let his thoughts drift cautiously towards the black depths of his memory, trying not to let himself get sucked back into another hallucination. His head pounded in protest as he edged back through the last few days, but he clenched his right hand until his nails bit into his skin, focusing on the lesser pain to keep himself anchored. His map… what was it about his map?

“What? Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten all about my super special present!” Monokuma gasped as though his heart had been broken. “And after you were willing to do so much to get it, too!” He threw back his head and laughed with manic delight.

That laughter… Naegi shuddered as it gouged its way into his head, tearing at his fragile attempts to ignore the bear. The map, he needed to think about the map instead, that was the important thing… but as he tried to focus, the two things mingled together, map and laughter intertwining in his head. He couldn’t untangle them, the sound ringing in his ears even after Monokuma had gone silent. They were linked together somewhere in the thorns of his memory, he knew it…

“Are you saying Naegi’s map includes icons that the rest of ours don’t have?” Kirigiri asked from the opposite side of the circle, her voice sharp. “What kind of icons?”

Togami didn’t answer. With his eyes locked on Naegi, he probably didn’t even realize she’d spoken. He was waiting, Naegi realized — giving him the space he needed to remember. The realization eased some of the painful pressure in his head, allowing some of his memories to resurface from the snarling pain. It hurt to think, but he thought maybe… maybe if he just had enough time…

“What is on that map that could qualify as a cheat sheet?” Kirigiri’s words pierced through Naegi’s head, and he lost his tenuous grip on his memories. Why was she still asking questions — couldn’t she see Togami wouldn’t answer?

But as Monokuma’s laughter rang out again, Naegi realized that Togami wasn’t the one she’d been addressing. “Wow, this shocking twist really got you hooked, huh? Well, don’t worry — even if Naegi decides not to share with the class, we’re still gonna see this lesson through.”

Naegi’s stomach lurched as the mirrors all showed hundreds of grotesque eyeballs twisting in his direction. He had to close his eyes against the sight to stop another round of pain and dizziness from erupting through his skull.

“The day after the fourth class trial, your little buddy Naegi made a deal with me to upgrade the map in his e-handbook,” Monokuma announced, his bright voice even louder than usual. “Those adorable little icons I added to the map show him exactly where each of you are every single minute of the day!”

As soon as Monokuma said it, the memory came rushing back. That was right — he’d been trying to distract Monokuma so Kirigiri could sneak off to find the door Ikusaba had unlocked, and the bear had ended up foisting the trip tickets and handbook upgrade on him. He hadn’t really wanted anything from their captor, but he hadn’t been able to figure out how to refuse without putting Kirigiri at risk of being caught.
“That’s… that’s right.” Naegi couldn’t quite muster the strength to open his eyes and face the glare of color and light in the world around him, but he could at least manage to speak clearly enough for Togami to see. “It’s… like Monokuma said. My map… shows where everyone is.”

“Two days ago.” Kirigiri’s words could have been chipped from ice. “You got this two days ago — and never told anyone.”

Naegi frowned. That wasn’t right… was it? “No… I’m sure I said something about it. I must have…”

“Not to me,” she said flatly.

“I’m afraid I don’t recall hearing anything of the sort either,” Ogami added slowly.

“Yeah, ‘fraid not, Makyutie!” Jill chimed in. “A secret weapon like that isn’t the kind of thing a gal could forget!”

“It… it wasn’t a secret,” Naegi protested, wishing desperately for the energy to make the words sound more emphatic. Listening to his own voice, breathy and faltering, even he wasn’t sure it sounded believable. “I wasn’t… hiding anything…”

“The facts appear to say otherwise,” Kirigiri said. “Why reveal this now?”

Monokuma was the one to answer. “Well, I have to make sure you all get a fair trial, don’t I? Isn’t that what you wanted — a fair chance at finding the right answer?”

“And you’re saying that we would have to know about Naegi’s map in order for the trial to be fair?” Kirigiri pressed. “Meaning that as long as Naegi was the only one aware of the truth — it wasn’t fair?”

Monokuma’s only response was laughter, so wild and fierce that Naegi’s knees buckled, and he slumped down until his head rested flat against the top of the podium.

“I see.” Kirigiri’s words hurt to hear, fresh wounds gouging their way into the aching mess of Naegi’s mind. “That certainly explains it.”

And then a crack echoed through the trial room, the sharp sound of a hand slamming down onto the podium.

“No,” Togami said, intensity burning through his words. “He wasn’t the only one who knew about it. I knew. Naegi told me the truth about his maps.”
Chapter 244

Togami didn’t know what had possessed him to lie to the other students circled around him in the trial room. He hadn’t known about it — obviously he would have put such a valuable tool to use if he’d had the faintest inkling it existed — and yet he’d claimed that he did, with as much confidence as he could muster. He didn’t object to lying, when he had good cause and time to plan out a convincing cover story… but he hardly knew enough about the circumstances to maintain this bluff for long. All it would take was one wrong question, and the lie would fall apart.

But even so… what else could he have done? He let his eyes flicker towards Naegi, just for a moment, and the sight of the boy he loved crumpled over a podium flooded his veins with a fresh wave of protective fury. No matter how hard the other trials had been, Naegi had always stayed strong in all the ways that mattered… it was wrong that he should be reduced to this mess of trembling weakness, not even able to lift his head from the top of the podium. And so when Togami had seen those girls turning towards Naegi in this state, circling like sharks with the scent of blood in the water, he’d shielded the fragile boy with a lie before he’d had a chance to think it through.

And as the girls turned back to look at him with varying degrees of surprise and skepticism, he knew just how flimsy a defense it was. Kirigiri crossed her arms, one eyebrow arching high. “For someone who already knew about the map, you certainly took your time inspecting that handbook.”

Togami shrugged. “I didn’t want to reveal it if it wasn’t necessary. It doesn’t hurt to have a few hidden advantages — especially with a murderer on the loose.”

“But keeping a secret like this seems quite dangerous,” Ogami said, studying him as if she were preparing to face him in a one-on-one match. “Surely you must have realized that it would look unfortunate if we learned the two of you concealed it.”

Togami had to struggle to hide his reaction — that statement struck a little too close to his own questions for comfort. Because when he thought about it… why had Naegi kept this map a secret? He could understand not telling the girls about it… but surely Naegi trusted him enough. Didn’t he?

No — he did, of course he did. Togami dismissed the unsettling hint of doubt from his mind. Naegi had seemed genuinely confused to learn that this was the first any of them had heard of the maps — between the shock of his injury and Ikusaba’s murder, it had probably just slipped his mind. That was understandable, even if Togami would have preferred to have gotten the information before Monokuma’s dramatic mid-trial announcement. And really, after everything Naegi had been through in the past few days, it was hardly a shock that he’d started losing track of a few things.

And so he did his best to change his near-flinch at the words into a derisive sneer, curling his lip at Ogami. “Don’t be absurd — obviously we would have told you all once the trial was over and the murderer dealt with. How exactly were we supposed to know that Monokuma would reveal it first?”

“That’s true — he certainly hasn’t done anything like this before.” Kirigiri faced Togami as she spoke — but her eyes had gone back to Naegi. Togami didn’t like the way she watched the unresponsive boy, for all that there was no readable expression on her face. “But he intervened this time… out of fairness. If you really did know about this map the whole time, you should be able to explain what exactly he meant by that.”
Of course she would be the one to zero right in on the question Togami hadn’t quite worked out how to answer yet. He scowled at her for a long moment, buying himself a few extra seconds to think rapidly through the limited options available to him… but he couldn’t put off responding for long without looking suspicious. The only thing left to do was to pick the least unlikely scenario and press grimly on.

“I don’t see why we have to believe Monokuma meant anything by it,” he said, raising his chin imperiously. “He was probably just trying to stir up trouble — and you’re all falling right into his trap.”

“Is that so?” Kirigiri tapped one of her long, gloved fingers against her chin, and Togami was almost sure he could detect a hint of affectation in the gesture. It was as though the girl thought she was mocking something, but didn’t expect anyone else to be clever enough to notice. Well, if that was the case, he’d just have to make her think again. “But it seems to me that we’ve already had more than enough trouble in this trial without his help. And even if that was his sole motivation, why not simply reveal the fact of the map without further explanation? Why cite fairness?”

Togami couldn’t believe that he hadn’t identified Kirigiri as the Ultimate Detective before finding her profile — she was certainly enough of a bloodhound to make it obvious. She’d gotten her teeth into this idea of fairness, as if she believed it had some kind of deeper significance — but Togami couldn’t follow her logic there.

“How should I know why Monokuma says any of his idiocy?” he snapped. “I can’t hear what he’s been babbling about, in case you’ve forgotten. All I know is that this game stopped being fair the moment the mastermind tried to manipulate events by planting a traitor among us. Naegi knew it, too — this game was never meant to be fair, no matter what Monokuma says.”

“No, I don’t think that’s true,” Kirigiri said, looking far calmer than she had any business being. “The rules of the game are in place for a reason, and we’ve seen that even Monokuma follows them. I think it’s very important to the mastermind that the game should be seen to be fair. If you can only win by cheating, by using an advantage not available to the other players… then no one will believe you really won. Monokuma couldn’t let the map be an unfair advantage — because without knowing about it, no one else would have a chance to win.”

Togami gritted his teeth, wishing for the thousandth time that his hearing would recover. Admittedly, most of what Monokuma said was mind-numbingly stupid… but this was one of the rare occasions when there had actually been a few kernels of worth hidden amid the rubbish. How was he going to bluff his way through this without knowing exactly what Monokuma had said to the others about the maps? He could put the gist of it together from what the girls had said in response — but not enough to go toe-to-toe with Kirigiri on the bear’s specific wording. No… his best choice was to try to attack from a different angle that would favor him more.

“It sounds to me like you’re speculating quite a bit about just why you think the map matters,” Togami said, crossing his arms. “Interesting that you’re so sure it supports a theory that points in someone else’s direction. But unfortunately for you, there’s one other option you seem determined to ignore. The map might matter not because the murderer used it, but because they appeared on it.”

Kirigiri raised an eyebrow. “You’re suggesting that the map has a recording function, in addition to showing locations? You think that Monokuma would undermine the entire trial system by giving someone a tool that shows who exactly entered the room with the victim?”

Trust her to make the whole thing sound absurd. Well, he wasn’t about to back down without a fight. “Nothing so extreme. All the map would have had to do was show someone out of place
during the murder — one person who might have been wandering around these halls instead of exploring the dorms.”

“Hmm… yes, I suppose I can see why you might think that would matter.” Kirigiri reached up to tug at her braid, twisting it around her fingers. “But how exactly do you plan to prove that’s the case? I don’t hear Naegi speaking up to say he saw anything of the sort.” She tilted her head. “Or are you going to tell us that you saw it yourself?”

Togami would have dearly loved to do so and show her once and for all — but he certainly wasn’t about to walk straight into whatever trap she’d laid out for him. Lying to protect Naegi was one thing — after all, he knew the boy had been unconscious and too injured to stand at the time of the murder. But accusing someone with a lie, even the girl he knew had to be the killer, was something else entirely, and he had no intention of being that stupid.

“I didn’t have the map with me at the time of the murder,” he said instead. “And Naegi’s in no shape to answer questions about what he saw.”

“Exactly.” Kirigiri smiled, and Togami’s stomach clenched in a sudden burst of nausea. “Which means that the only way the map could possibly be relevant is if it had to do with the murderer. After all, with this powerful an advantage, our culprit would had a much easier time locating and trapping Ikusaba, even with her military training.”

Togami prayed that no evidence of the blow from those words showed on his face — but he was all too afraid it must have. Damn it, she’d managed to drag the debate back to the exact point he’d been trying to avoid!

“It doesn’t matter how much of an advantage you think this might have given a murderer,” he said at last, glaring across the circle. “Naegi and I were the ones who knew about the map — and we’re the two with the least incentive to kill!”

“I understand.” The deep lines creasing Ogami’s face began to relax as she looked from Togami to Naegi. “Neither of you has a motive, not when escaping would mean the other one’s death.”

“Right.” Togami gave her an approving smile, relieved that at least one person was finally beginning to grasp the truth. “The map doesn’t matter when we had no reason to use it.”

But then a flash of silver drew Togami’s gaze in Jill’s direction, where she twirled her scissors in one hand while the other rested on her hip. “Sorry to be the cold shower to your sizzle, darling, but I’m not so sure about that last part.”

Togami stared at the genocider in shock — had she actually just contradicted him? “Excuse me?”

“Don’t get me wrong, White Knight, most cases I’d be more than happy to let you show me what’s what!” Jill grinned at him, but there was a darkness gleaming in her eyes that he didn’t like at all. “But I’m not about to let you put my life on the line if you don’t really mean it.” She lunged forward, scissors pointing directly at Togami’s heart. “You did have a motive to kill — five feet and three inches of one!”
Chapter 245

At first, Togami didn’t understand what the genocider was trying to say. What kind of motive could be measured in length? She spoke so quickly even now, when everyone had deliberately slowed their words for him to read — the meaning must have gotten garbled somehow, obscured by one of her inane attempts at humor.

Except… something about the numbers struck a chord in his head, as though they ought to mean something to him. Five feet and three inches… it sounded like a measurement of some kind, or…

Or a height.

His eyes shot over to Naegi. He couldn’t judge the boy’s height with any certainty while he lay bent over the podium, but it did sound about right, considering how small the other boy was compared to him. Even if Jill had pulled the number out of thin air, it made all too much sense that she would have used it as a roundabout way of referring to Naegi.

Except that it didn’t make any sense at all.

Togami glared at Jill, eyebrows snapping together so sharply that he felt a sharp twinge through the center of his forehead. “Have you lost what sliver of sanity you had left? How could Naegi possibly be a motive for me to commit a murder? Even if I killed someone and got away with it — then he’d —”

He couldn’t bring himself to speak the words, his jaw snapping shut in spite of himself. The thought of condemning his boyfriend to die because he’d callously chosen to escape sent a wave of nausea rippling up from his gut. No… no, he’d known from the first night he’d spent in Naegi’s bed that becoming the blackened had ceased to be an option. Even if it meant a lifetime searching for another way to escape the mastermind’s trap, there was no way that he could let Naegi die.

But Jill didn’t look at all convinced, tapping her scissors against her palm. “Believe me, darling, I get where you’re coming from — and sure, any other time I’d be more than happy to get right behind you, all up close and personal! But the whole reason you wanna keep your hands clean is so you can keep your cutie safe and sound, right?” She heaved a sigh, tossing her braids back over her shoulder. “Well, not like I wanna remind you about it or anything — but he’s definitely not either of those things.”

“No thanks to you,” Togami pointed out darkly. If she thought he’d forgiven her role in Naegi’s injuries just because he’d allowed her to assist him in the more overpowering events that had followed, she was very badly mistaken. “But as much as I want to see Naegi well again, killing someone and beginning another trial would hardly be likely to achieve that. It may come as a shock to you, but murder doesn’t actually solve every problem.”

“You’d be surprised what a good murder can do!” Jill’s mouth stretched out in what should have been a grin, if it had contained any of her normal brightness. “Especially when you know how to pick your victims. Sure, you didn’t have a reason to try to win the game, not if you wanted a happily ever after with sleeping beauty over there — but you sure as hell had a reason to want to end it.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “Oh, please — we all want to put an end to this game. It’s hardly a unique sentiment.”
“Sure, no one likes it,” Jill said with a one-armed shrug. “But you’re the only one who had a ticking clock. Sure, I know more about letting blood out than keeping it in, but it doesn’t take a medical degree to know your boy needs more than the Ogre’s got to give. You already admitted you’d stay in a place you hate just to keep him safe — so how far would you go if it came right down to it?”

Togami stared at the girl in frustrated confusion, trying to work out exactly what she meant. She was serious about whatever it was she was trying to say — that much was all too clear. The cheerful enthusiasm of her usual demeanor had drained away, leaving only the bare-boned intensity that had always lain beneath it, terrifying and raw. He’d never been entirely sure what the serial killer really thought about anything, or how much or her jabber reflected her true feelings… and now he was starting to regret not putting more effort into trying to understand her.

A fluttering movement on the other side of the circle distracted him from his contemplation, and his head jerked the other way to see Kirigiri waving a notebook through the air. Once she’d caught his gaze, she nodded briskly and returned the book to her pocket. Togami only had a moment for the outraged realization to sink in that she’d been gesturing at him — like some sort of disobedient pet! — before her lips began moving.

“When I told Naegi about my meeting with Ikusaba, he asked if he could share the information with you as well. From everything that we’ve heard since, I think it’s safe to say that he did.” She clenched her fists, staring at him head-on. “So let’s hear it, then — when exactly did Naegi tell you about Mukuro Ikusaba?”

Togami blinked at the question. He’d braced himself for some kind of piercing question — but this hadn’t been the sort he’d expected. He recognized the look of a hunter in Kirigiri’s eye — she meant this question as an attack, that was obvious enough. But it had never been her style to launch unsupported questions out of left field, when the debate was progressing in a different direction. She liked to build on what had gone before, using the words of the other students to trap her victims. He’d certainly seen her do it often enough to the others, taking advantage of Naegi’s reasoning to corner a culprit. Why would she switch her methods now?

She wouldn’t. She hadn’t, not when she was watching him with all the impatience of a quick student waiting for the slower minds to catch up. Togami could have slapped her for it — but after forcing himself to stay awake so long that he could feel his hands tremble with the effort of pushing off his exhaustion, he knew he wasn’t at his best. He had to grasp for thoughts that should have been well within reach, work to connect ideas that normally flowed with ease. She was right to look at him that way, damn her, because for the life of him he couldn’t see the link between her question about Ikusaba and Jill’s claim that Naegi was his motive.

But he knew had to respond somehow, if he wanted to keep the girls from returning to their scrutiny of Naegi. Lying about it would be too much of a risk when he couldn’t work out why she was asking. No, better to play along for now, at least until he understood her plan. He crossed his arms and did his best to look unconcerned. “Naegi told me your story about Ikusaba at the first opportunity he had the next day.”

“Which would be?” Kirigiri prompted.

He glared at her. “When I came down to check on him after his injuries.”

She glanced over at Ogami. “Can you confirm the time?”

Ogami frowned. “Well… yes, it was a little before ten last night. I left them alone while I went to the kitchen, and the nighttime announcement sounded just as I returned.”
“I see,” Kirigiri said, tapping her finger against her chin. “So you and Naegi had a nice long chat about our murder victim. And since he was apparently feeling chatty, can we assume this was when he told you about the map, too?”

Togami had the distinct sensation of a trap being laid. She wanted him to elaborate on the lie, exposing holes that she could attack. Well, he wasn’t going to give her the chance. “Think what you want — you will anyway.”

She smiled. “At least we agree on one point. So it seems that Naegi told you all about Ikusaba and his shiny new map — and he did it before Ikusaba was killed.”

Was that all she was getting at? It wasn’t anywhere near as damning as she’d been acting — but Togami didn’t let himself relax just yet. “So he made sure I knew everything he did — hardly extraordinary.”

“Hmm… maybe not.” But in spite of her apparent agreement, Kirigiri didn’t look like she’d given in. On the contrary, her smile widened just a hair. “But on the other hand… tell me, what did you think when Naegi told about what I was doing? Did you accept the story as he explained it?” She leaned forward. “Or did you suspect that Mukuro Ikusaba was the mastermind behind this game?”
Chapter 246

Had he thought Ikusaba might be the mastermind? At Kirigiri’s question, Togami’s thoughts flashed back to the previous night, when he’d wondered about that very thing. He hadn’t mentioned the theory to Naegi until much later, since at the time there hadn’t seemed to be much point. It had sounded like Kirigiri was already in the midst of whatever trap had been set for her, and he hadn’t wanted to upset Naegi by speculating on the fate of his supposed friend while the injured boy should have been focusing on his recovery.

But once they’d found the dead body, the situation had changed. He’d needed Naegi to understand the full range of possibilities they might be facing — including the idea that Ikusaba might have been the one behind it all. Even after they’d discovered that the corpse almost certainly belonged to her, he hadn’t fully abandoned the thought that she still could have been their captor — not until Monokuma had resurfaced from his long absence. With the bear back in action, throwing them into another trial as gleefully as if he’d never disappeared, it had become painfully obvious that Ikusaba couldn’t have been the real mastermind.

But even so, that didn’t change the fact that Kirigiri was right — he’d suspected it. And with that connection spelled out, he was started to get a very bad feeling about where she intended to take this accusation. He didn’t dare confirm the truth for her, not with the jaws of her trap prickling tight around him — but before he could come up with a way to dodge, her smile shifted to a satisfied smirk.

“I think we all know exactly what you would have thought,” Kirigiri said, her head never turning away from him for an instant even as her eyes flicked from Jill to Ogami. “Don’t bother trying to deny it — not after spending so much time proving to us just how very clever you are. There’s no way you could have missed such an obvious conclusion.”

Togami recognized the ploy for what it was — after she’d said that he must have recognized the possibility, claiming that he hadn’t would be a serious blow to the image of perfection he worked hard to project. She didn’t believe he’d be able to do it — and even if he proved her wrong, she’d set up the dialogue so that the other girls wouldn’t put any stock in his words. He’d played this kind of game with opponents before, but he’d never expected to find himself on the wrong side of it.

“Wait… I’m not sure I understand.” Next to Kirigiri, Ogami raised a hand to draw attention to herself, giving the bizarre impression that she was asking permission to address a classroom. “Why would it matter if it looked like Ikusaba might be the mastermind? She’s dead now, so it can’t be true.”

“The point isn’t whether or not she really was,” Kirigiri said calmly. “The point is whether Togami had reason to believe she was, at a point before the events of her murder took place. Keep in mind that this conversation happened while Naegi was recovering in Togami’s room, in the time before you were knocked unconscious — and since we’ve determined that Ikusaba was the one who did so, she must have still been alive at the time.”

“Alive and making plenty of trouble,” Jill added, red eyes flashing dangerously. “Sneaking around and shoving innocent young maidens into creepy hidden rooms!”

“Yes, that’s true,” Kirigiri said, picking up from the genocider’s train of thought as smoothly as if her mind aligned perfectly with the other murderer’s. “Ikusaba would have been out wandering the halls at the very time that Naegi was explaining all of this to Togami — and with the map showing
“Everyone’s location, it would have appeared as though the mastermind herself had emerged to walk around the school while the rest of us were busy elsewhere.”

“None of it happened that way,” Togami snapped, hoping that a flat contradiction might derail the girls. “I never saw Ikusaba appear on the map. I doubt it would even have shown her, anyway — why would the mastermind give any of us a tool that could reveal the existence of their hidden agent?”

“Because Ikusaba was a player in the game,” Kirigiri countered, crossing her arms. “If the map shows the locations of all the students, then it would have had to include her as well — isn’t that right, Monokuma?” She glanced up towards the bear with a raised eyebrow.

Togami didn’t trust the manipulative girl to report Monokuma’s words with any accuracy. As soon as the bear ceased the contortions that went along with his words, Togami looked in Ogami’s direction and demanded, “Well?”

Ogami blinked in surprise at his query, but after a moment she responded. “Monokuma informed us that the map shows the locations of all living students in the game who are in areas covered by the security cameras.”

Which meant that Ikusaba would have appeared on the map, at least until she’d succumbed to the poison. Well, that was no reason to back down. Togami scowled and repeated, “I don’t care what that bear says — I never saw Ikusaba on the map.”

“But sadly, you can’t prove it.” In spite of her words, Kirigiri didn’t look sad about it in the slightest. “And why should we believe you when you have every reason to lie?”

“And I gotta say, darling, it’s not like you’ve gotta be embarrassed about it or anything!” Jill clasped her hands to her chest as her mouth twisted into a facsimile of an adoring grin. “It was a pretty solid plan for something you made up on the fly. No one but my White Knight could’ve pulled this one off!”

“Except that he didn’t — not quite,” Kirigiri pointed out. “You can’t give him credit for killing the mastermind when he only took out one of their agents.”

“I didn’t kill anyone!” Togami snarled.

“I wish I could believe you, baby,” Jill said, heaving a sigh. “I really do.”

“Then why do you continue to doubt him?” Ogami asked, looking genuinely baffled. “Even if he believed that he had identified the mastermind, why would Togami of all people act so impulsively as to murder her without thinking the plan through?”

“Because based on Naegi’s behavior, he seems to need serious medical attention soon,” Kirigiri said, before Jill could jump in with more of her incomprehensible babble. “And he’s certainly not going to get it here. But kill the mastermind and that’s the end of everything — there’s nothing left to stop us from leaving.”

“So that’s it.” Ogami looked over in Naegi’s direction, taking in his deteriorating condition… and to Togami’s horror, he saw the first stirrings of doubt creeping across her face as she finally looked back to the rest of the circle. “I suppose that isn’t an unreasonable motive. We even discussed the limitations of the school’s medical supplies at one point. I can understand why he might have seized an opportunity to get Naegi out of here… even if it meant that he had to kill the mastermind to do it.”
“So are we done playing catch up for the slowpokes?” Jill demanded, spinning a pair of scissors in a flashing whirl that came dangerously close to her own cheek. “Cause I think we can all see how this must’ve gone down.”

“If you think so, then you’re all out of your minds!” Togami raised his voice so loudly that he could hear the glimmers of it through the emptiness filling his ears. “This entire scenario is nothing but a patchwork of guesses and what-ifs, without a shred of proof to back it up! Are you really going to disregard all the evidence pointing in her direction just because of an unsubstantiated theory?” He gestured across the circle at Kirigiri, who ignored his jabbing finger with her most irritatingly impassive expression.

“No — you’re right,” Ogami said, shaking her head sharply. “This might have happened, but without more proof, we can’t say for certain. And even if it did — even if Togami did mistakenly kill another student instead of the mastermind — I can’t believe that we would be debating it in this manner. If you’re all right, that would mean he’s been working to hide his guilt so he can win the trial and survive… and condemn the rest of us to death.” She shook her head again, more slowly this time. “I don’t believe he’s capable of doing such a thing to Naegi.”
Togami’s eyes widened at Ogami’s unexpected display of confidence in him. He’d noticed that she seemed to understand more about his feelings for Naegi than the others… but did she really believe that he’d sacrifice his own life for the other boy? He’d fight to save the boy he loved, obviously, but her words had implied something altogether different. If he’d really found himself in such a hopeless situation, faced with a choice between Naegi’s death or his own… what would he do?

No… that was a pointless train of thought, full of nothing but useless pain. He hadn’t killed Ikusaba, so he didn’t have to make that kind of soul-destroying decision. The choice couldn’t possibly matter, and he did his best to shove it from his head and focus on the ongoing trial.

Looking back at the circle, Togami saw that whatever Ogami thought about the situation, Jill clearly disagreed. She’d flung her head back in what seemed to be laughter, although she didn’t look like she was actually amused. A grin still warped her mouth as she looked back at the rest of them, making her words even harder to read than usual. “You think my White Knight would actually go that far? You think he’d die for his boytoy? Please — no way he’d throw himself away for good on a high school sweetheart!”

Ogami shrugged. “Perhaps not — but even if he chose to act as you say, I don’t believe that he would be able to conceal his unhappiness from the rest of us. And besides, if this truly was his plan, surely he would have enacted it in such a way that he didn’t end up deafening himself.”

“Assuming that he’s telling the truth on that score,” Kirigiri said, raising an eyebrow at Togami.

He sneered back. “Oh, yes, because there have been dozens of conversations that I could have spied on among the rest of you by pretending to be unable to hear — is that what you’re implying? Don’t be absurd. The only thing I’ve gotten from that bomb is a great deal of inconvenience.”

Kirigiri just shrugged a single shoulder, like she couldn’t even be bothered to complete the gesture. “There might be other reasons for subterfuge — convincing us you didn’t know about the bomb, for instance.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t see how that would make sense,” Ogami said, looking uncomfortable at directly contradicting Kirigiri. “How could he have set up a bomb in the first place? Someone allied with the mastermind might have had access to such things, but as for the rest of us — we’ve never found anything of the sort elsewhere in the school.”

Kirigiri looked as if she intended to respond, but just as she opened her mouth, a flash of silver drew Togami’s attention back to Jill. The genocider had lunged forward, pointing her scissors at Ogami — and facing her in profile, Togami couldn’t quite make out the words flying across her lips. He thought he could see the word wrong woven in and out of her chatter, but beyond that she might as well have been spouting complete gibberish.

When she’d finally finished whatever she’d been going on about, Ogami shook her head slowly. “No — I didn’t see anything of the sort.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her. “What are you talking about?”

Ogami seemed confused — but to his irritation, Kirigiri grasped the problem immediately. “Jill says that there was actually a bomb available for any of us to use,” the obnoxious detective informed him. “Apparently you yourself managed to unearth one during your dissection of a
deactivated Monokuma robot — a fact that somehow never made it into your account of your investigation.”

The bomb — Togami remembered his first glimpse of it all too clearly, tangled in the robot’s mechanical innards. He’d hardly dared to breathe wrong until he’d ascertained that it wasn’t active. But even if the bomb had been available… he shook his head. “No — I left it in the library. As far as I know, it’s still there.”

Ogami gave him an unhappy frown. “Well — that’s what I was saying. I’m afraid that it isn’t. I checked the library just before the trial began, and I didn’t see anything of the sort.”

Togami tightened his lips, cursing his inattention. With both a bomb and an explosion appearing in the school within mere hours of each other, he should have spotted the connection far sooner. Claiming that the bomb was still in the library when even the closest thing he had to an ally in this debate said it couldn’t be had only made him look worse in the eyes of the other two girls. But how was he supposed to have guessed that the bomb could have disappeared? After all, he knew it had still been there when the tracking device had lured him out to discover the body.

Although now that he considered the matter… it did make sense. The room had still been full of poisoned gas when he’d entered to find the body, but when he and Naegi had returned later, the culprit had used the reagent to clear out the air. That meant they must have been inside the room at some point between his two visits — and considering the amount of time he’d taken investigating the dorms and getting Naegi up the stairs, there would have been more than enough of an opportunity to set up the explosives.

But if that was the case… then he’d missed the perfect chance to unmask Ikusaba. The bomb couldn’t have been in place when he’d first entered the room. If he’d moved just a little faster, he might have been able to remove her mask before the poison had taken effect. If he’d managed to learn the victim’s identity before going downstairs to meet with Naegi… how differently would their investigation have turned out?

Well, it hardly mattered at this point. There was no use wishing events had occurred differently — the important thing now was to deal with the situation he was currently facing. He looked at the girls around the circle with the most unconcerned air he could muster.

“The killer must have taken advantage of my absence to remove the bomb, then. They would have had quite a number of opportunities, since I didn’t have any reason to return to the library once the investigation began.”

“Provided they knew the bomb was there to be taken, of course,” Kirigiri said, tugging idly on the end of her thin braid.

She would notice that. Togami curled his lip in a sneer. “There’s hardly much point in debating what the culprit might or might not have known. You can say they couldn’t have been aware of the bomb, and I can propose a dozen ways they could — but without proof, it’s meaningless.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” A chilly hint of a smile touched Kirigiri’s lips as she spoke, and a shiver of ice slid down the back of Togami’s neck. “Proof is the key point here — solid evidence that could be used to identify a single culprit.”

“Yes, we’re all well aware of that,” Togami snapped. “Why bother bringing it up now?” Suspicion flared, and he narrowed his eyes at her. “Are you suggesting that you’ve been holding back some piece of evidence during the whole trial up that could have made a difference?”
“Of course not,” Kirigiri said calmly. “I’m not the one who’s fond of theatrics. If I’d had a key piece of evidence, I would have brought it up far sooner — and in fact, I did. We began the discussion near the beginning of the trial… but unfortunately, you seemed quite intent on taking the conversation down a different track.”

The beginning of the trial? Togami frowned, casting his mind back through the various elements of the murder they’d discussed. They’d talked their way through all of it, as far as he could recall, hammering point after point into the ground with no definitive culprit to show for their efforts. The timing, their alibis, the knife, the poison —

The poison… that should have been safe behind a locked door.

Togami met Kirigiri’s gaze, both their eyes grim. “You mean the poison, don’t you? We never discussed how the killer got the poison out of the dojo locker after the three of us burned the key.”

“Of course,” Kirigiri said. “If Ikusaba really did die from the poison, then that’s quite a critical point, wouldn’t you say? Although now that I think about it… you did insist on carrying the key yourself, didn’t you? And you made such a point of rushing ahead to the trash room a few paces before Naegi and me.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “And so I must have swapped the key out? Where exactly would I have gotten another dojo key to burn? Don’t forget, you’d only just told us about your murder plan — it’s not as though I could have prepared anything ahead of time.”

“Hmm… well, maybe not.” She twisted her braid round and round her fingers in an almost hypnotic whirl. “But it’s not as though someone could have broken into the locker to get the poison out — not with the rule about locked doors. Or are you suggesting that it might not apply to a locker?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Togami shot back. “Who in their right mind would assume a locker doesn’t count under that rule? But it doesn’t matter — the culprit didn’t need to wonder about breaking the rules.” He crossed his arms with a smirk. “Naegi and I discovered during our investigation that the dojo lockers have a second, hidden keyhole. The poison was never truly secure in the first place.”

“Is that so?” Kirigiri’s eyes widened — but something about her expression struck a nerve somewhere in the exhausted recesses of Togami’s mind. It wasn’t deception, not exactly — he knew he could have identified that easily enough. This was something else, something more complicated… something he hadn’t expected. But a blink of the eye later, and whatever it was had gone, leaving only an iron-cold mask behind. “Well, then, if that’s what you found —”

She stopped short, eyes shooting to her right. At her side, Ogami went pale, mouth moving too fast for Togami to read any words from it — not that he needed to. Not when both girls were looking in the same direction.

He felt as though he had to fight against the inexorable pull of the tide as he forced his head to turn. Centuries could have passed in the fraction of a second it took for him to turn his head and see what had happened… but as soon as he saw, he would have given anything to wipe it from his memory.

Naegi had collapsed to the ground behind his podium, crumpled on his knees with his good arm shielding his head from the floor.
Chapter 248

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Twin lightning bolts of pain exploded up through Naegi’s body when as his knees slammed down against the ground. He just barely managed to raise his right arm to protect his head as he pitched forward, saving himself from cracking his skull on the hard stone floor or the heavy wooden podium — but it was too much, too fast, more movement than his injured arm could bear. Knives of white-hot agony jolted their way up his arm from wrist to shoulder, and only the fact that the fall had knocked him breathless kept him from screaming.

He could hear noise in the trial room around him, voices blurring together in floods of words that he didn’t have the energy to decipher at the moment. The others would be worried, wouldn’t they? He wished he could move a little, just enough to reassure them… but his muscles wailed in tortured protest against the attempt. Maybe if he hadn’t pushed himself so hard, if he hadn’t spent so much of his strength on the investigation and trial already, then he might have been able to fight his way back upright… but as things stood, it was no longer an option.

But if that was true… if he really couldn’t participate in the trial any longer… then who would be left to stop Togami and Kirigiri from tearing each other apart again? Even when he’d fallen forward on the podium, too much pain throbbing behind his eyes to dare risk lifting his head — even then, he’d still been able to hear the horrible words fired back and forth across the circle. He’d heard all the accusations, all the doubts… and all the lies.

Togami had lied for him.

At first, Naegi hadn’t realized what was happening, his memory muddled enough that he couldn’t remember what he had or hadn’t said to anyone. As far as he knew, it was completely possible that he had told Togami about his upgraded map. It made so much sense that he would have, didn’t it? He had no reason to keep secrets from Togami, especially not when it was something so important. He must have told…

Except that he could hear the lies in Togami’s voice. Naegi recognized how the heir sounded when he lied, when he put on a mask of false sincerity and tried to spin the world around his wishes. He didn’t know how he knew, why he knew, but there wasn’t a shred of doubt in his mind. Togami was lying about the map…

And the only reason he would have done so was to protect Naegi from the girls’ suspicions. All the doubt and fear they would have turned on him had been redirected towards Togami, until even Genocide Jill had been willing to believe that her beloved White Knight had committed a murder. Naegi couldn’t understand how she could believe that Togami would kill because he cared about Naegi — even the thought of the other boy doing something so terrible for his sake made him ill.

But… even so… Togami had lied for him. And it had brought the trial back to a moment when he and Kirigiri were once again preparing to go in for their final strikes. Bad enough that they were going to do such a thing — but Naegi couldn’t let them do it because of a lie that had been told to protect him. He’d tried to intervene, just for a moment, just long enough to stop them… but all he’d managed was to fall on his face. No wonder Togami had thought he needed protection… there was nothing Naegi could do to help his friends, not anymore. The only thing he could do was lie broken on the floor, as useless as the scattered contents of his pockets that littered the ground around him.
Were they continuing the trial without him? His absence wouldn’t make much difference at this point. Naegi strained to hear, trying to push aside the pain whirling through his head long enough to pick out individual words from the voices buzzing through the air above him. It hurt to listen, his mind doing its best to rebel against the effort — but even weak and broken, there was one voice that could still make its way to him.

“— not okay, can’t you idiots see that? Going on with the trial isn’t an option — I’m not going to stand around arguing about who said what while my boyfriend is lying on the floor!”

Hot tears pricked at Naegi’s eyes, dripping down onto his arm. He could hear past the furious attack of Togami’s words to the deep ocean of fear roiling beyond — fear that Naegi had caused. And that was wrong, so wrong, because Togami shouldn’t be afraid — he was clever and confident and strong, he was wonderful, and he should never be consumed by that depth of fear. A sob racked Naegi’s body, jolting painfully through his limbs and leaving him trembling in its wake.

“—find yourself some chill, darling, or you’re gonna lose that cool ice prince charm!” Genocide Jill’s hysteria-tinged laughter stabbed as sharply through his head as if she’d jammed her scissors into his temples. “And hey, maybe it’s not so bad that Sleeping Beauty’s down for the count — he’s probably better off not seeing how this fairy tale plays out.”

“Better off?” Togami’s voice shook as he repeated the words, rage mingling with disbelief in a snarling mess. “He’s injured, he needs medical care — we can’t possibly continue the trial under these circumstances! I refuse to do it!”

No — no, that wasn’t right. Even muddled and adrift in a whirl of pain, Naegi knew that wasn’t what should happen. They couldn’t stop the trial now, not when it would leave them all at each other’s throats, battle lines blazing down the middle of the circle. It was too important to keep going, to find a solution, to make their way through the darkness of the game until they could find a way to the light of hope. They couldn’t stop — he couldn’t let them.

He tried to scramble at the floor with his good hand, fingers barely twitching along the rough surface of the stone. If he could just get some leverage, just enough to try to push himself up, then maybe that would at least show them he was still okay. Then they could continue, finishing the debate that still hung over their heads, threatening them with its lack of resolution.

But try as he might, he couldn’t do more than move his arm a few inches, knocking into the room key and paper he’d dropped earlier when he’d thrown his e-handbook. Although… that had worked, hadn’t it? He’d at least managed to draw attention by throwing something… so maybe he could do it a second time. If he could throw something past the podium that loomed between him and the others, that might be enough to get them back on track. He groped for the key, hooking his fingertip on the edge… but the key barely shifted at all. He could have been trying to knock over a stone pillar for all the effect he had.

The paper, then. Surely he could manage that much. Naegi dragged his hand the long inches over to the folded sheet of paper, sliding it ever so slightly closer to him. The sheen of clammy sweat clinging to his hand seemed to help, giving him just enough extra hold on the paper. Maybe it could work, maybe if he tried his hardest, if he could just lift the paper enough to throw… if he could, then…

Then it would flutter down to the ground in front of his eyes without drawing any attention at all. Any of the tiny, insignificant movements that were within his power to make would be blocked by the podium, invisible to the rest of his friends. Naegi bit his lip hard, trying to swallow back another frustrated sob. He couldn’t let himself give up — there had to be something he could try. Noise, maybe — the girls might hear it, even if Togami couldn’t.
Speaking was out of the question, not when every inhalation of air took so much more effort than it should. Jangling the key might have worked, if he could have moved it enough to make a clatter. But… maybe if he crumpled the paper? It would be quiet, but maybe if he timed it right? Naegi strained his fingers for the paper, where it had fallen open onto the ground in front of him — and froze.

The name *Mukuro Ikusaba* stared back at him from amid the rows and rows of words lining the starkly creased sheet.

Naegi stared at it blankly, hardly comprehending the letters. There was so much written there, words that blurred and spun together in a black web of confusion… but that name burned through his consciousness. What was that name doing on a piece of paper that had been in his pocket? He didn’t think it should be there… should it?

He tried to recall, but the last few days writhed through his mind like plumes of smoke, hiding reality and leaving him nothing to hold onto. He couldn’t remember putting that paper in his pocket… but he couldn’t say for certain he hadn’t done it, either. He’d seen Ikusaba’s name written before, over and over and over, he could see it written tidy in a column with the names of so many other friends who’d died… and he’d seen it in a notebook of profiles, full of information he’d already known.

HADN’T known. He hadn’t known. It had been new, a collection of shocking details about the mastermind’s spy hidden in the school, the girl who’d been murdered by the one person she’d trusted…

Who’d been murdered…

His mind felt full of a thousand shards of glass, tearing him apart with every new thought… and yet, from the jagged tangle of pain, some fragments of clarity were starting to form. He could almost see the shape of it, the blood-soaked nightmare waiting for him beyond the painful memories. Ice filled his stomach, the cold and bitter knowledge that whatever lurked in the depths of that pain he *did not want to know about it*… but there was nothing he could do to prevent it. He knew… he knew…

“Wow, with the way you guys go round and round in circles, it’s like you think you have all the time in the world!”

Monokuma’s gleeful voice knocked the breath out of Naegi, terror flooding through him in wave after wave of breathless horror. He’d thought that the executions had left him miserable and afraid, but that was nothing, *nothing* next to the emotions gripping him now.

“But I’ve counted all the way to one hundred, so too bad — time’s up!”

Fear writhed through Naegi’s being, clawing deep gashes through his heart that would bleed forever — wounds that had already been there, waiting for the right person to say the right words to bring it all rushing back to him. The fear wasn’t new… he recognized it all too well, all the worse for its familiarity. And… he almost, almost, *almost* knew the person who had reminded him about it…

“Ready or not, this class trial is over!”

Chapter End Notes
And there we have it -- the end of the trial! Well, not quite... we still have the voting and aftermath to deal with. And I've been thinking about the best way to handle what's coming up next. I would like to be able to go back to daily posting for the trial follow up chapters... but unfortunately, I wasn't able to write ahead as much as I would need to in order to manage it. So I'm going to take about two weeks off from posting so I can finish up the post-trial chapters. I'm really sorry to leave you all hanging like this - - but I think it will work better this way. Once we really get into the post-trial stuff, you'll be relieved to have less of a wait!

So, the next chapter will be posted on March 30. After that, I'll temporarily go back to daily postings until the voting and follow up chapters are done. See you all then!
Chapter 249

Chapter Notes

And we're back! I hope you're all as excited for the post-trial chapters as I am! I do have one quick update on scheduling, though. I wasn't quite able to finish the entire set of chapters for this arc, unfortunately, so instead of daily posts, I'm going to switch it to every other day. That means the next chapter will be up on Saturday.

“Ready or not, this trial is over.”

Junko leaned back in her chair and watched the shock ripple across her friends’ faces. Oh, they didn’t look happy at all, did they, the poor dears? But really, what else was a girl to do in this situation? She’d been keeping an extra close eye on sweet little Naegi’s expression as pain writhed its way through him, and she could tell his memories had been clawing their way free even faster than she’d calculated. And this wasn’t like the fun they’d been having with the mystery photographs or a playful hint scribbled on a classroom blackboard — this could’ve put a stop to the whole game!

In fact, it still could if she wasn’t careful. Naegi didn’t look up to much more than lying on the ground and whimpering for now, but Kirigiri was just brimming with outrage as she glared up at the enthroned Monokuma. Well, Junko had figured the detective wouldn’t take this lying down.

“What do you mean, the trial’s over?” Kirigiri demanded, her anger bringing her words back to their usual brisk patter. “We aren’t done discussing the murder.”

Junko tsked, shaking her head at the thoughtless girl — between the speed and the way she’d turned her head, Kirigiri had ensured Togami would be unable to follow the conversation.

Well, sucked to be him. But hey, that’s what he got for ruining her ability to talk to him! It just took so much fun out of making bear puns, knowing she wouldn’t get to see Togami’s annoyed reaction. Junko sighed regretfully, shaking her head in the direction of the boy furiously demanding explanations from the others before tuning him out and leaning back towards the microphone.

“I told you — time’s up!” she said, grinning when it only made Kirigiri’s gloved fingers curl into fists at her sides.

“I heard — but you haven’t said why.” Kirigiri’s voice probably sounded perfectly even to the others, but Junko could hear the effort the girl was putting into sounding that way. “We’ve never had a time limit before.”

“Huh? Is that right?” A quick keystroke, and Monokuma tilted his head inquisitively. “But isn’t it natural to assume an exam is due before the bell rings?”

“I’m not going to play into your fantasy that this is still a legitimate school setting,” Kirigiri snapped. “There are no school bells, and whatever you pretend, we all know the stakes are higher than any exam. The rules don’t say anything about a time limit, and it isn’t fair for you to impose one now.”
Fair… Kirigiri sure had seized on that particular concept. Sounded like she’d worked out quite a bit during her little field trip to the second floor dorms — or she thought she had, anyway, which was just as dangerous. Junko drummed her fingers on the console next to the array of buttons, quickly running through her options. A schoolbell sound effect would be a surefire way to annoy the other girl — but no. That wouldn’t be enough. She had to go on the offensive before Kirigiri could.

“Just cause it’s not written down doesn’t mean the time limit isn’t there,” Junko said. “I told you, didn’t I? You’ll be sorry for being late!”

And wow, did that ever have an effect — Kirigiri’s eyes visibly widened and everything! Junko frowned, leaning towards the screen to get a clearer view. Sure, she knew it had been a good jab — but she hadn’t expected it to hit that hard.

“That was what you meant?” If Junko didn’t know better, she would’ve sworn there was a hint of a tremor in Kirigiri’s voice. “When you spoke to me before the trial even began — everything you said — it was leading up to this?”

Junko was getting the distinct feeling that she was missing something — and she didn’t like it at all. Even if she didn’t catch everything important on her cameras, that shouldn’t matter — she knew her friends inside and out, and she’d planned out every twist of this lovely game just for them. There shouldn’t be anything going on that she couldn’t understand.

And if she was right, that really limited the responses she could make. Omniscience was such a delicate image to maintain, after all — she wouldn’t want to let her friends down by destroying it! After an instant’s rapid thought, she tapped the button to send Monokuma into an explosion of his maddest laughter as her lips curled back to bare her teeth, as much a threat as a grin.

And sure enough, as ensnared by fear as she was, Kirigiri took the laughter as confirmation of her worst suspicions. Her face went pale enough that even the other students had to notice — and wow, between the light hair and eyes, was that ever a bad look for her! What, did detectives not believe in wearing foundation? And after she’d gone to all the trouble of making sure the stockroom had the right shades for everyone, too!

“I see… so that’s how things stand.” Kirigiri’s lips went tight and thin, barely parting enough for the words to escape. “I should have known better than to expect someone as underhanded as you to give me a fighting chance.”

Something glimmered in the depths of Kirigiri’s eyes for an instant, not long enough for Junko to understand what she’d seen in full — but it was just warning enough for her to lunge for the gun controls at the same time Kirigiri spun to face the rest of the circle.

“The mastermind’s true identity —”

“Stop talking if you want anyone left to hear you!”

Kirigiri froze, eyes shooting up — to focus on the gun spinning round and round the room in an arc that perfectly matched the line of the circled podiums. She tracked it in a single full circle — and then her mouth snapped shut, eyes closing in defeat.

Junko slumped back against her seat, though she didn’t move her fingers away from the controls. Ugh, that had been too close — she hadn’t realized the little super sleuth had hit that level of suicidal desperation yet. And even worse, she’d had to bludgeon her darling friends into good behavior with the very same weapon she’d used on Asahina. She hated having to repeat herself.
Clearly it was time to get things back under control. She leaned back towards the microphone before anyone else could get any unhelpful ideas.

“No more talking. Everyone, it’s time to cast your votes.”
The deep whirring of the gun spinning above the circle vibrated through Naegi’s ears, a low trembling that shook all the way up through his aching skull. He could feel its presence looming there on the ceiling even if he couldn’t lift his head to see it, a dark reminder that Monokuma’s orders couldn’t be ignored. The sharp, cold threat still hung in the air of the trial room, so uncharacteristically empty of any trace of humor. Of course Monokuma’s laughter was bad, wrong, frightening in a way that he couldn’t bring himself to understand… but not hearing it was hardly more reassuring. It meant something, something important… but he didn’t know what. All he knew was that their opportunity to discuss the murder had been snatched away before they’d reached a conclusion.

But even so, Kirigiri would know what to do. She would, she had to, she always did. Any moment now her voice would ring out through the madness, calm and collected and knowing exactly how to point them in the right direction. Except… it didn’t.

No, that wasn’t right… she’d already spoken, hadn’t she? That was right, he’d heard her voice… but it hadn’t matched the one in his head. Her exact words had slipped away before he could grasp their meaning, but he’d still heard the outrage that left her terrifyingly off balance… and he’d heard the moment it turned to bitter defeat.

She’d had a plan to fight the mastermind. Naegi couldn’t be certain of much now, not with the thorny tangle of his memories still turning careless thoughts into agony… but the promise of that plan lingered. Her voice whispered through his head, asking for his help, asking him to trust her. And he did, of course he did… but he wasn’t sure any longer what it ought to mean.

He knew, he thought he knew, that Kirigiri had meant to take down the mastermind… but he couldn’t remember how. The details had slipped too far out of reach… or maybe he’d never known them at all. But even so, any plan of Kirigiri’s would involve far more than simply blurting out a name a few seconds before the voting began. This wasn’t what she’d wanted. Something had gone wrong during the course of the trial, and she hadn’t been able to put her plan properly into motion…

Or the mastermind had stopped her before she could.

Was that the real reason that Monokuma had suddenly announced a time limit for the trial — to prevent Kirigiri from succeeding in her plan? Then… that had to mean that whatever she’d uncovered was true… and the mastermind would kill all of them rather than let her share it. But that didn’t make sense, did it? Killing all the players would end the game early, before the mastermind had accomplished whatever her real goal was. Could anything make such a drastic step necessary?

The questions kept bubbling through his mind, drifting up into his awareness without conscious thought propelling them. Even when he thought he had an answer, another dozen sprang out of nothingness to take its place, weighing down his head like iron bars. Even resting his forehead against the cold ground couldn’t relieve the relentless pain in his head — it only let the chill seep into his bones, leaching away any trace of warmth. His torn, bloodstained jacket did nothing to protect him from this cold.

A sudden, fierce desire gripped him — to go back to bed, to curl up in a nest of clean blankets and soft pillows, to close his eyes and sleep until the world made sense again. He’d wake up with Togami’s arms around him, in a place where they could both be safe and warm. Nothing would
hurt, not his head or his arm or anything else, and when he whispered good morning, Togami would understand without needing to read the word from his lips.

The dream of that nonexistent morning was almost too beautiful to bear. It didn’t belong here, in this dingy room of bitter accusations and tangled half-truths. He couldn’t let himself dwell on it now, not without sullying the dream with the cruelty of reality. There was no room for wishing in one of the mastermind’s trials — the only thing he could do was keep moving forward in whatever way he could find. No matter how lost and confused he might be, he still knew what he had to do — he had to figure out some way to vote.

And it wasn’t just a mental dilemma, either. Naegi looked up, all the way to the top of the impossibly high podium where he knew the voting buttons would be. He’d have to stand in order to press one of them… and there was no way he could, not when his strength dwindled further away with every passing second. It just wasn’t an option.

But then… did that mean he didn’t have to make the horrible choice after all? If he couldn’t cast his vote, then it didn’t matter what he would have picked. He wouldn’t have to decide, just this once he wouldn’t have to feel a piece of his soul shrivel into ashes, he wouldn’t —

A loud creaking filled the room, the groaning protests of gears forced back into labor after too long standing idle. Naegi gasped, doing what little he could to brace himself as the floor beneath him trembled and shook, jolting through his aching body to turn the almost familiar pain into fresh waves of agony. And his arm — oh god, his arm —

And then it stopped, as unexpectedly as it had begun, and the only sounds left in the ringing silence were his own hissing gasps. At least he hadn’t screamed this time — or he didn’t think he had. His throat didn’t burn as he tried to fill his lungs with air, anyway. That had to be a good sign, didn’t it? It had to mean he was getting better. He couldn’t let himself think any other way.

But what had happened in the rest of the room? What had caused the strange sounds and made the floor shake? A terrible suspicion grew, a cold lump in the back of his throat, as he dredged up the strength to lift his head a long inch off the ground and look around him.

He’d expected what he found… but even so, it was a shock to come face to face with one of the sights he’d seen in nightmares ever since the first of the mastermind’s trials. The voting buttons, the tools he’d had to use to condemn his friends to death over and over again, gleamed only a few inches in front of him. Naegi was unable to stand… so the podium had sunk down into the floor, bringing the buttons to a level he could reach.

Of course the mastermind would do this — Naegi should have realized the instant it had looked like he might be able to escape voting. She would never let any of the students avoid a chance to sink into despair. With the buttons close at hand, he had no excuses… he had to choose a culprit.

But… how was he supposed to do that? Naegi’s eyes drifted over the buttons, flat caricatures of his dead friends staring back at him, reminders of the painful choices he’d already made. But even though the earlier trials had been hard, at least he’d known what he had to do. They’d all managed to uncover the truth, no matter how much it had hurt. This time… they hadn’t. None of the evidence was definitive, none of the theories addressed all the questions, and no one had broken down and admitted their guilt. Those earlier trials seemed almost easy by comparison, when he’d been able to confront a culprit with their crimes and hear them confess in reply.

No. Not easy. There had been nothing easy about watching his friends lose their last shreds of hope for survival.
Naegi forced his eyes away from the accusing faces of the dead, looking instead at the images of the survivors. There were so few of them left now, barely a handful of the students who’d been sealed away at the start… and the actual options were even fewer. Ogami and Jill had both been incapacitated during the course of the murder, so neither of them could have done it. The only options were Togami and Kirigiri… the two people in the school he’d never wanted to choose between.

Because Togami hadn’t done this — Naegi knew that with every fiber of his being, certain as the steady beat of his heart. He couldn’t believe that Togami could have been so caring and kind to him during their investigation if it had all been a ruse to escape. And he’d gone right on protecting Naegi during the trial, even telling a blatant lie so the girls wouldn’t suspect him. The real culprit would have no reason to make himself look guilty like that.

But that left him with Kirigiri… and believing she’d done this was equally impossible. From the start, she’d been more interested in solving the school’s mysteries than playing the killing game — which made sense, now that he knew the truth about her talent. And as the Ultimate Detective, wouldn’t she be smarter about a murder if she really did kill someone? Why would she use parts of a plan that she’d already told two of the other students about, things that could be easily identifiable as hers?

*I can see the trap being set in this trial.*

Kirigiri’s words echoed through his mind, as though he were hearing them anew instead of just remembering them. That was right… she’d thought the mastermind would attack her during the trial. That was why she’d come up with her own plan to go on the offensive, trying to reveal the mastermind’s identity first. But she hadn’t had a chance to put it into motion.

But if this was the mastermind’s trap, Naegi couldn’t understand what it had been meant to do. Things might not look very good for Kirigiri, but it wasn’t as though everyone was against her, either. From the bits and pieces he’d managed to hear of the argument, the remaining students had split nearly evenly, two against two.

Could that have been the trap Kirigiri had meant? Had the mastermind intended to divide them so they’d be unable to reach the true solution? If so… that meant his own vote would be all the more critical. He was going to be the tiebreaker, wasn’t he… the one who chose between the two impossibilities of who could have been behind this murder.

Naegi looked away from the buttons, unable to meet even the two-dimensional eyes of his friends as he considered voting for them… and instead, his eyes fell back on the strange paper bearing Mukuro Ikusaba’s name. It was yet another question about this murder that would remain unsolved due to Monokuma’s new time limit — what was that paper, and how had it ended up in his pocket? He’d never seen it before, he was sure of that… except that it looked familiar, for some reason. He hadn’t seen the paper itself… but he’d seen something like it. But… where? He narrowed his eyes at the paper, trying to force the shaky black lines to hold still and turn into legible writing.

They didn’t, not with his eyes bleary and dry from exhaustion. All he could see was the outline of the writing, the pattern of words filling the paper… almost like it was following a set pattern. It could be a form of some kind…

Or a profile.
Chapter 251

Togami’s breath froze in his lungs when he saw Naegi’s podium begin to move, lowering itself into the floor. The creaks of grinding gears cut through even the empty white noise filling his head, vibrating painfully through the tender inner workings of his ears, but he didn’t flinch away. His eyes never left the Naegi’s place in the circle, scouring the area for some hint about what the mastermind was doing to the injured boy.

Finally, the top of the podium drew level with the floor — and he was able to catch his first glimpse of Naegi since the boy had collapsed. He lay on the ground, still, so very still, and at this distance Togami couldn’t tell if any of the bloodstains on his clothes were fresh. With that podium in the way, he hadn’t been able to tell what was happening to Naegi — his injuries could have gotten worse, and Togami wouldn’t know. He —

He was breathing. Togami’s eyes locked onto the other boy’s shoulders, tracking the slight movements that could only be the result of functioning lungs. It wasn’t smooth or steady, he could tell that even at this distance, but even so — he was breathing. At least one of the terrors screaming in his useless ears could be put to rest for now.

With his mind freed from the grip of terrified paralysis, Togami was able to realize what must have happened. Naegi couldn’t stand on his own any longer, so of course the mastermind would have done whatever they could to force him to vote anyway. It was exactly the kind of vicious, unnecessary cruelty he’d come to expect from the person behind this game… but at least it meant that they believed Naegi was still physically capable of voting. He didn’t think they would have gone through the trouble of rearranging the podiums if Naegi had been unconscious, or if his injuries had left him completely unable to move. There wasn’t much comfort in the thought, but it was better than nothing.

Knowing Naegi was about as well as could be expected under the circumstances, Togami finally turned his attention to the buttons on the top of his own podium. He glared down at them as if they were directly responsible for the situation, instead of just another tool the mastermind could use to torment them. He shouldn’t have to consider the cartoonish faces of the other students scribbled on the buttons, not at this point in the trial — but obviously the mastermind didn’t care, since Monokuma had decreed it was time for the voting to begin.

But try as he might, Togami couldn’t understand why. Ogami’s explanation had been frustratingly vague on that point when he’d demanded that she inform him of whatever the bear had said that had triggered the emergence of the voting buttons. Or rather, the lack of clarity had been Monokuma’s — Ogami seemed to have done her best to explain the bear’s inane prattle, for all the good it had done. As far as Togami could tell, the mastermind had simply decided the trial was over because they’d gotten bored of listening to the arguments.

Except that it made no sense for them to have done so. The mastermind didn’t act on whims, no matter how much Monokuma might project a facade of childlike impulsiveness. Whoever was orchestrating this game had carefully calculated every move to manipulate their victims. If they’d decided to stop the trial short mid-debate, there had to be a very good reason… and his teeth ground painfully together as he tried in vain to work out what it could be.

He would have liked to believe that the mastermind had been forced to call the trial to a halt because he’d nearly had their agent cornered… but he had to admit it hadn’t really been the case. None of his evidence had been clear-cut enough to damn Kirigiri beyond a doubt, and for reasons that defied explanation, Jill seemed determined to cling to the idea of his guilt. Ogami had at least
been willing to see reason on that score, but he couldn’t be certain he had her convinced that Kirigiri had been behind the entire scheme. Nothing had been decided, not with enough certainty that the mastermind would have needed to act.

And it definitely didn’t seem to merit that charade with the gun on the ceiling. Togami didn’t need to look up to know it was still circling around at them, casting a whirl of shadows across the floor. He didn’t believe for a second that Kirigiri had genuinely tried to reveal the mastermind to the rest of them, no matter what Ogami said. More likely it was a last ditch attempt at making her look innocent, with the side benefit of giving the mastermind an excuse to make the threat of the gun explicit.

Not they needed the reminder. Togami hadn’t had much reason to be fond of Asahina, not after the part she’d played in separating him from Naegi and leaving the naive boy vulnerable to Kirigiri’s manipulations… but even so, he couldn’t erase the image of her lifeless body from his memory. If Enoshima’s death by spears hadn’t been enough to tell them what the mastermind could do, Asahina’s execution had made it brutally clear what could happen if they were too defiant.

Maybe he was overthinking it. For all he knew, the mastermind just liked the aesthetic appeal of the dark gun reflected in their twisted funhouse mirrors. If this whole elaborate plot had proved anything, it was that the person behind this game put a very high value on how things looked…

How things looked to the outside world.

Togami went very still, resisting the urge to shift uncomfortably as he suddenly felt the pressure of the cameras glaring down at him. The horrors of the data center had slipped to the back of his mind as he’d focused on his battle with Kirigiri, but that didn’t erase them. The events of these trials didn’t just matter to the handful of students trapped in the mastermind’s clutches… if Monokuma was to be believed, this was being viewed by the entire world. Was it possible that the trial was being manipulated not because of what was happening here… but because of what was going on outside?

It was impossible to tell, of course — the only contact any of them had with the rest of the world was through Monokuma, and that information was suspect at best. But it did make a chilling sort of sense. The mastermind presumably wouldn’t want their agent to look guilty to the viewers, especially not if the two of them were actual blood relations. And while they could control a class full of imprisoned students, surely not even the mastermind had the ability to manipulate the world at large. If things were going poorly, this could be an attempt at regrouping.

But even if that were the case… it didn’t make a difference for this particular moment. Whatever might be happening outside the school walls, it didn’t change the fact that right here, right now, he had to decide how he wanted to vote.

Not that there was much of a choice.

Togami glanced across the circle again, eying the silvery head bent studiously over her own podium, a thin frown creasing her face. Kirigiri had the gall to look as though she was actually thinking about it — like this decision was as hard for her as it was for the rest of them. Togami’s lip curled up in a sneer, and without hesitation he jammed his finger onto the button bearing the detective’s obnoxious face.

He’d thought he’d feel some measure of satisfaction at finally getting to declare once and for all what Kirigiri had done… but the only thing that filled his chest was a hollow sense of something disturbingly like regret. But that was absurd — he certainly didn’t regret voting for her, no matter how much it would hurt Naegi. Not when he knew she had to be guilty.
But that was the problem, wasn’t it? He knew she was guilty… but he didn’t know who else believed it. They needed a majority of votes to select the correct culprit — and with five students alive to participate in this trial, that meant three people had to choose correctly. His vote would be one… but he’d need two more.

Kirisu was out, obviously — she’d made it quite clear that she had no intention of confessing as the previous culprits had. And Jill had certainly made her opinion heard, stupid though it was. But Ogami… she’d been listening to him. He was pretty certain that when push came to shove, she’d select Kirigiri as the only possible choice. Which left only one vote.

Togami’s eyes went back to Naegi. The boy had raised his head a fractional amount, just enough to look at the buttons on his podium… but he didn’t seem to have chosen one yet. He wouldn’t be able to put it off much longer, though, not with Monokuma’s new attitude towards time limits. And when Naegi had to vote… then as much as he’d hate it, Togami knew the other boy would finally have to see the truth. Naegi might want to believe in his friends, but he had never let that blind him enough to be deceived in the face of their crimes. Togami had to believe that his kind, trusting boyfriend would be smart enough to figure this out, too. It was time for Naegi to face the reality of what Kirigiri had done.
Naegi stared at the strange paper he’d found in his pocket, head spinning from more than just exhaustion and injury. It seemed impossible… but even as he thought of every reason it couldn’t be true… the class roster he’d seen in the headmaster’s office flashed through his mind. He didn’t want to see it… out of all the memories he’d failed to recall, he didn’t want his brain to conjure up this one… but regardless of his wishes, the other student profiles emblazoned their images across his mind, as clearly as if he were looking at them now.

And yes… yes, that was it. This paper looked exactly like one of the profile pages from the class roster, he was sure of it.

Except… it couldn’t be. If it had been any of the other profiles, he might have accidentally torn it out when he’d removed Asahina’s profile — but not this one. He and Togami had been looking at Ikusaba’s profile when Monokuma had popped into the office, and Naegi knew for certain that it had still been securely attached to the roster when Monokuma had snatched the book away. He could almost see the dark blue cover snapping shut on the picture of the dark-haired girl.

The picture… that wasn’t on this profile. With his eyes aching and his vision unclear, Naegi could easily believe he might make a mistake about written words — but he knew he couldn’t miss whether or not there was a picture on the profile page. Did that mean it wasn’t the same profile from the roster? There had been so many other papers scattered around the office… he supposed he might not have noticed it lying amid the piles.

But that didn’t explain how it had ended up in his pocket. Naegi’s head ached from the questions that hammered away at his consciousness, but after so many trials and investigations, he couldn’t stop them. He tried to turn his mind away from the paper and focus the little energy he had left on the problem of voting… but even his thoughts defied him, puzzling out the questions whether he wanted it or not.

Where had that paper come from? How had it ended up here, on the trial room floor? Naegi didn’t see how he could have brought it from the office, whether it had been in the roster or not. With his injured arm, getting anything in or out of his jacket pockets was an elaborate ordeal. He’d only forced himself to do it a scant handful of times, for things he’d truly needed. A random piece of paper hadn’t been among them.

Someone else, then? Togami would have had dozens of opportunities, every time he’d helped Naegi walk… except that those times had been before they’d visited the headmaster’s office. He’d been so tired towards the end, nearly falling asleep on his feet — he’d left it to Ogami to help Naegi through the trial room to his place in the circle.

Could she have done it, then? No… no, she hadn’t known about Ikusaba’s identity until Naegi had told her. And even when the mastermind had been blackmailing her, she’d never been inside the headmaster’s office, so she couldn’t have gotten hold of a profile in the first place. No, if someone else had put the paper in his pocket, it would have had to be someone who’d been inside the headmaster’s office and who’d been close enough to reach his pocket without alerting him, and no one —

… the bathhouse locker room.

Naegi blinked as an image of the bathhouse flickered before his eyes. Why had such a thing popped into his head all of a sudden? It didn’t have anything to do with the trial that he could see…
maybe his mind was so overtired it had begun playing tricks on him, conjuring up images that
didn’t have anything to do with —

... before the trial.

Wait… that was right, he’d been in the bathhouse just before the trial. He and Kirigiri had needed
to talk alone, unmonitored by the mastermind’s cameras. That had been when she’d told him about
her plan to reveal the mastermind’s identity during the course of the trial… so maybe it wasn’t
completely irrelevant after all. But even so, it didn’t have any connection to the strange paper —

... a supportive arm sliding around his waist, guiding him to a seat.

As the moment resurfaced in his head, Naegi felt a jolt of shock that hadn’t happened when he’d
first experienced Kirigiri’s uncharacteristically kind gesture. But now, thinking back on it, it
seemed unusual that she’d helped him cross the room even though he’d had the music stand pole to
lean on, assisting him when he could have managed on his own — a stark contrast to the other
times she’d walked ahead and let him struggle to keep up with her brisk pace. He’d thought
nothing of the kind gesture at the time… but now it twisted in his head, shifting its meaning to
something far more calculated.

With her arm around his waist, Kirigiri could easily have slipped a folded piece of paper into his
pocket… and she’d actually been in the headmaster’s office where the profiles had been kept. With
those two facts taken together, it had to be certain — she was the one who’d given him this paper.

But why hadn’t she told him about it? They’d been in the bathhouse, away from the mastermind’s
cameras, so she could have said anything she liked without fear of being overheard. So that
meant… she’d chosen not to tell him. Why would she give him something and not want him to
know? It was only chance that he’d unearthed the paper before the trial ended — with his injuries,
it would have been more likely that he wouldn’t have found the paper until he was undressing for
bed that night.

I need you to be my failsafe in case something goes wrong.

He heard those words again, the ones she’d spoken just before leaving to enact Ikusaba’s plan.
She’d wanted a backup plan in case something went horribly wrong… and judging by the abrupt
end to the trial, that was exactly what had happened. Was that the reason she’d left a paper with
him in such a way that he wouldn’t have found it until the trial was over — so that he’d be able to
carry on without her?

His stomach seized up in a tangle of nausea that shuddered up through his throat, and if he’d eaten
anything in the past few hours he would almost certainly have lost it. Kirigiri had intended him to
find that profile page after something awful had happened — something that prevented her from
using it herself. The thought of finding the profile under those circumstances…

No. He couldn’t let himself focus on things like that. It hadn’t happened that way. He’d found the
profile now, before anything bad could happen. And maybe… maybe that meant he could use it
now, to avert whatever tragedy Kirigiri had feared.

He raised his head again, just enough to see the paper a short distance away on the floor. The black
spiderwebs that writhed across it had to be words, he knew it… but his eyes rebelled against his
attempts to focus. His brain couldn’t turn the tiny marks into comprehensible meaning.

But that wasn’t good enough — not with the trial going wrong in every possible way. Naegi
blinking rapidly and tried again, glaring at the paper until his eyes watered. He’d read it before, at
least enough to see Ikusaba’s name. He knew that much had to be on the paper, if he searched…

And yes, there it was, a small scrap of understanding in the midst of chaos… *Mukuro Ikusaba*. Her name wavered under the effort it took, but he could read it clearly.

Using her name as an anchor, Naegi tried once again to glean some kind of hint from the rest of the paper. If he didn’t try to focus on any specific text… if he just let his eyes drift down from the name… the some of the incomprehensible scribbles turned into actual words. He couldn’t read the entire profile… but he had to hope that the few words he could gather would be enough to help.

*Soldier.*

*Kidnapped.*

*Fenrir.*
Chapter 253

Soldier … kidnapped… Fenrir…

The words tumbled through Naegi’s mind, spinning over and over through more repetitions than he could count. They had to mean something, he knew it — Kirigiri wouldn’t have gone to so much trouble to give him a paper with them written on it if they didn’t. There was something about this paper she’d needed him to know, something she’d trusted him to be able to understand. And she’d never asked him to do something if it wasn’t important… so he couldn’t let her down.

As the words sounded through his head, something about them began to sound strangely familiar… like he’d heard them somewhere recently. But that wasn’t surprising, not with all that had happened involving Ikusaba in the past couple days. It felt as though the girl hadn’t been far from his thoughts ever since —

Ever since Kirigiri had told him her story.

Naegi’s head slumped back down until his forehead rested on the ground again, the will to keep it upright draining out of him. So in the end, that was all that the profile was — a summary of the same story Kirigiri had told him in their first conversation about Ikusaba. He’d been hoping for a critical clue, something that could change the course of the mastermind’s trap and avert the impossible decision of voting… but it looked like that had never been an option.

But why would Kirigiri have bothered to give him a paper that only contained information he already knew? That couldn’t be the case — he had to be missing something. Maybe the problem was that he hadn’t read the entire profile… if he could have done so, surely he would have noticed whatever she’d meant for him to find.

There had to be something… because otherwise it made no sense. Why would Kirigiri even risk taking the paper out of the office if it wasn’t important? Obviously she hadn’t had a problem keeping it hidden from the mastermind, but she wouldn’t go to the effort so for something trivial. And… did that mean she’d taken the paper with Ikusaba standing right in front of her? Or was it that Ikusaba had given it to her? But that made no sense, because Ikusaba had told Kirigiri to keep her presence secret… so she wouldn’t have had a reason to let Kirigiri walk out of the room with proof of her existence.

He must have misunderstood what he’d read… or maybe the story Kirigiri had told him about Ikusaba had gotten muddled in his head. That wouldn’t be a surprise, not when so much pain had shuddered through his head every time he’d tried to think further back than the last few hours. Words could sound in his ears or images flash before his eyes seemingly of their own accord, but any attempt to call up a memory consciously left him blinded by agony. With his head an untrustworthy mess, the specter of pain lurking behind every thought, of course his piece of the puzzle would be the one that didn’t fit.

But even so… the words wouldn’t leave him alone. Soldier… kidnapped… Fenrir. He tried to turn his thoughts away to consider some other aspect of the problem, but the words he’d gleaned from the paper brought him twisting back. Some buried part of his mind couldn’t let go of those words, no matter what he thought he wanted — and he wasn’t sure it was wrong. After all, if he gave up on finding meaning in the words, if he accepted that the profile had no hidden clues for him to decipher… then that meant he was back where he’d started, facing a decision he couldn’t bring himself to make. Puzzling through a jumble of confusing words was better, even if it turned out to be useless.
Soldier… well, that one he knew. Ikusaba had been a mercenary, despite being young enough to qualify as a member of their high school class. Extraordinary, yes, but no more so than any of the other Ultimates who attended Hope’s Peak. A teenage mercenary couldn’t be too out of place in a class that included the Ultimate Martial Artist and the Ultimate Biker Gang Leader. Nothing in that idea rang false.

Kidnapped… yes, that was what she’d said, she’d been kidnapped and brainwashed. The thought sent a shudder of horror through him. What kind of mercenary group recruited new members by kidnapping children? It would take a monster to do such a thing… maybe the same kind of monster that would think up the killing game. Could that be the connection? It might be… or it might not.

Fenrir… the name of the shadowy band of mercenaries, a group so elite that apparently Togami had already known all about them. That had to be true, it had been confirmed too many times. There were even documents here in the archive about it, Togami had told him so — papers and files that told about a world far removed from the one he knew. Secret troops of soldiers hired by world leaders, children snatched away to be trained as professional killers, symbols of the apocalypse as identifying tattoos… he’d never really believed those stories could be more than fodder for action movies.

Ikusaba’s hand flashed before his eyes, burn marks scorching down her wrist to mar the wolf tattoo snarling up from her skin. It hadn’t even been hidden, not really — that tattoo would’ve been visible to anyone who knew to look for it. What kind of secret group could afford to be so bold in marking their members? She had to be good, better than good, to be able to handle it and survive… like she really was the super soldier Jill kept calling her. But could anyone really be that good? He wasn’t sure. How was he supposed to know what was real when it all sounded so strange?

It all sounded strange.

Strange… it had sounded strange…

All the members of Fenrir can be identified by a tattoo somewhere on their body. She raised the hem of her shirt just enough for me to identify it.

The hem of her shirt, that was what Kirigiri had said… and he’d usually assume that meant the bottom. It was vague enough that maybe, maybe it could have meant the sleeve instead… except that Ikusaba’s tattoo had been on her hand, where her sleeves wouldn’t cover it.

It didn’t fit. Even through the aching of his head he could see that it made no sense. Did that mean Ikusaba had two tattoos…? No, why would she have two identical symbols on different parts of her body? Even if that were the case, surely it would have made more sense to show Kirigiri the more accessible mark on her hand, instead of lifting her shirt.

Then… did that mean that the Ikusaba who had spoken with Kirigiri and the girl lying dead on the fifth floor were two different people? But if so… the murdered girl had to be the real Ikusaba. That was why they were having a trial — because one of the students playing the game had died. And Monokuma himself had admitted Ikusaba was the final member of their class… so she was the only possible victim.

But if the corpse really was Ikusaba… then who had Kirigiri met? Could there be another member of Fenrir hiding in the school, one who didn’t count as part of the mastermind’s game for some reason? The thought sent goosebumps crawling down his spine, as though an entire army of super soldiers was already watching them all from the shadows. And for all he knew, that really was the case. It wasn’t as though they had any way of knowing who else might be in the school — even Kirigiri hadn’t known about Ikusaba until the girl confronted her.
Or whoever it had been who had really talked to Kirigiri. It seemed strange to use Ikusaba’s name, though… wouldn’t it have been better to keep the real name of the hidden player secret? Though it hardly seemed to have made much difference, not when Kirigiri hadn’t had any reason to know Ikusaba in the first place. After all, someone would need to know the actual location of the real Ikusaba’s tattoo in order to identify a fraud, and Kirigiri had never —

*Even though the bomb made the corpse’s face unrecognizable, we could still see that tattoo on her hand.*

Naegi could feel his own words burning on his tongue, when he’d told the rest of the circle exactly how he and Togami had been able to identify the corpse as Ikusaba. He’d used the tattoo as proof — and he’d even mentioned that it was on her hand. Surely Kirigiri, the one person who always noticed *everything*, couldn’t have missed that contradiction. And even if she somehow had… he’d sent her up to look at the body right before the trial began. There was no way she hadn’t known about the difference between her story and the body.

And yet… she hadn’t said anything. This was important, it had to be… and she *hadn’t said anything*. Even knowing they all believed something untrue, she’d done nothing —

No, not nothing. Not exactly. Naegi’s eyes flickered back to the paper that Kirigiri had hidden in his pocket, the one that had started him down this path of realization. She’d given him the key to the puzzle, a profile detailing the information that Ikusaba had told her. Maybe if he’d been able to read the entire thing, he would have spotted the problem faster. He could have found the differences between Ikusaba’s story and reality —

Wait, that wasn’t right, was it? He’d never actually talked to Ikusaba himself… so it ought to be the difference between *Kirigiri’s* story and reality. As he had the thought, Naegi could feel something shifting in his head, like the ground trembling before it was overrun by an avalanche.

Kirigiri should have seen the differences between the stories and reality, and yet she hadn’t said anything about it.

She had given him the profile that described Ikusaba’s life story… *before* she’d had any way of knowing about the different locations of the tattoos.

Knowing more than she should have, not acting as he’d expected… it all added up to one conclusion that Naegi was beginning to fear he had no choice but to believe.

Kirigiri had lied to him.
Naegi couldn’t quite comprehend the enormity of the conclusion he’d reached, not with the pain throbbing through his skull. His thoughts were all in a jumble, a box of puzzle pieces shaken apart every time he tried to make a connection that could help him understand. Because he needed to understand, needed to make sense of how his best friend could do such a thing to him. It couldn’t be true, he didn’t want to believe it… except that he knew that it was right.

Kirigiri had lied to him. She’d lied, right to his face, when she’d been telling him about her meeting with Mukuro Ikusaba. She hadn’t see the girl’s tattoo, she couldn’t have, not when she’d been wrong about where it had been placed. She’d been wrong, clearly and provably wrong — except that she’d never been wrong like this, not in all the years he’d known her, not about specific facts that she’d uncovered. She couldn’t be wrong like that… and so it had to be a lie.

But why lie about something so small? It didn’t matter where the tattoo was, surely it didn’t, not enough to deceive him. She hadn’t even had to mention it if she hadn’t wanted him to know. He wouldn’t have questioned her, not seriously, not expecting an answer — she never told him more than she had to, he’d learned that first thing. He had to keep up if he wanted to work with her because Kirigiri would never ever wait.

No… that wasn’t it, was it? She would wait when she had to, when she knew there was no other option… but she expected him to keep up when she knew that he could. And she’d taught him this, showed him how to think, how to work out answers to impossible questions. He wasn’t as good as her, no one else could be… but she must have expected him to be better than this. She’d told him a direct lie, an obvious lie, when she could have avoided it… and she’d made sure he had the means to spot it.

So she hadn’t seen the tattoo, was that it? Had she meant to draw attention to the contradiction so that he would realize the girl she’d met was an impostor? But no, no, the pieces still didn’t fit, because if she hadn’t met the real Ikusaba then she couldn’t have known where the tattoo was supposed to be in the first place.

The real Ikusaba…

Pain howled through his head once more, every neuron screaming in protest. Tears burned at his eyes, but he was powerless to wipe them away. Why did everything hurt, why couldn’t he think straight, why was his own mind turning against him now? He wanted to stop thinking, to flinch away from the cause of his agony, but against his will his mind hurtled onward into the darkness of uncertainty.

The real Ikusaba lay dead on the floor upstairs, part of the game from the beginning. She’d been here in the school all along, one of the mastermind’s agents… here in the school with her tattoo plain for anyone to see. With her nails too long for gloves, her allies would have been unable to miss its location. Even if one of them wanted to pose as Ikusaba… they shouldn’t have gotten the tattoo’s location wrong.

Only someone who had never met Mukuro Ikusaba could have made that mistake.

Never met her.

Kirigiri had never met her.
Dizziness flooded through Naegi’s head, his vision narrowing to a black-edged tunnel. He could see through it to the end, the final destination, the one thing that he didn’t want to know. He would have stopped himself if he could, would have halted the knife-edged thoughts before they could go too far… but he didn’t have the strength to prevent the plunge forward.

Kirigiri had never met Mukuro Ikusaba. That was the hole in her story, the flaw in her plan, the reason none of the puzzle pieces she’d given him could fit together to form the picture he’d been trying so hard to make. Kirigiri had never met Ikusaba… and everything she’d told him otherwise had been a lie.

Everything had been a lie. Images flickered before his eyes like a reel of film spinning out of control, visions of all the things that had happened after Kirigiri’s deception. Her long disappearance, his fear for her safety, the terrible uncertainty when he hadn’t known who the corpse upstairs really was.

The corpse. Mukuro Ikusaba.

Kirigiri’s story about meeting her had been a lie… but Ikusaba’s death was real. He’d seen the body, seen the mangled mess that had once been his friend, and there was no question about that. Ikusaba was dead… just days after Kirigiri had lied about meeting her. Was that a coincidence? Truth and lie tangled together in his head, bleeding into one another until he couldn’t be sure of anything. Had one event caused the other? Which had come first? He didn’t know, he didn’t know —

No. No, he knew, he did, he had to. No matter what kind of tangles Kirigiri had put in his head, he knew she had to have her reasons for it. The mastermind wanted to trap her during the trial, she’d told him so, and confusion snarling through his memories wasn’t her fault. It was the mastermind, always the mastermind at the root of everything, her and no one else.

No matter how the mastermind had manipulated Kirigiri, she hadn’t done anything wrong. He had to keep that thought in his head, no matter how the rest of his mind might twist out of his control. The mastermind was trying to trap Kirigiri, to use her own fake murder plan to frame her, but none of it was real. It couldn’t be, he knew it couldn’t be, because he’d watched as Kirigiri and Togami locked up the poison, watched as they burned the key —

The key…

They’d burned the locker key…

Alarm bells screamed through his head, piercing through the aching bones of his skull. He was missing something, he could feel the void in his head, empty and gaping wide, waiting to be filled with the right answer to a question he didn’t even know.

They’d burned the locker key… but there had been another keyhole, hidden away, where a master key could still have opened the door.

The door.

The locked door.

A key that could open locked doors.

Ikusaba had offered to open locked doors for Kirigiri… except that no, no, she hadn’t done anything of the sort. It had been a lie, all of it was a lie, none of the mastermind’s agents had agreed to open locked doors —
But one of the doors had opened anyway. Kirigiri might have lied about meeting Ikusaba, but she really had managed to enter the second floor dorms. He’d looked at his map, over and over he’d kept checking it, and she hadn’t appeared anywhere. She hadn’t been in the hidden room behind the boys’ bathroom, so she must have been in one of the other places with no cameras.

Behind a locked door.

But she couldn’t have gotten through the door on her own, not without breaking a rule. The door to the rest of the dorms had been locked, he knew it had, and Kirigiri hadn’t had a key.

A key.

A key for a locked door.

*Naegi? What are you doing?*

He heard her voice in his ears again, Kirigiri’s voice, startling him out of the dark thoughts he’d had just before the trial. He’d been alone in Togami’s room, unable to investigate, believing she was still missing and possibly in terrible trouble… and he’d heard her voice. He’d turned, turned to see her, and she’d been there in Togami’s room with him, standing right in front of the door…

The locked door.

He’d locked that door. Ogami had worried about leaving him all alone, and so when she left, he’d locked the door behind her. He’d had Togami’s key with him, it had been in his pocket safe and sound… so how could Kirigiri have been standing there?

He already knew the answer, sitting in his head like an anchor dragging him down into the darkness.

She’d had a key. Somehow Kirigiri had a master key.
Chapter 255

The darkness Naegi had tried so hard to resist surged through his mind, obliterating every conscious thought except the one he didn’t want to acknowledge. Kirigiri had a master key, one that would let her move around the school at will. It wasn’t true, he couldn’t believe it, she wouldn’t hide such an important discovery from the rest of them… but no matter what objections fluttered uselessly through his head, the facts made too much sense to deny.

Kirigiri had been places she shouldn’t have been able to go. She’d opened locked doors without violating the mastermind’s rules. And she’d spent time alone in the headmaster’s office… the one place such a key might be located.

The headmaster’s office… where she’d gone the night after the fourth class trial, the night she’d said she met Ikusaba. But that had been a lie, nothing but a lie, he knew that now. She hadn’t met anyone there, not anyone at all. The only things she’d found had been a torn piece of a profile and…

The most dangerous weapon in the school.

Togami’s words rang through his head, discordant against the rest of the questions spinning round. A weapon… he’d said that a weapon had been taken from the headmaster’s office, he’d stayed to search for clues about it… but there’d been nothing. It had been stolen away before they got there… except that the door had been barricaded, they’d only gotten in because he’d used a trip ticket. But still, still, the weapon had been taken…

The key had been taken.

The two thoughts bled into one another until he couldn’t pick them apart any longer. A stolen key, a stolen weapon… only a brief moment when the door had been open…

Could a key be a weapon? No, of course not, what was a key against all the other weapons in the school? How could it be more dangerous than knives and dumbbells, hammers and poisoned needles?

What if no one knew you had it?

He hated the question as soon as it slithered its way into his brain. It wasn’t right, it couldn’t be right, it was just a passing thought that didn’t mean anything and he didn’t want it in his head.

But he couldn’t un-think it. His mind spiraled out from that starting point, whirling through a thousand ways a brilliant young woman could use a key when her companions all believed a locked door could keep them safe. It would be easy, too easy…

It would have been so very easy for Kirigiri to commit a murder.

He’d known it from the start, known it as his mind linked the puzzle pieces together without his conscious thought. He hadn’t wanted it to be true, hadn’t wanted to let himself accept the possibility… but somewhere deep within himself, he’d known what the picture he was putting together would be. Kirigiri could have killed Ikusaba.

It was like being in that horrible first trial all over again, his belief in Maizono crumbling to dust as he realized what she’d been planning. He’d thought they were friends… and she’d used his trust in her against him. She’d planned to kill Kuwata, and only a fatal misstep on her part had given
Kuwata the chance to kill her after defending himself.

Defending himself… a victim and culprit changing places after he’d defended himself…

Maybe betrayal wasn’t the only reason his mind had gravitated back to Maizono’s death. Because after all… hadn’t Ikusaba been plotting a murder of her own, too? Kirigiri’s story had been a lie, but still, Ikusaba had crept out of hiding to steal Togami’s knife and try to frame Ogami for it. They’d figured that out independently of Kirigiri’s lie, so it was true, it had to be. And he’d wondered earlier if perhaps Kirigiri had been the one Ikusaba had meant to kill.

Kirigiri wouldn’t murder someone as part of the game, Naegi couldn’t believe that… but would she do it in self defense? It wasn’t the same as Kuwata, not quite the same, because he could have walked away and Maizono wouldn’t have been able to try again… but Ikusaba had been an elite soldier working for the mastermind. Even if Kirigiri had thwarted a first attempt, what was to stop Ikusaba from continuing until she succeeded?

Or until she was taken out of the picture.

Naegi wanted to be sick, nausea fighting for control of his stomach… but it couldn’t wipe away the ideas. No matter how terribly he ached, it couldn’t stop his thoughts from churning through his head and producing these horrible conclusions. It could be true. It made sense. Something had to be true, and if not this, then what? How could he ever know?

Kirigiri had lied to him. He’d trusted her, and she’d lied to him. Grief and confusion and pain all howled through his mind, each screaming their own questions and thoughts and phrases from the inaccessible pit of his memories, twisting into one another until he didn’t know what he could believe any longer. She had lied to him. She’d lied.

She’d lied to conceal this. Togami had been right… every time he’d said not to trust Kirigiri, every question he’d asked about her motives, every accusation he’d sent her way… he’d been right. Kirigiri had been deceiving him with every word she’d spoken over the last two days, using his trust to set a trap for…

To set a trap…

A trap…

Naegi’s thoughts ground to a blessed halt, clarity flooding into the mental silence left in their wake. Kirigiri wasn’t the one setting a trap in this trial — the mastermind was. He’d lost track of that, in the hurt that had stabbed through him at discovering the truth of Kirigiri’s lies. He didn’t like that she’d deceived him… but really, it wasn’t so far removed from other ways she’d gotten him to help without explaining herself.

No, Kirigiri might have told him a few lies, but the real person who was deceiving them all was the mastermind. She was the one who’d been behind the greatest betrayal of all, and nothing Kirigiri could say or do would ever come close.

And he’d nearly forgotten that. He’d nearly let the mastermind manipulate him into turning on his best friend, giving up on her at the very moment she’d needed his trust most. Because if he hadn’t realized what was going on… if his thoughts had driven him onward to the final conclusion they’d been headed towards… he could have made the mistake of voting for Kirigiri.

It would have sealed her fate if he’d done it, snapping the trap closed around her beyond any chance of escape. The vote was going to split, he knew it would split, with the circle broken right...
down the center. His vote could have tipped the balance, breaking the stalemate that had dominated the trial… and he knew that was the worst thing he could possibly do. The stalemate was the only way to delay the mastermind’s plot, to stop whatever horrors they’d put in motion. He couldn’t let his vote shatter the fragile stasis.

But he had to vote, didn’t he? He couldn’t just lie here forever, the mastermind would force his hand if he tried. He had to do something…

*I couldn’t vote to condemn any of you. I voted for myself in each of the trials so far.*

Ogami’s words whispered through his mind, a ray of light glimmering in the darkness. That was right… the trial had framed matters as a choice between Kirigiri and Togami, but that didn’t mean their actual voting options were limited. He could still make a different choice. He could still try to find another way.

Slowly, so slowly, Naegi forced his hand up onto the top of the podium, and he pressed the button that bore his own face.
Chapter 256

Too many seconds ticked away after Togami had finalized his vote, a far longer wait than they’d ever had to endure before. Of course, they’d always been in agreement on the culprit’s identity before now. With the trial ending so abruptly, before he’d had a chance to convince the entire circle of the truth, it was no surprise that the other students were taking their time making their decision.

Because that had to be the cause of the delay. He couldn’t let himself consider the possibility that anything other than indecision was keeping Naegi from voting. His eyes flickered in the direction of his boyfriend once more, in spite of his best efforts not to stare desperately at the injured boy. With billions of eyes trained on them all through the glaring cameras, he had to stay strong through whatever was coming next… and if he looked too long at Naegi lying prone on the ground, he didn’t know if he could. Even thinking too long on Naegi’s condition sent fear flooding through him, chilling whispers of all the things that could have happened to make the boy’s injuries worse.

No — no, this wasn’t the moment for that, not yet. The ban on leaving their places in the circle seemed to end after the voting results were announced, based on the previous trials, so he’d be able to check Naegi’s wellbeing for himself in just a few moments… one way or another. And if everything turned out as it should, Naegi would need support at the moment that Kirigiri was dragged to her well-deserved fate.

Because that would be the result of the voting — it had to be. The truth had to win out, and the true culprit had to be convicted. Any other result was just — unacceptable. It couldn’t occur.

He stole another glance in Naegi’s direction, willing his face to remain unchanged — but that resolve flew from his mind when he spotted the slightest twitch of movement. Naegi’s hand crept slowly across the podium until finally — finally — he pressed a button.

Togami froze, scarcely daring to breathe. Then — that was it. Naegi had voted, and now this mockery of a trial could end. At this distance, he couldn’t see which button Naegi had pushed… but of course there was only one option. Naegi always saw sense in the end, even if it took him a while to get there. He had to have chosen correctly… he couldn’t have been so taken in by Kirigiri’s manipulations that he would ignore all the evidence pointing her direction.

But whatever Naegi had chosen, Togami knew he wouldn’t learn the truth of it by watching his boyfriend lying on the floor. Reluctantly, he tore his eyes away from Naegi and looked upward at the brightly glowing slot machine of portraits.

The images spun round and round, almost too fast to make out the individual features — not that it mattered. He knew every face in the mix all too well, and his mind could fill in details that his eye couldn’t see. The neon whirl of faces burned against his tired eyes, but he didn’t look away for a second. He had to wait until the spinning slowed, until the portraits settled on a choice…

Until three identical images of Makoto Naegi stared back at him.

Junko beamed up at the monitor, soaking in the delightful reactions of her darling friends. Shock,
horror, dismay, a thousand lovely seeds that would bloom into the most beautiful despair… oh, this was the nicest gift she’d given them yet! She was so glad to see they appreciated it properly.

All of them but one, anyway. The star of the show was still lolling around on the floor, not even lifting his head to check the final score. Well, that wouldn’t do at all! She leaned towards her microphone with a grin.

“And the results are in, folks! The blackened you all chose as Mukuro Ikusaba’s killer is….” She took a deep breath, savoring the tension in the air. “Makoto Naegi!”

And at the sound of his name, the silly boy twitched, a full-body shiver from head to toe, as if she’d pumped a jolt of electricity right up through the floor. Well, that couldn’t be good for his wounds! Not that it made much difference at this point, but Junko wanted him in the best shape possible — how else could he enjoy the full experience of her lovingly crafted executions?

“What the hell is that supposed to be?”

Togami was the first of the students to break free of his initial shock, though his face was still pale enough to pull off a fantastic vampire cosplay. He managed to tear his eyes away from the results and spun to glare — not at the enthroned Monokuma, but at Kirigiri. “What did you do?”

But Little Miss Detective ignored him, just as deafened by the thoughts running through her head as he had been by the explosion. She slowly lowered her gaze from the lights, pupils contracted to tiny dots as she narrowed her eyes at the camera embedded in Monokuma’s eye. Junko settled back in her seat, steepling her fingers in front of her face in her best evil mastermind impression as she waited for Kirigiri to find her words.

“Is this some sort of joke?” There it was, an oh so tiny hint of a quaver in the detective’s strong, steady voice. Kirigiri might have forced her hand with the gun threat, but now control of the situation was back where it belonged. “Are you mocking me?”

Junko bit back her giggles so that the microphone wouldn’t pick them up as she leaned forward. “Huh? You want me to tell jokes?” She tapped a button to tilt Monokuma’s head with innocent confusion. “Well, okay, you asked for it! A headmaster, a detective, and the world’s most adorable bear walk into a bar —”

“Do you think this is funny?” Kirigiri’s glare could have frozen over a volcano.

“Aw… have you heard that one already?” Junko heaved a disappointed sigh.

“Stop that!” She clenched her fists, so tightly her nails had to be gouging her palms even through the gloves. “Just tell me what this is supposed to mean!”

“Hmm? You can’t tell?” Junko tsked and shook her head. “I guess they don’t make Ultimate Detectives like they used to! I told you already — these are the results of your vote!”

“I know that,” Kirigiri snapped. “But — this can’t be right. These can’t be the real results.”

“You think so? Well, too bad for you — they are!” Junko laughed. “But you don’t have to worry your pretty little head about it — because they’re absolutely correct!”

“What? No — they can’t be!” This time it was Ogami, looking from Togami to Naegi in growing panic.

“Oh? Are you gonna argue with a passing grade?” Junko kept her eyes on Kirigiri even as she
answered the other girl. “I mean, you wouldn’t want to be wrong, would you?”

And she saw it hit home, striking right through all Kirigiri’s layers of icy armor like a dagger finding its way to her heart. That was it. After all the plans and machinations she’d juggled in the past few days, that was it — the moment she knew she’d won. It was perfect, exactly how she’d wanted it, so very perfect —

So perfect it was boring. Junko sighed, slumping back in her chair. Was it really fun like this — if her friends didn’t even have a chance? If it just played out exactly the way she’d planned?

Barely a fraction of a second had passed before she leaned back towards the microphone once more. “Unless, of course, someone wants to challenge the verdict.”
Naegi didn’t understand what was happening in the trial room around him. Raised voices pounded through his aching head, the reflections of garishly bright lights stabbed through his tired eyes, and he thought — he thought he’d heard — something impossible, something that couldn’t have been real. At the end of the voting, when Monokuma sang out the final results — it had sounded like he’d heard his own name.

But that couldn’t be right. He’d voted for himself for the same reason Ogami had in the other trials — because he couldn’t choose between the options the other students were considering. It had been an attempt to throw his vote away, not a serious guess, not something he’d meant. It hadn’t been a real vote —

No… that was wrong. It was a real vote, even if he hadn’t intended it to point to the true culprit. He knew, after watching so many beloved friends die in this room, of course he knew that everything he did here had to be serious. He hadn’t meant that he was the culprit — but he’d meant what the vote represented. If it came down to it, another crushing choice between his boyfriend and his best friend, he’d choose a third option every time.

But even so… even so… it shouldn’t have meant that his own name was the one ringing out, twisted by Monokuma’s laughter. He hadn’t killed anyone, he would never kill one of his treasured friends — and even if he’d thought about trying, he couldn’t have, not after Jill’s attack. With only five surviving students, it would take three votes for a majority… and who else would have chosen him, the one person who couldn’t possibly have been the culprit?

Unless that had been the reason they’d done it. After all, Ogami herself had told him about the idea of miscasting votes… but no, no, she’d promised not to do it this time. And even if she’d forgotten her promise, surely she would have chosen herself again. But… what about the others? Could two of them have picked him in a desperate attempt to avoid the impossible choice?

Did it matter if they had?

No. It didn’t matter, not any longer. The questions running through Naegi’s head were useless now. However it had happened, the votes had been cast, and he’d been the one chosen. And that meant… that meant…

That meant they’d chosen wrong.

“Too bad for you! They’re absolutely correct!”

The words sank through Naegi’s head like dead weight, dragging everything around them down into shadows. Correct… the word felt heavy and wrong in his mind, distorting all the thoughts around it. Correct. The votes had tallied up to call him the culprit… and the mastermind said that answer was correct?

For a wild, dizzy moment, Naegi almost wondered if such a thing could be true. His mind had betrayed him, memories twisting into a past that had never happened… maybe it wasn’t so impossible that he could have done this. Maybe he’d just forced himself to forget, wiping the painful past out of existence by tearing his mind apart. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d lost important memories. What if she was right? What if — what if he’d really —

But no. No, he couldn’t have — not when he’d been too weak to move. Relief washed through
Naegi’s heart, rinsing away the darkness of self-doubt. He couldn’t have done it, he knew he couldn’t have done it, no matter what she said to the contrary. Anyone who’d seen his injuries at their worst would know he couldn’t have killed Ikusaba.

And that meant the mastermind was lying.

Except… that was impossible, wasn’t it? The entire point of the class trial was to force them to uncover the truth about the killings, to find out who had committed the murders — because they’d all be killed if they guessed wrong. But this vote had been wrong, definitely wrong, obviously wrong — and instead of leaping on the opportunity to execute them all, the mastermind was pretending it was right.

It made no sense, none at all… or maybe it was just the confusion roiling through his head that made it seem nonsensical. There were so many lies, everywhere he turned he found another once-solid fact crumbling away beneath his feet. Togami had lied, lied to protect him, turning the trial on its head. Kirigiri had lied, turning his understanding of the game upside-down as she tried to hide her master key. His own head lied, showing him visions of a world that didn’t exist instead of the memories he’d thought he could believe. And now, now, now the mastermind was lying, dodging her own rules and giving up the chance to beat them once and for all. Everything and everyone was lying to him, for good reasons or bad… lying so much that he didn’t know where to find the truth any longer.

“I mean, you wouldn’t want to be wrong, would you?”

No… no, he didn’t want to be wrong… but he couldn’t see how to be anything else. Everything was wrong… there was nothing he could trust, nothing he could believe. If this result was being called true, then everything in the world around him had gone horribly wrong.

“Unless, of course, someone wants to challenge the verdict.”

Challenge…?

The word spun round through Naegi’s head, a thousand questions tied up in that single idea. Challenge the verdict? Argue with the mastermind? Tell the truth and call her a liar with the whole world watching? If he tried… if he found the strength, if he found the words, if he dared… what would happen?

Nothing, of course nothing would happen, there was nothing he could say that would change anything. He’d been found guilty, it was to be expected that he’d claim innocence. Monokuma would laugh it all away, call him a liar, say it wasn’t true…

Except that it was true. They both knew it was. That was the difference between this trial and any of the ones that had gone before. So then… was it also the reason that the mastermind had allowed him a chance to argue? But why would she bother when she knew, she had to know, that there was nothing he could say, nothing he could do, nothing he could —

And then, almost without his conscious direction, Naegi found his eyes locking onto the profile page that Kirigiri had placed in his pocket.

Mukuro Ikusaba’s profile… that Kirigiri had found in the headmaster’s office… when she’d taken the master key.
Naegi stared at the profile, trying to make some sense of the words that blurred before his eyes. The black scribbles were no more legible than they had been any other time he’d looked at the page… but this time, they seemed to mean something different.

Kirigiri had given him this profile to use somehow… so that he could carry on her work if she was no longer capable of doing so. Taken in combination with the words she’d spoken, the decisions she’d made… the profile was proof that she’d lied about meeting Ikusaba. Was there any way he could use it to prove anything else?

He could show the profile to the others… show it to the mastermind… let them all see what it was and what it meant. And then… if he did that… then what? He tried to think, tried to corral his wayward mind and focus on the possibility of how the future could go if he chose to reveal Ikusaba’s profile in response to Monokuma’s prompting.

... With Kirigiri’s lie exposed, the others would have all the pieces they needed to put together the facts they hadn’t had during the trial. Togami would seize on the information, making short work of shredding the cloak of deceit Kirigiri had woven around herself. She’d never met Ikusaba… and yet she’d known about the girl before she’d died. It wasn’t proof… but it would look damning.

And with such a blow to her defenses, Kirigiri would respond with an even fiercer attack of her own … with the one weapon she hadn’t yet used. Kirigiri knew the mastermind’s true identity, and if ever there was a moment to announce it, this would be it.

Kirigiri would tell them all who the mastermind really was, unmasking her before the survivors and before the world. They would finally understand all the mastermind had done, everything she’d done and everyone she’d hurt and everyone she’d killed…

Everyone she’d killed… including Mukuro Ikusaba. The mastermind had killed Ikusaba, it was the only thing that made sense. None of the rest of them had done it… so who else was there? And if Kirigiri could name her, they’d finally know it, understand it, see the truth that lay beneath the lies…

And they’d be killed.

With the mastermind’s deeds revealed, she could execute them freely. Their votes had been wrong, he knew they were wrong, and proving her guilt would lock the condemnation in place. She could kill them all…

Ogami, who had only just begun to see the possibility of hope in a world without Asahina.

Genocide Jill, who had never had the chance to live with others as her genuine self.

Kirigiri, who’d fought so hard and risked so much so that she could uncover the truth.

Togami.

Togami would die.

If they proved the truth, unmasked the mastermind, and revealed her crimes … Togami would die.

Naegi felt himself plummeting down through a shadowy darkness so deep he couldn’t breathe,
paralyzing his throat and turning his lungs to lead. He didn’t know how much of the past he could trust, didn’t understand the contradictory present he’d found himself trapped within… but he could see the future stretching out clear and inevitable ahead of him. If he took this path, the mastermind would execute them all. And Togami would die.

Togami, who had fought so hard to protect him… who had trusted him every time he’d asked… who had given up his plan of winning the mastermind’s game because of how much he’d come to care.

Naegi couldn’t raise his head enough to see the rest of the circle, but even so, the other boy was clear and bright before his eyes. His mouth curled upwards in a smirk — arrogant, yes, but drawn from a bone-deep self-confidence that couldn’t be bought. His eyes flashed behind his glasses, cold unless you knew how to read the deep emotions hidden beneath the ice.

Brilliant and smug, sarcastic and honest, aggravating and endearing — everything that he was filled Naegi’s mind, flooding his heart with so much warmth and sweetness that hot tears filled his eyes again. The thought that this wonderful, impossible, perfect boy could be ripped away from the world was too much to bear. Togami couldn’t die, he couldn’t.

Naegi couldn’t let him die. Nothing else mattered, nothing else made sense, nothing else stayed in his head except that one screaming and inescapable thought. Byakuya Togami could not be allowed to die… because Naegi loved him.

The thought was a revelation… and at the same time, it wasn’t. He’d known all along, felt it somewhere in the hidden recesses of his heart too deep for conscious thought to reach. He loved Togami so much, so ridiculously absurdly much, that it was impossible to conceive of anything else. He would do anything, anything to protect the other boy’s wonderful, precious life…

Even go along with the mastermind’s deceit.

Revealing her crimes would only prove the vote had been wrong, condemning everyone to execution… Togami, oh god, Togami, but not just him. They would all be killed in that case, every single one of his surviving friends. No matter what she’d done, that wouldn’t matter — not with the rules of the game still in play. As long as their vote was proved to be wrong, they would have no chance of survival.

But if that wasn’t the case… if the vote was allowed to stand as true… then the others would be able to live. They’d have one more chance to fight, to use Kirigiri’s information to unmask the mastermind for good, to escape from this nightmare and find what measure of peace they could in the world beyond these walls. They would live. Togami would live.

And Naegi would die.

But he would die either way. Whether the vote was right or wrong, there was no outcome where he could survive. He knew what was coming… he knew how this trial had to end. He couldn’t save himself… but he could save the boy he loved.

“No.”

Naegi could barely force air through his trembling lips, the word no louder than a breath. He took a shaky breath and tried again.

“No. No challenges. You’re right…” He took one last breath, mustering the last of his strength so the whole room could hear… and lied. “I’m the culprit.”
Chapter 259

Togami didn’t know what nightmare had descended on the trial room in the moments after the voting results had been revealed. He’d hoped with all the will in his heart for the garish casino lights to stop on Kirigiri’s face… he’d feared they would end with his own… but it had never occurred to him that he’d see the face of his sweet, soft-hearted boyfriend when the slots stopped spinning. Naegi should have been the one person safe from the others’ stupidity, the one person no one in their right mind would vote for — and no one would tell him why they had.

Ogami’s eyes had gone blank and empty as she stared up at the lights, and he doubted she could even hear his demands for an explanation. Jill had traipsed merrily off into whatever mad mental landscape lurked inside her head, tapping her scissors against each of her fingers as her lips flew through gibberish too fast for him to read. And between them, in her place at the opposite end of the circle, Kirigiri stood locked in some self-serving chit-chat with Monokuma instead of answering his questions.

She’d done this. Somehow, she’d twisted the voting, used some trick of the mastermind’s to alter the results. This couldn’t be right, it was absurd, it was impossible. No one would vote for Naegi, not even one person here — let alone the three votes it would take for a majority. All three girls would have had to vote for Naegi to make it true, and that couldn’t be the case. Jill and Ogami had seen him broken and unconscious, they knew he couldn’t have run all the way up to the fifth floor to plant poison and set bombs. They’d have to be idiots to vote for him, worse than idiots, no more than animals whose brains had never evolved to handle higher thought processes! They couldn’t have voted for him —

But then why weren’t they saying so? Togami glared from one girl to the other. “Say something! Tell them it isn’t right!”

They didn’t even look his way. Instead they turned as one, attention snared by something to the left of the circle — the place where Naegi lay unmoving on the floor.

Togami spun in that direction — just in time to see the iron collar snap around Naegi’s neck.

“No!”

He’d never moved so fast — but even so, the mastermind’s chains outstripped him. He flew across the circle, bursting past Naegi’s podium, to the place where the boy had been, but he’d never had a chance. The chains hauled Naegi’s limp body through the wall, mirrors snapping shut over the opening as if it had never been there.

Togami slammed into the mirror, fingers scraping across the bumps and cracks in its surface as he searched desperately for the seams to the door. This couldn’t be happening, it couldn’t, it wasn’t right — Naegi couldn’t be taken away with the chains the mastermind used for the culprits. He flung himself at the mirror again, clawing at the twisted glass until bloody smears distorted his reflection.

But no matter how he tried, it did no good. The mirrors wouldn’t budge — not for him, anyway.

He whirled back towards the circle, glaring at Ogami where she still stood frozen at her podium. “Don’t just stand there — get over here!”

She heard him, he saw her eyes flicker in his direction — but she didn’t move.
“Come on, we don’t have time for you to waste like this!” he snarled, bloody fingers spasming as he tried to clench them into fists. “You know this is a lie — he’s innocent, he’d never hurt anyone, he couldn’t! You know that!”

She just stared at him with the same stricken eyes he’d seen when he’d found her hunched on the floor of her darkened room. The eyes of a girl who’d watched her friend die…

“We can still get to him!” He felt the crack in his voice as the words tumbled desperately out of his mouth. “There’s still time, we can still stop this!”

Ogami opened her mouth as if to speak — but her lips didn’t form any words.

“Why aren’t you helping?” Togami spun to look at Jill, but for the first time he could remember, she wouldn’t meet his eyes. He ground his teeth together — the one time he could have used a maniac on his side and this was what she did?

There was only one person left — and with no other options, with the seconds slipping away through his bloody fingers, Togami turned to Kirigiri. “You can still stop this — you have to! Tell the mastermind it’s gone far enough, tell them they don’t have to go through with it, whatever they need to hear! They’ll listen to you, you know they will!”

She flinched visibly, a mere flicker of motion — but for the stoic girl, any reaction at all was dramatic. He stepped towards her, pressing whatever small advantage it might be.

“What reason they’re doing this — if they want us to stop fighting, if they want us to stop searching — whatever they want, it doesn’t matter. Tell them I’ll do it. I’ll stay, I’ll stop accusing you, I’ll — I’ll do whatever it takes.” He searched her face for some hint of kindness, some trace of the good person Naegi had so firmly believed she was. “Please. He thinks you’re his friend, he trusts you. Do something — please!”

“I…” The color had drained from Kirigiri’s face, leaving it the sickly shade of old milk. “I… I’m sorry.”

Togami stared at her, a leaden weight filling his stomach. Naegi had fought so hard for this girl, believed in her so much — and this was how she repaid him?

But before he could find the words to damn her, a flash of movement whirled its way across the mirrors, twisting across the twists and lumps in the glass. That was all the warning they had before harsh, brilliant light burst through the dim room. The mirrors reflected it back onto itself, over and over, and Togami’s eyes snapped closed against the laser-sharp beams that burned into his retinas. The light hurt after so long in shadows, writhing across the insides of his eyelids too brightly to bear.

As soon as he could stand the pain, he forced his eyes open again, trying to brace himself for whatever new attack the mastermind was launching. It had to be an attack, it couldn’t be anything else. They’d been wrong, their vote was wrong, and that meant they were all slated for death. That was what was coming, it had to be —

Except that wasn’t what he found when his vision finally cleared. The trial room was unchanged, with its circle of podiums — but one section of the mirrors lining the wall had slid aside, revealing a large picture window that opened on another world.

None of them had seen the sun in weeks, but behind the window it shone like a perfect summer morning. Fluffy white clouds dotted the brilliant blue sky, and fresh green grass stretched across
the ground. Birds swooped merrily across the sky, and colorful butterflies floated above a rainbow of wildflowers. And in the center of this peaceful scene, an idealized model of Hope’s Peak Academy stretched to the heavens.

Togami stared at the out of place school, icy dread coiling through his veins. The outside of the academy had been one of the last things he could remember seeing before the start of the mastermind’s game, and the model captured the essence of the building all too well, down to the same huge brick walls and glittering glass windows. The sight sent a visceral shudder through him, for all that it was objectively quite pretty. It didn’t matter how lovely the scene seemed to look… there was a nightmare lurking there, he knew it.

Because as peaceful as that scene looked, it was no idyll. A bright yellow school bus rolled up to the front gates, and despite its cartoonish appearance, the grinning face of a Monokuma robot peered out through the driver’s window. The jarring horror of the bear’s presence set alarm bells ringing in Togami’s head, warning signs that even the rushing emptiness filling his ears couldn’t silence. He didn’t want to watch this, didn’t want to see it, to have the images in his head to haunt him every time he closed his eyes…

But he couldn’t look away. If the worst was true, if Naegi really was on the other side of that window, if he’d managed to stay conscious while dragged away in chains… then he deserved to know that his boyfriend was watching. If there was the chance it might offer the sweet, undeserving, innocent boy a drop of comfort, Togami couldn’t deny him. He took a slow, stumbling step towards the window, then another.

He reached the window just as the school bus pulled away again, leaving a long line of black silhouettes behind. Fifteen dark figures were outlined against the sunny sky, hands joined together to link them in a chain — fifteen figures that he recognized. Hagakure’s mess of an afro, Ogami’s muscular build, Celeste’s corkscrew pigtails… every one of the students who’d begun the game stood there all in black.

No — not every one of them. When he searched the line for a small figure with one strand of distinctly disobedient hair, he couldn’t find anything — but he did see the outline of a slim girl he didn’t recognize. Was that supposed to be Ikusaba? But if she was there… then where was…

And then the line began to move — and Togami realized that the figures hadn’t been the only things Monokuma’s school bus had disgorged. He hadn’t been able to see past the black figures, but now, as they slid away from their starting positions, they parted to reveal Naegi’s crumpled body on the front steps. He would have been entirely sprawled on the ground if it hadn’t been for two large, heavy handcuffs on each wrist, binding his hands into their places in the line. His right hand linked him to a girl with one thin braid in her otherwise loose hair — and his left hand — oh god, injured left hand had been torn from its sling to dangle uselessly from the cuff chaining him to a tall boy with glasses.

The silhouettes had moved from a line to a loose circle, wrapping around the model of the school in a strange echo of the circles of the trial room. Togami strained to see through them, pressing against the cold glass of the window as he searched for some clue about Naegi’s condition. Was he still conscious? Still breathing?

But before he could tell for certain, the last two figures joined hands to connect the final links of the circle — and the silhouettes began to spin.
Pain encompassed the whole of Naegi’s world, swirling around him in a howl of dizzy black rings. His left side burned with constant jolts of agony, every twitch flinging bolts of lightning from fingertips to shoulders. That pain should have been enough, should have at least drowned out the rest of his nerves… but no, even through the mess of his arm he could feel the jolting through his legs as he was dragged along the ground, the ache where the chained collar had gripped his throat, and through it all, in the midst of everything, the throbbing tangle of darkness that pounded through his skull.

He could almost be grateful for the ache of confusion in his head, the way that it made the world shudder in and out of focus. The pain never disappeared, not entirely… but when aching head sent the world blurring around him, the physical sensations seemed to be a little further away. It brought him just enough relief to reach for the confusion, letting it flood through his mind and drag him down into its mire. Down into the darkness…

Into the shadows…

… into the nightmare unfolding through his mind…

… Hope’s Peak stretched tall and proud above him, so lofty it could brush the sky itself. Hope’s Peak Academy, where he’d been invited to attend as the 78th class’s Ultimate Lucky Student, where he’d walked up the steps on the very first day, where he’d walked through those heavy doors to find the fifteen people who would change him forever…

…

Fifteen people… no, fifteen classmates, fifteen friends who spun around him in a maddening whirl. He couldn’t see them, not clearly, not through the dizzying whirl that grew faster every time he blinked… but he didn’t need to see them, not when he knew them all so very well. He could hear them laughing happily, one after another, and he was almost… almost sure the sound hadn’t come from the depths of his head.

The laughter of his friends surrounded him, Maizono’s bright voice mingling with Celeste’s practiced snicker, and Fujisaki’s shy whisper of a giggle nearly drowned out by Ishimaru’s booming rumble. He could hear them all, as clearly as if they stood here with him outside the school… the laughter of his dead friends.

…

… They stood together in the entrance hall, meeting as a group for the first time. Sixteen smiles, shy and open, proud and nervous, sixteen people all waiting to see what would happen. Sixteen people about to become friends.

They’d gotten closer over the course of a year… a long year that had lasted a lifetime… a year that had been much too short. Those first fragile connections had deepened, and new bonds had formed that they hadn’t expected. The year had taken them through twists and turns, transforming them from strangers into a group, a class, a team… but this had been the start of it, here at the academy entrance where they’d met for the first time.
Where they’d met…

… for the first time…

Faster and faster the ideas spun through his head, blurring into a haze as the line whirled him round the room. All the world disappeared, lost behind the dizzying veil of motion — but Hope’s Peak Academy stood there in the center, looking somehow wrong but still unmistakable. It was all he could see clearly, shuddering in the middle of his vision, shaking and swaying as he spun faster than ever. The front doors shot past his eyes, doors that he’d only gotten to walk through once…

... hundreds of times, he’d walked through that door every day for a year, up those steps and into the building without a second thought…

Windows flashed by, nearer and farther, nearer and farther, like the line was zigzagging instead of circling. Open windows, clear and airy, windows like he’d never seen at this school…

… windows in every classroom, letting in the light, opening the world up to the students because no one believed there was anything out there to fear…

And there wasn’t — they’d been right. Fear was inside the academy, fear was within them, among them, worse than anything the world could do to them. Fear was what the academy had unleashed on the world, fear and horror and despair…

Laughter echoed in his ears, the recorded voices overlapping one another until the happy sounds bled together into a long mad cackle that seemed to shake the very walls of the school in front of him. Not just the voices he knew this time, now there were others, voices he didn’t know…

… voices he knew, people he knew, friends he could never forget…

Mukuro Ikusaba, whose quiet laugh had to be surprised out of her.

Headmaster Kirigiri, proud and welcoming to them all, but with a fond, sad chuckle reserved for the moments after he caught sight of his daughter in his halls.

And another voice … a voice from his nightmares, a voice he knew too well…

There could be dozens of other voices, hundreds, thousands — and still, that one laugh would ring out clearly, distinct from them all. Her voice clawed at his brain, deep wounds from sharp red nails the same bloody shade as Monokuma’s lightning bolt eye. Her voice, her voice, one that he should have heard and hadn’t, that had been missing where it should have been present, that had been laughing in his head for days…

...the last voice he’d heard, the last laugh he’d heard, burning into his brain in those final few seconds when he’d realized that nowhere, nowhere, could ever be truly safe from despair…

Not even Hope’s Peak Academy.

Especially not Hope’s Peak Academy.

The school had nurtured despair, becoming a breeding ground for the very thing it should have most strongly opposed. It had been shaken, twisted, rocked to its very foundations …
The school rocked on its foundations, tilting back and forth until even caught in this whirling loop he could see that it wasn’t just happening in his head. The school tipped one way then another, as if shaken by the whirlwind of students dancing around it. Their laughter tore at it, knocking it round and round, this way and that, until no building could stand up to the strain. The walls shook… shuddered… and one fell away from the other three with a crack, smashing through the line of silhouettes opposite Naegi.

The impact jolted up through his injured arm, along his twisting spine, and out through his throat in a strangled, gasping scream. But he couldn’t continue, didn’t have breath, because even with half of the students crushed the line never stopped its maddened whirl. It dragged him on, over the crushed silhouettes, through the pools of blood bursting from their shattered forms, onto the broken remnants of the wall. His throat seized and spasmed, trying to find enough air to fill his lungs just one more time — but a second wall crashed through another segment of the line before he could.

Broken figures lay on the ground, not bodies but the idea of bodies, a reminder of what human flesh would look like torn asunder, drenched in blood, scattered carelessly across the ground. He could see them, people he knew, *friends* that he knew, he could see them in the unidentifiable pieces that remained, his mind filling in blanks that should have been meaningless.

A roar of wind, a thunderclap at his side, and the third wall crashed to the ground, inches away, smashing through the figure that had been unmistakably Kirigiri. His right arm stretched as he was whirled away, cuff stretching out from his wrist — stretched and twisted —

Black exploded across his eyes as something tore inside his arm. The cuff broke away from the rubble, but his arm flopped uselessly at his side as he spun. It hurt, both of his arms hurt, pain screaming through his veins until his whole body throbbed with it. He wanted it to stop, *wanted it to stop* —

And in the midst of it all, in the blackest depths of pain, in the ruins of the school, memories of the dead surrounding him… he heard her laughing. The voiced he knew but hadn’t heard, the girl he’d never seen but who had been present for every moment of the game, the one person at the root of every nightmare he had.

He knew her.

Of course he knew her.

The darkness fell away from his eyes, and he didn’t know if it was a real vision or a hallucinated memory or some twisted combination of the two… but as the final wall plummeted directly towards him, he saw the face of the figure across the circle, bright and smiling and crueler than anyone could imagine.

*Junko Enoshima.*
There was nothing left.

Togami stared through the window, eyes fixed on the ruins of that final wall, the place where the last of the grotesquely dancing line had been crushed… but no matter how long he looked, there wasn’t a hint of motion. No shifting rocks, no quivering dust, not a single sign that anything living might remain on the other side of the glass. The facts were clear… leaving only one logical conclusion.

There was nothing left of the boy he loved.

His body seemed to drift hollow and empty through the passing seconds as he stood pressed against the window. He knew the glass was cool under his hand, the ground solid beneath his feet, the air frigid as it blew across the back of his neck… but the sensations themselves couldn’t touch him. His world began and ended with the execution room… the last place he had seen.

It had been pretty, before the execution began. The thought did nothing to comfort him now, after the falling walls had destroyed any possibility of beauty in the world… but still, it hadn’t been Celeste’s witch burning scene or Fukawa’s horror movie asylum. It had been a nightmare of its own, yes… but it was possible that someone too injured to think straight wouldn’t have recognized the horror of it.

Maybe someday he would be able to believe that, if he tried.

But whatever the room had been at the start, it certainly wasn’t pretty now. The walls had split and crumbled all across the rolling grass, turning it to a field of dirty rubble that oozed red from every crack. The birds that had soared through the air had fallen to the ground in a tangle of wires and sparks, still twitching in a futile attempt to repeat the motions of flight. And the sky, bright and clear and crystal blue, the sky that had looked so real he’d almost forgotten they had to be far, far underground… the sky had been torn asunder when the walls fell against it. A long swath of blue cloth dangled from the ceiling, exposing the solid gray concrete and half-rotted support beams.

He didn’t know how long he stood there, looking at the wreckage. Years, a lifetime, an eternity… or maybe only a handful of seconds. It wasn’t as though it mattered, not when there was nothing left to change. With only an endless span of emptiness stretching out into his future, details didn’t make a difference. He could have stayed there until all the time in the world had ticked away… and it still wouldn’t undo what had happened beyond the window.

But even eternity ended. The room receded, moved into the distance, slipped away from his grasp… and only when he would have lost sight of that spot, the last place that had meant anything did he realize that it wasn’t the room that was moving, but him. There was a hand, a large and calloused hand holding his elbow, guiding him away from the window with a grip that was gentle but firm.

He could fight it, though, if he wanted to try. He knew the movements that would let him twist away, free himself, and go back to the window, back to where he’d been, back to the place he’d stood when he saw the last of the walls crash down into a nightmare of red…
But there was no point. Togami closed his eyes and let Sakura Ogami lead him carefully away to the elevator that would carry them back to the rest of the school. It didn’t matter if they left this scene behind. There was nothing left of Naegi in that room.

There was nothing quite like a job well done. Junko couldn’t help but beam with pride as she surveyed her handiwork. The broken slump of Ogami’s shoulders as she lost her battle against depression… the dull plodding of Jill’s feet, stripped of their usual bounce… the shell-shocked numbness that had washed away Kirigiri’s mask of false stoicism… and the emptiness in Togami’s eyes as he stumbled unseeing towards the elevator. She really had outdone herself this time, if she did say so herself!

Well, no, she had to give credit where it was due — she and Naegi had outdone themselves. After all, she couldn’t have pulled off this level of despair without the other boy’s help. He was such a nice guy, always willing to help out a friend — she’d always appreciated that about him!

It was such a shame that he couldn’t see the beautiful results of his decision to lie. He’d torn through his friends like a wrecking ball — and realizing it would have sent him plummeting into the loveliest depths of despair. If he hadn’t died before getting the chance to experience it, she would have been so jealous!

She kept an eye on her friends just long enough to make sure they settled in for the night, without another round of key-stealing hijinks. Once they were all snug in their beds, or at least close enough, she flipped her trap door open and dropped into the room beneath. It was pretty jam-packed, with barely enough room for her bed wedged in between all the piles of possessions she’d confiscated from the school that could have given the game away early. It took some maneuvering, but she managed to wriggle her way around the stacks without knocking more than a couple photos to the floor.

On the other side of the room, she hit the button to open her personal elevator and slipped inside, drumming her fingers impatiently against the steel walls as it descended to the trial rooms. Honestly, she would much rather have taken the opportunity for a nice nap, while all her friends were occupied… but if there was one thing she’d learned from Owada, it was that the post-execution clean-up couldn’t be delayed. She’d left him to his own devices just a little too long, and scraping all that congealing flesh off the motorcycle so she could move it to the morgue had taken hours — and that wasn’t even counting the time she’d had to spend redoing her nails afterward!

Not that she expected Naegi to give her anywhere near that much trouble, of course. She’d just grab a shovel from her backstage equipment stash on her way into the execution room — it hadn’t been long at all, so that ought to do the trick.

Shovel in hand, she swung open the back door to the execution room, taking a deep breath of the blood-soaked air. How many tragedies had she visited, with that same stench hanging heavy in the air? She might have lost track of the numbers, the boring little tallies devoid of personality… but she remembered every single one. And she’d remember this one, too. She owed it to sweet little Naegi, who had given his life to bring about her dreams.

Junko’s feet squelched through the blood-soaked grass as she circled around the room, studying the fallen walls with a frown. She was going to have to move them, if she wanted to get at the body… but the real question was how to do it. There wouldn’t have been much point if the walls weren’t
heavy, after all! She headed towards the place where Naegi had been squashed, frowning thoughtfully at the large pieces of the wall that lay together in a heap. Maybe if she pushed off the top one…?

She gave the largest piece of rubble an experimental shove — and to her surprise, it toppled backwards to shatter against the ground. She blinked. That was strange… it must have been pretty off balance to fall over that easily. She glanced down… and her eyebrows slowly lifted up towards her hairline.

The reason the piece of wall had tipped over without much trouble was that apparently, it hadn’t been lying flat against the ground. The wall had crumbled in such a way that the pieces had hit the floor at just slightly different moments, creating a small space where they’d been propped against one another. It wasn’t much space, of course — but it was just enough for Naegi’s body to lie in the small, uncrushed space.

Junko shook her head slowly, a smile of disbelief curling across her lips. “Wow… guess they weren’t kidding when they called you the Ultimate Lucky Student, huh?” She shrugged and raised the shovel high above her head. It ought to be heavy enough if she swung it hard.

And then she realized his eyes were open.

She paused, shovel going still in her hands. He shouldn’t be awake, there was really no way he could be conscious. His eyes might be open, but even so, he had to be in the middle of some wild hallucinations, not seeing the reality of the situation. He couldn’t really see —

“Junko…”

Her name was less than a whisper, barely a breath on his trembling lips… but she still heard it. Junko stared down into Naegi’s eyes — and she saw recognition. Not of the hair, the clothes, all the things she’d shared with the second-rate copy of herself that Mukuro had managed… but a deep, cutting recognition of who was really standing in front of him. He knew her.

He knew her.

The shovel clattered to the ground, an abandoned tool from another plan, as Junko bent down at Naegi’s side. Slowly, gently, she slid her arms under his back and his legs, lifting him out of the wreckage. The movement seemed to be too much for his overloaded brain, sending him slumping back into unconsciousness… but she could still see the rise and fall of his chest as she turned to carry him back towards the elevator.

She had a new plan.

Chapter End Notes

And there we have it -- the final chapter of the post-trial arc. This is one of the sections I've been looking forward to writing ever since I plotted out this fic, and I'm really excited to have it finished! I'd also like to say thank you to those of you who have been reading it along with me. It means a lot to know that you're enjoying the story as much as I am! <3

Now that this arc is over, I'm going to take another break before trying to start the next
section. After the emotional intensity of writing this section, I need a solid two weeks to recover! So that means the break will be about two and a half weeks. The next chapter will be posted on Thursday, May 11. I'll see you all then, when we learn more about just what horrible plans Junko has for our poor boys!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The back wall of the Hope’s Peak library was one of Togami’s favorite places to read, seated at one of the quiet tables tucked away from the world. With the large windows beside him, opening onto a clear view of the city below, and the musty scent of venerable old books around him, he felt like he could enjoy the written words far more than anywhere else in the school. Even with his classwork done for the day, he often chose to stay and read a little longer in the peaceful room.

Footsteps sounded along the edge of the bookcases, gradually approaching his seat, but he didn’t pay them much attention. This was still a school, after all, and students did occasionally need to find a book from the shelves in this area. He could hardly object to the presence of the other students, as long as they didn’t try to talk to him. He never appreciated being interrupted in the middle of a book —

“Oh, Togami! Here you are!”

His hands froze on the book, clenching tight at the unexpected voice. He hated being interrupted — but there was one exception to that rule. Slowly, taking great care to feign a reluctance that he didn’t feel, Togami set his book down and looked up into Naegi’s face.

A smile lit up the other boy’s face when their eyes finally met — and oh god, that wasn’t fair at all. How was Togami supposed to convince himself that he really was annoyed to be interrupted when Naegi’s open, genuine smile sent his heart stuttering against his ribcage?

“Did you want something?” he asked, doing his best to conceal any trace of his reaction from the other boy. Having something as ridiculous as a crush was bad enough without advertising the fact — especially not to the boy in question.

But it seemed like he’d covered up the truth a little too well, because Naegi paused, eyes darting down to the book on the table. A pang shot through Togami’s chest when the bright smile faded, Naegi’s lips tilting downward in a hesitant frown. “Oh, sorry — I’m interrupting you, right? I should go.”

“No,” Togami said immediately, before Naegi could turn to make good on his threat. “That is… you’ve already interrupted me, so you might as well say whatever you came to discuss.”

“If you’re sure.” Naegi’s frown cleared away, though his smile didn’t return. “Well… I wanted to ask… you know the park up the street?”

Togami raised an eyebrow at this ridiculous inquiry. Not only was the park clearly visible from their classroom windows, Naegi ought to know perfectly well that their entire class had gone there together not two weeks ago when Maizono’s band had put on an open-air concert there. “I’m familiar with it.”

The dryness of his words sent a flush creeping up Naegi’s cheeks, and all other thoughts evaporated for a moment as Togami wondered what it would feel like to run his lips along the warm pink skin.

“Right, of course you know it.” Naegi’s voice snapped Togami back to reality, and he could only pray that the other boy hadn’t noticed his distraction. “Well, I heard from Asahina that a really
good new ice cream stand just opened there, and I thought that... maybe we could go there tomorrow night.”

Asahina and Naegi had been planning some sort of outing? Not that it could be for the two of them alone, or Naegi wouldn’t have felt the need to inform him... but even so, Togami felt his shoulders stiffen as jealousy prickled through him. “One day ahead of time is rather short notice for a Saturday night. You’d have a better chance of convincing the class to join you if you delayed the excursion until next week.”

Naegi blinked, looking confused rather than grateful for the suggestion. “The class...?” And then understanding dawned in his expression. “Oh — you thought I meant we’d go with all our friends?”

Togami frowned, deciding to let the “all our friends” remark pass without comment so that he could focus on the odd question instead. The way Naegi had phrased it made his stomach twist into very disconcerting knots, and he was finding it unaccountably hard to breathe normally. “Are you saying that — that you meant something else?”

Naegi took a deep breath, then nodded, lifting his chin with a flash of determination so fierce that Togami couldn’t tear his eyes away. “That’s right. I wasn’t talking about going with the entire class. I want to go together with you — just the two of us.”

Togami could feel every individual beat of his heart, pulsing hot and rapid through his veins as he stared up at Naegi. Just the two of them, walking together through a park where fragrant flowers were bathed in the reds and golds of the setting sun ...

“It just occurred to me all of a sudden that it would be a nice first date. I like ice cream and parks. That’s where I would want to take you.”

The words echoed through Togami’s head, discordant and out of place. They could almost have been in Naegi’s voice... except that they had a strange sort of hollowness to them, as though he’d imagined the other boy speaking lines of dialogue from a play he’d never heard aloud. That ought to make perfect sense, since of course he’d never heard Naegi say such a thing... it ought to... except...

“I had a dream about you.”

It was definitely Naegi’s voice this time, without a doubt. Togami looked back up at the other boy, prepared to demand an explanation for this unsettling shift in the direction of their conversation — but when his eyes refocused on Naegi, he froze.

Blood dripped down Naegi’s face, long crimson gashes that soaked into the clean white of his uniform shirt. The boy hardly seemed to notice, head drooping from a tired neck as he swayed unsteadily on his feet. Haziness clouded his gentle hazel eyes, but even so, they bored straight into Togami’s own, the only part of him that didn’t falter.

“I dreamed that we could attend school together like normal students. You would kiss me good morning, and we would walk to class together.”

What was he talking about? They did go to school together, they attended the same classes every day — but when Togami tried to open his mouth to say as much, he found that his voice had deserted him. With Naegi’s eyes on him, stripping away all his outer shields to stare directly into his soul, Togami couldn’t remember the words he’d wanted to say.
... there’d been something he’d wanted to say...

“It would have been nice. I would have liked the chance to have something like that.”

He’d heard these words before, he knew he had... but they hadn’t been said like this. There was a
sorrow in these words now, sorrow and regret and loss that had wiped away the wistful dreams of
a world that might have been.

“You told me I could have my dream. You said you’d keep me safe. You asked me to be on your
side, but you weren’t on mine.”

Naegi’s eyes burned into his, staring out from a blood-streaked face.

“You didn’t protect me.”

Togami scrambled to his feet, knowing what was coming — but even as he lunged forward, trying
to catch the broken young man in his arms, a greater force drew Naegi away. He ran towards
Naegi, flew past an overturned library, down hallways that shifted with twisting shadows and
writhing patterns of colored lights, through a school locked and barred like a prison — but the
faster he ran, the further out of reach Naegi seemed to be.

Further... further... until he turned a final corner and found himself outside the school, in an
eerily lovely meadow that turned his blood to ice despite its beauty. Togami spun, searching
desperately for the boy who he knew had to be there, and as he turned, the shadows rose up from
the ground around him. Corpses leered at him from all directions, Kuwata’s battered form and
Maizono with the knife still in her chest, Fujisaki crucified and bloody and Asahina riddled with
bullets — all of the dead laughed and laughed as they joined hands and danced around him.

And when he caught sight of a flash of soft brown hair, Togami realized Naegi was among them.
The boy was one of their number, spinning in the dizzying whirl, too fast for Togami to catch more
than a glimpse. He tried to call out, tried to scream, tried desperately to say the words he needed
the other boy to hear — but he’d lost his chance to speak. He ran forward, trying to snatch
Naegi’s hand away from the clutches of the dead, but everything he touched scratched deep into
his skin like broken glass.

There was nothing he could do, nothing he could say, no way he could prevent the line of laughing
corpses from hauling Naegi away as one of their number. All he could do was throw himself after
them in one last desperate attempt, throw himself into the dead and —

— and wake up, sweat-soaked sheets tangled around him as he shot upright. Togami’s shoulders
heaved as he gasped for breath, lungs burning as though he really had been running the entire
length of the school.

A nightmare. That was all it had been. He closed his eyes, trying to steady himself against the
lingering effects of terror shaking through his limbs. Just a nightmare, nothing real. He reached out
to straighten the sheets —

And his hands really did hurt like he’d beaten them against broken glass.

Chapter End Notes
And we're back! Well, sort of. I forgot that this Sunday will be Mother's Day, so the next chapter will be up on Monday instead. After that, we'll be back to your regularly scheduled Sunday/Thursday chapters!
Chapter 263

The world stopped around Togami as he froze, staring down at his hands. The previous morning, they had been smooth and elegant, perfect as befitted the Togami heir — but they would never look so unmarred again. Dozens of jagged red lines zigzagged across his skin, branching upwards from palms that looked like little more than bloody swathes of flayed meat. His hands had been torn to shreds, ruined by shards of knife-edged glass —

No. Not glass — mirrors. It had been mirrors that had ripped through his hands, the broken mirrors that had lined the trial room. He’d thrown himself at them, tried to claw his way through the door they concealed with his bare hands, in a desperate attempt to reach —

Naegi. He’d wanted to get to Naegi.

He could see the chains dragging the other boy away, hauling him into the darkness beyond the trial room without any regard for the weakened boy’s terrible injuries. He’d run, he’d forgotten all trace of exhaustion and flung himself after his boyfriend faster than he’d known he could move, he’d used every trick in his power to try to get to Naegi in time…

And he’d failed.

He hadn’t crossed the room fast enough to snatch Naegi from the swift iron chains. He hadn’t found a way to reopen the door in the mirrors. All he’d been able to do was stand there and watch from behind the unbreakable window as the mastermind forced Naegi into a ghoulish execution.

No, that wasn’t right. The other deaths had been executions, but this hadn’t been the same. Those had all occurred according to the rules, punishments meted out in response to a failed gambit to win the game. But this was no rule-sanctioned execution. Naegi had been murdered for a crime he hadn’t committed.

Murdered in front of them all, in the middle of a twisted mockery of a dance with the people who should have been his classmates. Murdered by the collapsing walls of the school itself, the prison that had lured them all here to meet their doom. Murdered by the people he’d called his friends.

Naegi had been murdered.

Togami closed his eyes, painful shudders racking through his chest as he tried to draw a shaking breath. The nightmare that had haunted his sleep might have been a delirious tangle of fact and fiction… but the core of it had been the truth. Naegi was gone. He was gone, lost forever to the mastermind’s insane plot. Togami had fought so hard to save him, to protect him, to keep him safe and whole and well in spite of the dangers of the killing game… but it had all been for nothing. Naegi wasn’t coming back.

The thought was too vast to hold in his mind, too shattering to comprehend its meaning. He couldn’t doubt the truth of it, not when the memories of the horrible events sank dark and poisonous through his head… but he couldn’t understand it, either. How could it be possible that he would never get another chance to see Naegi smile at him, to wake up with Naegi in his arms, to feel his heart fill to bursting with the unexpected brightness Naegi had given him? It couldn’t be true, it couldn’t be real, that couldn’t be way their romance ended.

Or maybe it was the only ending possible. He could remember the aftermath of his initial tryst with Naegi, when horror struck him as his actions finally sank in. He’d felt as though a noose had settled
around his neck, just waiting until he least expected it to destroy him. And that was what had happened. He’d let himself believe that maybe, even in the midst of the killing game, even with the mastermind flinging dangers at them from every angle, just *maybe* this relationship could be one spark of light in the depths of this nightmare… and that light had been brutally snuffed out.

And now all that remained was darkness, closing in around him as cold and unforgiving as the void of space. Naegi had been warmth, he’d been light, he’d been joy and happiness and hope… and when he’d disappeared from the world, he’d taken all those soft, gentle things with him. Emptiness stretched out through the parts of Togami’s soul that they’d touched, emptiness too encompassing for even grief to fill it. Naegi deserved grief, he deserved to be mourned… but Togami couldn’t find the emotions within him. Nothing was left, an infinity of empty space spanning beyond his comprehension.

Time passed as he sat there on the bed, but he couldn’t have said how much. Time had no meaning any longer, except as yet another force separating him from Naegi. Every painful second that ticked by dragged him further away from the final moments when Naegi had existed in the world. It didn’t matter how many of them there were… whatever number it was would be too many.

But eventually, something reached through the thick fog of nothingness, something too grating and unpleasant to ignore. Slowly, without the drive to fight the process or urge it onward, Togami felt his awareness shifting back to the world around him, pulled back by something that was occurring in the present moment… something that was off to his right…

Something that was loud.

That ought to mean something. That was important, as much as anything could be in the wreckage of his world. Togami couldn’t find the part of himself that cared about it… but because he knew he *should* care, he managed to turn his head ever so slightly to the right.

He had a vague sense of disorientation as he looked at the room, a recognition in the distant part of his mind that still functioned that his dorm room hadn’t been decorated with punching bags or weights… but that didn’t matter. Whatever room this might be, he didn’t see anything to his right that would make such a sound. He’d thought it had been like the clanging of a bell… but now it almost seemed like words…

He dredged up the will to turn his head one more time, in the direction of the television screen mounted on every dormitory wall. As he let his eyes focus on the monitor, he recognized the final moments of Monokuma’s usual morning announcement. The last few words sounded in his right ear just before the screen flickered back to blackness.

Togami continued to stare up at it, since looking in that direction was as meaningless as any other. Up and to the left… not to the right, where he’d expected to see the source of the noise based on what he’d been able to hear. It didn’t match… and while he knew there was a conclusion to be drawn from that, he couldn’t see the point of bothering.

He couldn’t see the point of anything.

Togami slumped down backwards onto the bed, his head bumping down flat on the mattress instead of onto a pillow. He could have moved, could have shifted to make himself more comfortable… but he couldn’t remember why he should. He couldn’t see a reason to do anything now, so he might as well just lie here in the silent dorm room that wasn’t his own, staring up at a ceiling he didn’t recognize. It was as good a way to spend his imprisonment as any. Nothing he could do would make a difference anymore.
Chapter 264

Togami felt himself drifting forward through time in haze of solitude, gazing upward at the ceiling without actually seeing it. Somewhere far away, he had the vague idea that things like hunger, thirst, stiffness, and other kinds of discomfort existed... but they weren’t strong enough to reach through the fog enveloping him. It was almost peaceful, with his consciousness too distant to be touched by the world around him. It was empty and lonely, yes... but it kept the pain at bay. That was the best he could expect.

The room around him shifted, the pattern of shadows altering along the ceiling... but that didn’t matter. He knew, in that far off part of himself almost entirely muffled by the fog, that this fact ought to be significant, that it would once have caused him serious alarm... but he let the fog carry it away beyond his notice. What was the point of alarm, if he’d failed to protect the only thing worth worrying about?

But instead of disappearing entirely from his awareness, the changes in the room only grew more insistent. The air current shifted along his body, proof of motion around him that he couldn’t fully ignore. And as much as he tried to keep himself wrapped in the fog, as desperately as he clung to the illusion of peace it provided... he couldn’t avoid the sounds that trickled into his head.

Not just sounds... words. There were words in the room, poking and prodding at his mind with demands to be understood. He didn’t want to give in to them, didn’t want the knowledge of the present they would force on him... but their mere existence was enough to keep him tethered to room where they occurred. But even so, even with the prodding and the awareness... even so, he didn’t have to give in to them. He could still refuse to acknowledge them, staring upward without moving to encourage them to leave him to his solitude.

Or at least he could until a large hand settled on his shoulder.

Instinct took over, reacting to the unwanted physical contact without input from his brain. He twisted away from the touch, shooting upward and grabbing the wrist to hurl the potential attacker away.

But Sakura Ogami didn’t budge, other than a slight lift of her eyebrows at his reaction. She paid no attention to his hand gripping her arm, and instead met his eyes with a determined gaze that left no room for escape.

“You have to get up, Togami.”

She spoke the words slowly and clearly enough that he could read them from her lips as well as hear them in his right ear. Even though she must not have thought that he could hear, her voice was still full of a firmness that couldn’t be ignored and a gentleness too terrible to bear. The words closed off the possibility of retreat, preventing him from returning to the fog, at least as long as she stood there.

Even so, he didn’t have to give in to her. His eyes narrowed, and his lips tilted downward in a dark frown. “No.”

But she seemed to take the words as some sort of encouragement, rather than the dismissal he’d intended. “Ah... so you can understand me. That is a relief. I wasn’t certain you were still able to respond. Are you aware you’ve been nearly catatonic for most of the day?”
Togami stared blankly at her. Why was she telling him something so meaningless? What did it matter to her if he spoke or not? It wasn’t as though he had anything to say to her.

Or… was that true? A deeply buried thought shifted in the depths of his brain, struggling to make itself heard…

“You need to treat your hands before they get infected,” Ogami went on, before the thought could fully surface in Togami’s mind. “And afterward you should try to eat something, if you can. And…” her eyes flickered down, “and you should think about trying to shower and change into clean clothes.”

At that reminder, he found himself conscious of the rough, gritty movement of his clothes against his skin. He glanced down at himself… and he could hardly recognize the garments as his own. Stained with blood and oil and soot, torn and creased and shredded, his clothes had been so ravaged by the events of the last two days that nothing in the laundry room would have a chance of salvaging them. They were filthy, and he could feel his shoulders shift in discomfort at their continued touch.

“I brought you new clothes from the storage room,” Ogami said. “Since your own aren’t an option right now.”

Not an option…? Togami didn’t look up at her, continuing to frown at his clothing as memories of the previous night drifted back into his head. He remembered swaying outside his dorm room door, key shaking in his hand… remembered trying to slide the key into the lock over and over to no avail, until it fell from his nerveless fingers. It hadn’t worked… the key hadn’t worked, not even when Ogami had picked it up and tried it herself. His dorm room door hadn’t opened.

Because it had been the wrong key. He’d given Naegi his key, when he’d stayed to search the headmaster’s office while the other boy returned to the dorms. And that key… he’d pocketed that key while helping Naegi sort through his overloaded pockets during their investigation. The key he’d tried to use last night had been Naegi’s.

His head shot up to glare at a startled Ogami. “Where is it?”

She blinked, startled. “I — I don’t know what you —”

“Naegi’s key — where is it?” His grip on her wrist tightened until it hurt his injured hands more than it could have caused her any pain — but he didn’t care. He’d thought nothing could matter again, but this, this, this — this did. Naegi was gone, but he’d left one thing behind, one thing that Togami could touch and hold and keep, and he was not going to let it slip through his fingers.

“It’s there, on the nightstand —”

Before she could say another word Togami dropped her wrist and lunged across the bed for the place she’d indicated. And there — next to a stack of weights, dropped carelessly near the edge — there it was, sitting out in the open with no regard for its worth. He seized it, snatching it close to his chest as if it could be ripped away from him at any moment. Why would Monokuma let him keep something precious, after destroying so much else that he valued?

“I wasn’t trying to keep it from you,” Ogami’s voice came from behind him, her voice quiet and strange, as though the words took more effort than usual. “I thought you’d find it there when you woke up, I —” She stopped. “Oh, that’s right, his hearing. He can’t —”
“I can hear you.” His voice sounded strange in his own ears, twisted and thick and distorted. “But I don’t know if I believe you.”

“You… what?” She sounded confused, as if she had no idea what he was talking about.

He felt his mouth curl into a sneer. “Don’t pretend not to know!” With the key in his hand, he could feel his thoughts clicking back into their proper places, the broken gears of his mind beginning to spin once more. And as they did, the memories flooded back, the horribly unfair end of the last trial and everything it had meant. He turned so he could look her in the eye as he spoke. “You stand there acting like you’re on my side, telling me all these useless things you’ve done to help me — but you haven’t told me the only thing that matters!”

She had the gall to look as though she didn’t understand him. “I’ll tell you whatever you wish to know —”

“Then tell me if it was you!” Togami snarled with a fury that had seemed impossible mere minutes ago. “Someone voted for him yesterday — someone condemned him to die in that pit! Someone did that to him, and I want to know if it was you!” His fingers tightened around the key, its sharp metal ridges biting into his hands to aggravate the existing wounds anew. But that didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was watching Ogami for her reactions, finding the truth in whatever response she chose to give.

Because he would find the truth about this. There was no other option. He was going to find out which of the other students had voted for Naegi… and he was going to kill them.
Chapter 265

Togami watched Ogami carefully as understanding spread across her face, deepening the lines of grief around her shadowed eyes. It looked real enough, as though she genuinely felt sorrow for everything that had occurred — but he couldn’t be certain, not after the unexpected verdict. Someone had lied, had cast a vote that hadn’t matched their arguments, had manipulated the trial to get an innocent student convicted… and so he needed more solid proof than an initial impression of relative honesty before he could eliminate anyone.

“Of course I didn’t vote for Naegi,” Ogami said at last, the words choking their way out of her throat. “I wouldn’t have — even if he hadn’t had me promise, I —”

“What promise?” Togami interrupted sharply. “He didn’t tell me about any promise.” There was so much Naegi had never told him — secrets and dreams and unanswered questions, so many conversations they’d never get the chance to have. It was wrong, wrong, that Ogami should have gotten the opportunity to hear some of Naegi’s thoughts that he hadn’t.

But at least she seemed to recognize that, since she didn’t hesitate to explain. “Naegi had me promise not to throw away my vote during this trial. I — well, when I was the mastermind’s agent, I — I never voted against any of the rest of you. I couldn’t.”

Togami’s expression hardened. “And you thought that kind of meaninglessly sentimental gesture would balance out your betrayal?”

“No,” Ogami said, dropping her gaze as guilt apparently overwhelmed her. “I know that nothing could. Nevertheless, that is how I voted — and when I told him about it, right before the trial, Naegi asked me not to do that this time. He wanted me to vote for the person I really thought had killed Ikusaba.”

Throwing another voter into the mix without even trying to sway her in one direction or another — it was such a ridiculously Naegi thing to do that Togami had to squeeze his eyes closed for a moment, forcing back the trembling wave of darkness that threatened to drag him back into broken oblivion.

But he couldn’t let it — not when he still had so much left to uncover. He swallowed back the grief clogging his throat and forced his eyes open again, doing his best to act as though the moment had never happened. “So you expect me to believe you kept your promise?”

“I hope you will,” she said quietly. “I tried my best to understand what happened, but… it was difficult. Everything was confusing, and the rest of you think so quickly that I couldn’t always keep up. But… I’d promised him. So I tried.”

He had to admit that it did make sense for Ogami to have had such a promise driving her during the trial. She’d never participated much in the earlier trials, waiting for the rest of them to work out a solution… but this time, she’d tried to reach a conclusion herself. She’d asked questions, made arguments, chosen sides — all the steps that would let her do as Naegi had asked. It all seemed to make sense…

Or it would have, if it weren’t for the way the trial had ended. Togami narrowed his eyes at her, preparing himself for any potential deception. “All right, if you worked as hard as you could to find an answer, let’s hear it — who did you vote for?”
Ogami raised her head slowly until she could look him in the eyes again, and he could almost believe that he saw real pain in her gaze. “Kirigiri.”

It was the right answer, the answer that matched what he’d guessed she’d do back during the trial, the answer that matched her actions… but at the same time, it was the wrong answer. Togami’s lip curled up in a bitter sneer. “You’re lying.”

She sighed, looking at him with an expression that he couldn’t quite understand. “No. I’m sorry, but no. I’m not lying. I wasn’t completely convinced by your arguments, but none of the other options seemed plausible. I didn’t want to make a choice… but when I had to, she was the only one I could pick.”

“Do you actually believe I’ve lost the ability to do simple math?” Togami snapped. “If you’d done as you claim, then she’d be the one who isn’t here now!”

“Math?” Ogami blinked. “You mean the vote counts? But… why would that have gotten Kirigiri executed?”

Togami rolled his eyes. “I know you’re an athlete, not an intellectual, but it’s a bit much to act like you can’t even add up to five. If you, Naegi, and I,” he held up one condescending finger as he spoke each name, “all voted for Kirigiri, then that would be three out of five — a majority. Even if the other girls both betrayed Naegi at the last minute, it wouldn’t have mattered. The three of us would still have won.”

“The… three of us.” Ogami stared at him blankly, and for some reason, a knot of tension began to tangle through his stomach. “You believe that Naegi would have voted for Kirigiri, as well?”

Ice gripped Togami’s chest, freezing the defensive words that wanted to rush to his lips. Up until that moment, he would have said yes — of course Naegi had voted for Kirigiri. She was the culprit, the only possible choice, and surely even with their supposed friendship obstructing his reason, Naegi would have been able to find his way to the truth when it mattered.

Except that it wasn’t the truth that had won the day. Not only had Ikusaba’s killer walked free, she’d succeeded in adding another death to her tally. And when he held that up against the rest of the evidence, all the ways that Ogami’s claims made too much sense to ignore… there was only one conclusion he could reach.

“No… he didn’t vote for her.” Togami’s fingers tightened around Naegi’s sharp, cold key, painful to hold in more ways than the mere physical. “She deceived him right up until the end.”

“Wait — you mean you still believe she was the culprit?” Ogami blurted out, too startled to speak as gently as she had before. “Even after the way the trial ended?”

“Of course I do. You said it yourself, there were no other possibilities.” Togami scowled. “Don’t tell me you’ve actually bought into the idea that Naegi was behind this.”

But she was already shaking her head before he finished the sentence. “No, of course not. Naegi might have managed to move around a little for the investigation, but no one who saw him in the aftermath of Jill’s attack in the library could consider him a serious suspect. But that wasn’t what I meant. Togami…” She hesitated, frowning at him as though she actually thought she would be able to read something from his expression. Normally, Togami would have scoffed at the very idea… but with the wounds of the trial still bleeding in his soul, it was just barely possible she might be right.
So before she could see something he would prefer to keep hidden, he sent her the darkest preemptive glare he could muster. “If there’s something you intend to say, get on with it before you waste any more of my time.”

The glare didn’t cow her as he’d normally expect, but it did at least produce a reaction. Ogami sighed, eyebrows drawing together in a sharp crease as she looked at him. “Well… I suppose you have the right to know what the rest of us heard during the trial.”

“Heard?” Togami’s eyes narrowed as he quickly flipped back through his memories of the trial, searching for moments of conversation that he might not have been able to understand. “Are you talking about some of that rubbish Monokuma said?”

“Not exactly,” Ogami said. “That is, he did say something that I don’t think you would have heard — after the verdict was announced, when none of us could believe it. He asked if any of us wanted to challenge the verdict.”

“He what?” Togami had to clench his fists into balls of agony to prevent himself from being stupid enough to attack the ultimate martial artist where she stood. “He gave you a perfect opening like that — and you didn’t even try to protect Naegi?”

“I intended to do so,” Ogami said. “But… I never got the chance. No one did. Naegi spoke up before we could.”

“Naegi did?” He hated the way his voice shook at the question, sounding weak and vulnerable… but it didn’t matter, not anymore. He’d already revealed his vulnerability to the world. “He tried to defend himself?”

“No.” Ogami swallowed hard. “He did the opposite. He said that the verdict was right… and that he was guilty.”
Chapter 266

Togami stared at the girl in front of him in disbelief. Her words echoed through his one working ear, making no more sense now than in the moment she’d spoken them.

*Naegi said that the verdict was right, and that he was guilty.*

It was absurd, it couldn’t possibly be true… but when he met the shadowed depths of Ogami’s eyes, the angry protests fell away from his lips. He couldn’t see any deceit there, no matter how hard he searched. No lies, no cruelty, no veiled claws… only a dark well of emotion he couldn’t quite bring himself to consider.

*He said he was guilty.*

The words burned like acid, scorching their imprint onto his soul. They would have been his last words, or so close to it that it made no difference. His last words before the chains seized him, before the mastermind dragged him off into unimaginable agony… and that was what he’d chosen to say.

But… if that was what he’d said… then why? What could possibly have caused Naegi, the boy who’d spoken out against killing from the start, to confess to a murder someone else had committed?

Had he even known what he was saying? He’d already collapsed on the floor at that point, barely even able to hold up his head. Maybe exhaustion and pain and blood loss had addled his mind so badly that he’d spoken the words without understanding their meaning. Maybe it had been nothing more than hallucination-induced gibberish that the other students had mistaken for a confession.

Except… that wasn’t what Ogami had said. *He said the verdict was right.* Those weren’t the words of someone unaware of what was happening around him. And Ogami hadn’t sounded as though she doubted Naegi’s lucidity, despite her past experience judging the severity of head wounds. Would it really be possible for a meaningless stream of babble to match up with a conversation so perfectly that no one could tell the difference?

But then what did that leave — the possibility that Naegi had *meant* to say those words? That he’d deliberately prevented anyone from defending him, instead choosing to end the trial with a proclamation of his own guilt? That was just as impossible to believe. Naegi might have an underdeveloped sense of self-preservation, but he didn’t have an actual death wish. He wouldn’t roll over and let the mastermind win, not after fighting so hard to keep them all believing. He wouldn’t just give up without even trying to escape.

Would he?

Uncertainty curdled through Togami’s stomach, churning together with the acidic bite of hunger until his hands shook from the unfamiliar pains. He wanted to shove the unsettling thoughts out of his head, to reaffirm his understanding of Naegi’s personality and priorities… but there was a logical, calculating part of his mind that could quite forget how short a time he’d actually known the other boy. A mere handful of days, not even a full month — was that really enough for him to say for certain how Naegi would act under those circumstances?

Maybe Naegi hadn’t been the person Togami had thought he’d known. The kind, positive, hopeful boy he’d fallen so hard for could have been nothing more than an illusion born of danger and
despair, a fantasy Togami projected onto an available ally to make the mastermind’s nightmarish game more bearable. If that was the case, then the boy he loved wasn’t just gone forever… he had never existed at all.

Red and black spots flickered across his vision, but they were so very hard to see against the horrific thoughts blazing through his head. The words rang through his brain without even passing through his ears, drowning out the distant, distorted sounds of someone struggling to catch their breath.

It’s not true.

He tried to summon up words of his own, filled with all the confidence and determination that had brought him so much success in the past… but even in his own head, the words felt too hollow and desperate to trust.

That wasn’t him. It wasn’t. It can’t have been.

Questions and refutations whirled through his head, dizzying and disorienting, until he hardly knew which way to turn. He wanted to believe in Naegi, wanted to trust that the boy had genuinely been what he’d seemed and that what they’d shared had been real — but he wanted it so much that his own desires might bias him into trusting where he shouldn’t. And now that Naegi was gone, gone forever… how could he ever know for sure?

Naegi wouldn’t do that. I know he wouldn’t. I know him and he wouldn’t. Not Naegi. Not him.

A ragged breath tore through his right ear, the sound a distant reminder of pain. His shoulders shook unsteadily somewhere far away, and the hitch of his chest as his lungs fought to draw air through the aching lump in his throat. Something was wrong, terribly wrong, but he couldn’t understand what. The terrifying questions about Naegi took all his attention, circling round and round in his head until the room faded away around him. The world turned gray and ashen, sliding from his awareness as he fell back into the depths of fog where he’d lain all morning. No questions could reach him there… no terrors could torment him… nothing could hurt him.

Nothing could… until pain shot across his palms, sharp and electric and immediate. Togami’s eyes shot down to his hands, wrapped so tightly around Naegi’s room key that fresh blood streaked his fingers from dozens of reopened wounds. As he recognized the physical pain, the rest of his body began to demand his awareness as well. He felt himself shuddering as he gasped for breath, swaying on his feet so badly it was a miracle he was still upright.

That was unacceptable. No matter how upset he was, there was no excuse for so blatantly advertising the fact. One aching muscle at a time, Togami forced himself to relax his grip on the key until the pain in his hands eased. His breathing steadied as he regained some semblance of control over himself, letting his lungs expand enough to catch his breath properly. He had to be calm if he intended to search for the truth. He couldn’t let the shock of a single piece of information rattle him so badly, especially not with one of his suspects there watching him.

Except that when Togami looked up again, he realized that Ogami wasn’t there after all. She’d left — no, wait. He could hear the splash of water coming from the bathroom, just before she returned with a damp washcloth. She frowned as she approached him, but he sent her his fiercest glare before she could ask whatever questions she had. She blinked for a moment, then nodded to herself as some of the tension left her expression.

“You really do need to clean your hands before infection sets in.” She held the washcloth out towards him while keeping herself at a safe distance, in much the same way that she might have
approached a potentially dangerous wild creature.

Togami hesitated, then took the cloth gingerly in one hand while he kept the other securely on Naegi’s key. Red stained the edges of the washcloth where he held it, seeping through the white fabric to mar it forever. The cool water stung his fingers, which he had to admit was probably a bad sign. He sighed and settled himself back on the edge of the bed, doing his best to clean one hand with the other while both were badly injured.

“Would you like me to assist you?” Ogami asked cautiously.

Togami stiffened, glaring up at her. “I’m perfectly capable of managing myself.”

“Very well, if you’re certain.” She looked away from him, crossing her arms protectively in front of herself. “I… I think perhaps I should apologize to you.”

Togami didn’t respond, but his attention sharpened for all that he looked uninterested. If she felt guilt about something, he was certain it was well-deserved — and he knew he’d get more information from her if he let the guilt drive her words than if he tried to question her.

Sure enough, the silence didn’t last long before she continued. “I should have told you sooner… about what Naegi said. You asked me for help yesterday, but I… I didn’t say anything.”

The moment flashed back through his mind, a blur of grief and desperation and pleading. He’d begged the girls to help him rescue Naegi, but none of them had lifted a finger. It made sense now, if he thought about it with the cold logic he could remember how to use. The mastermind had guns, exploding robots, and who knew what other kinds of weapons that they could operate from behind their cameras. Any rescue attempts had been doomed before they began, and he should have seen it immediately. He would have, if he’d been thinking at all clearly.

But logical or not, he doubted that was what Ogami meant by her apology. She didn’t seem likely to have realized the impossibility of a rescue in the moment — and even if she had, it would hardly be something for her to be sorry about. Then what else was there that she could mean?

“I should have told you then,” Ogami went on, oblivious to his musings. “I was afraid to say something that might make things worse… but I see now that staying silent was just as bad. If you’d known from the start, then maybe… maybe it would have been easier to handle. It might not, of course… but I shouldn’t have made the decision for you as I did.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her, ignoring the instinct to object to the pitying undertones to her words. He didn’t like that, or the lack of respect it implied… but he could use it. “Then you’re saying you want to make it up to me?”

She met his eyes squarely. “I do. You deserved to know the truth.”

“I agree.” Togami weighed his plan for a moment, rapidly calculating the risks… then nodded. “I intend to investigate until I’ve uncovered the real truth about that trial — and you’re going to help me.”
Chapter 267

Togami glared darkly across the room until Ogami nodded her head in agreement with his scheme — and Junko just couldn’t help but applaud his eagerness to take charge. Here she’d been puzzling over the best way to encourage her classmates after their recent shocks… and Togami went and did it for himself before she could decide! That kind of achievement really deserved some recognition — she’d have to think of a nice reward for him later.

That could wait, though. Ogami seemed pretty determined to switch into being the Ultimate Nursemaid, insisting that Togami clean up and change before soldiering on. It sounded pretty counterproductive to her, because if he was going to start a vengeful rampage on behalf of his dead sweetie it would be much more impressive to charge out wearing clothes soaked in his beloved boyfriend’s blood! No one thought these things through properly, that was the problem.

Junko sighed and spun her chair until she could see some of the other monitors. Watching her friends just wasn’t as much fun as it used to be, now that she could check on most of them with one glance up at the biology lab camera feed. There were really only a few screens she had to keep an eye on now, which was practically a lazy morning watching cartoons compared to the head-turning chaos of more than a dozen different classmates running around the school.

And it wasn’t even as if there was anything interesting going on. Jill had taken over the cafeteria as soon as the morning announcement finished playing, settling down at a table where she could watch the door without being in the line of sight for anyone walking in. She’d barely moved a muscle since, and if it hadn’t been for the occasional flash of light from her scissors, Junko might’ve checked the camera feed to make sure it hadn’t glitched. If Ogami really did manage to convince Togami to eat something, they’d have a nasty surprise waiting for them.

But even if Jill had decided to be uncharacteristically boring, at least she had the decency to show up on the cameras — unlike certain trouble-making detectives. Kirigiri hadn’t even waited for the morning announcement before she made her move, creeping out of the dorms to hole up in the bathhouse with her sewing kit and a box of supplies she’d nabbed from the art room.

All kinds of problems could be brewing there, if Junko wasn’t careful — especially since Kirigiri still had her daddy’s key. That was safe enough as long as she stuck to her arts and crafts projects… but that wouldn’t hold her interest forever. Once she’d realized Kirigiri was settling in for a while, Junko had taken the opportunity to make a few adjustments to the cameras trained on the bathhouse doorway. If Kirigiri stuck so much as one gloved fingertip outside, a whole array of lights and beeps would sound the alarm throughout the whole data center.

But if Kirigiri was thinking about causing more trouble, she sure was taking her time about it. It was dull enough to drive a girl to distraction! Or at least it would be… if Junko hadn’t had the perfect distraction right there on hand already.

After one more glance at the monitors to make sure everyone seemed safely occupied, Junko kicked against the edge of the desk to send her chair rocketing across to the other side of the room. She whirled past the blur of monitors to the edge of a curtained-off area she’d set up during the night, rolling to a stop exactly at the gap serving as the entrance to the makeshift room.

And yes, there her new favorite distraction was, just where she’d left him. Junko frowned at Naegi, tsking to herself as the boy twitched restlessly in his sleep. Lying in a sleeping bag on the floor couldn’t possibly be good for the poor thing after all he’d been through, but it had been the best she could manage on short notice. Sure, she’d happily have shared her own bed with him — but then
how would she have kept an eye on him and her monitors at the same time? Besides, a room packed with dusty confiscated materials couldn’t possibly be a healthy environment for recovery!

But at least he had a better color to his cheeks now, after she’d pumped a couple bags of blood into him with those transfusion bags she’d confiscated from the clinic. Pale just wasn’t a good look on him — he didn’t have the bone structure to pull off a vampire chic aesthetic. He didn’t make a bad victim, though, all fragile and covered in blood. Shame Celeste wasn’t around, she would’ve appreciated that… maybe even enough to join Togami, Mukuro, and Maizono as one of Naegi’s unaccountable collection of admirers.

Although she had to admit… for the first time, she could kinda see where they were coming from. Naegi definitely had the cute, innocent appeal when he was all banged up like this, just waiting for someone to kiss it all better.

But none of his champions were around now… she was the only friend he had left. Junko sighed heavily and shook her head, clenching a fist to her heart. Surely she owed it to Mukuro to take care of the boy she’d secretly cared for. Junko bowed her head and made a silent vow to her beloved sister’s memory as glistening tears filled her eyes. Yes… for Mukuro’s sake… she’d take care of Naegi to the very best of her abilities.

And damn, was he gonna need some caretaking! She’d skimmed through a couple medical books after hauling Naegi out of the trial room, and she was pretty sure the way his arm had been flopping in all directions meant he’d dislocated his right shoulder. It couldn’t possibly be comfortable for the poor boy to sleep in that condition, especially not if he was going to insist on trying to thrash around.

So it sure was lucky he had someone so helpful on hand. Junko reached over to the nearby table and nabbed the nurse’s cap she’d pulled out of her storage, flipping it up onto her head as she knelt down beside the boy in front of her.

“The patient appears to be in critical condition,” she muttered to herself, tapping one finger against her chin. “Emergency field treatment is going to be necessary. It’s a high risk maneuver, with a real possibility of permanent damage… nerve damage and hemorrhaging if we act, or inflammation, infection, and paralysis if we don’t. With the patient unable to respond and no medical proxy on hand… what choice do we have but to act?”

She took another look at the angles of his body, sizing it up and making mental calculations… and then took a firm hold on his right wrist. As she pulled it towards her, feeling the grind of bones sliding awkwardly over the joint, she glanced up at Naegi’s face. The lines of discomfort around his eyes and mouth deepened into a twisting pain, and his breaths sped up with quiet whimpers.

Well, it was supposed to hurt to reset a joint, so at least she was doing something right.

One more yank, braced hard against the floor — and she heard a quiet thunk as Naegi’s arm shifted into place. Junko beamed down at her handiwork in satisfaction at a job well done. Not bad for a first try!

She wouldn’t have minded some appreciation from her darling friend… but Naegi didn’t seem inclined to offer any. The blood drained out of his sleeping face, leaving him nearly as pale as he’d been when she’d first found him, and his head lolled to the side as he fell deeper into unconsciousness. Looked like he still had a while to go before he woke up.

Junko sighed, jumping to her feet and turning away from the sleeping boy. The nurse’s cap fluttered off her head as she flopped back onto the chair, rolling backwards towards the monitors, but who cared what happened to a boring accessory like that? She had other things to do.
Togami had to admit that Ogami had made a reasonable point when she’d insisted that he needed to clean up. Saying that he felt *better* after showering off the grime of the past two days might be an overstatement — that implied any kind of positive feeling could be possible — but it was preferable to leaving the filth on his skin. And while the tracksuit was the sort of garment he would normally disdain even for his employees to use as a cleaning rag, at least it was intact and unstained. It was far less complicated to put on than his usual clothes, too, which fortunately meant he could manage it even with the somewhat limited range of motion left to him with his bandaged hands.

And so by the time he stepped out into the hall and Ogami turned to lock her door behind them, he felt marginally more like himself than he had until that moment. That could only be a good thing — after all, he would need all his wits about him if he was going to figure out the extent to which the other two girls had been complicit in Naegi’s murder.

Togami swallowed hard against the tightness in his throat, one hand going to his pocket to touch the dorm room key he’d so carefully stored there. There was something disorienting about beginning an investigation while knowing that he wouldn’t be able to rely on the other boy to support his conclusions and confirm them in a way that the others could understand. He’d let himself rely on Naegi for so much of the investigations right from the start, before they’d even gotten personally involved. Now, even Ogami’s presence at his side as they began walking down the hallway only served to underscore the fact that Naegi would never be there to support him again.

He’d intended to continue on out of the dorms without hesitation… but against his will, he found his feet slowing as he approached Naegi’s door. He refused to look up at it, to stare lost and heartbroken at the nameplate… but he didn’t have to, not when it blazed so painfully clearly across his mind’s eye. The key in his pocket seemed to burn through the cloth, a fiery reminder that he could open that door and enter that room again…

But no. Togami forced himself to walk forward again, away from the only room in the school he truly wanted to enter. He wouldn’t go in there with Ogami at his side, or even waiting for him outside the door. That room had been one of the places he and Naegi had spent most of the short time they’d had together. Those moments had been *theirs*, and he intended to guard every memory of them as jealously as a precious jewel. He would go in when he could be alone, without anyone else to steal away even a hint of what he’d find.

Either Ogami possessed the discretion necessary to ignore his pause, or she simply failed to notice it. Whichever was the case, she walked beside him in pensive silence — right up until Togami would have passed by the cafeteria to head towards the gate to the other half of the first floor.

“Wait… where are you going?” she asked, startled. “Don’t you intend to eat anything?”

Togami glanced towards the closed cafeteria door, frowning as he considered her suggestion. It was true that he hadn’t eaten in quite a while… but while a few hunger pains did gnaw at the edges of his awareness, the thought of actually eating made his stomach knot with nausea. Enduring the taste of food, feeling it heavy in his mouth, going through the process of chewing and swallowing… it was too much, *too much* to deal with now. He’d only make himself sick if he tried.
"Later," he told Ogami, intending the word to come out curter than it did. It must still be the lingering effects of shock and grief, blunting his usual speech patterns.

And sure enough, she didn’t take it as the utter dismissal he’d intended. “But you would have more energy for your investigation if you took a few minutes to have a brief meal. You could even bring it along if you prefer not to delay.”

He scowled at the implication that he couldn’t judge his own physical capabilities. “I said I’d eat later, and that’s what I plan to do. Stay if you’re so determined, but I’m going to do something more useful with my time.”

He’d only taken a few steps through the gate before he heard her following after him. He glanced up at her as she caught up to him, but she didn’t seem inclined to bring up the point again. Good. If she had any sense, that would be the end of her attempts at directing his actions.

“Do you know where Kirigiri and Jill are?” he asked as they crossed the first floor.

Ogami shook her head. “I haven’t seen them. I wanted to be on hand when you awoke, so I only left my dormitory to go to the storage room.”

That was unfortunate… but the refusal to leave another student alone in her room did show an unexpected amount of sense on Ogami’s part. He could hardly fault her for exercising appropriate precautions while sharing her room. He’d just have to work the girls’ locations out for himself. After all, there were only five floors to the school — they couldn’t hide forever.

“Then we’ll start on the second floor and work our way up,” he decided, as they reached the stairs. He could climb them without any physical difficulties now, after spending so much time resting — or at least, he could as long as he didn’t allow himself to think about helping Naegi up the stairs, the smaller boy’s body pressed warm and solid against his own. There was nothing to be gained from those recollections, nothing but grief that weighed down each footstep like his shoes were lined with lead.

As he stepped out of the confining walls of the stairwell, he felt as though he could breathe properly again… but the relief was only momentary. Approaching the library door, Togami couldn’t help but recall the blind terror he’d felt two days ago, when he’d come racing down this same hallway to find Naegi bleeding on the library floor. He’d fought so hard to protect Naegi, but it had never been enough, not even before the trial. He’d failed, completely and utterly, he’d done everything in his power and it still hadn’t been good enough —

“Perhaps we should start somewhere else.”

Ogami’s sudden words jolted him out of his dark thoughts, and Togami realized in shock that he’d come to a standstill in front of the library doors. Did she think that he was standing here because he was too frightened to enter? He shot her a furious glare before grabbing the handle and yanking the door open.

And he found himself staring at a room that looked exactly as he’d left it… with every shattered bookcase, torn book, and bloodstain intact.

“The mastermind hasn’t cleaned the room,” he murmured, scanning the wreckage in confusion. Yes, it was quite a mess… but even so, the other murders had been nearly as messy and the mastermind had still been able to clean the rooms where they’d occurred in the night after the trial. Some evidence of the murders could still be found — the knife Maizono had taken, for example, or the furnishings Owada had switched in the changing rooms — but there had never been an entirely
destroyed scene left intact before.

Was it because this hadn’t been the scene of the murder itself? Most of the destruction had been Jill’s fault, the day before the murder had occurred. It might make sense for the mastermind to leave unrelated scenes alone… but as Togami crossed over to the area hidden by the bookcases, he found that even the pieces of the Monokuma robot he’d deconstructed were just where he’d left them. Well, all except for the bomb — but he knew all too well what had happened to that.

But that didn’t make sense. Even if the rest of the library was arguably unrelated to the murder, this part wasn’t — not when the tracking device in Monokuma’s eye had been the trigger for his discovery of Ikusaba’s corpse. The robot had been a key part of the trial, irrefutably a piece of evidence for the murder — and yet the mastermind hadn’t touched it. Why would they have left it in place? Had they simply not had the time to deal with it yet… or was there some deeper, more sinister reason?

Well, whatever the mastermind’s plan for this room might be, Togami wasn’t about to let the chance to reexamine some of the murder evidence pass him by. He moved forward, heading for the place he’d been sitting when he’d first uncovered the blinking device.

“Oh no, are you back to look at all my hidden places again? How embarrassing!”

Togami stopped short, ice threading down his spine at the sound of that voice. Slowly he turned around… and there Monokuma stood, smiling innocently up at him.
Togami felt as though the floor itself shuddered under his feet, quaking with the force of his hatred for the mastermind’s puppet in front of him. How could that thing have the nerve to stand there, smiling and cheerful without a care in the world, when just one day before it had thrown the kindest boy he’d ever met into a horrifying nightmare? It shouldn’t be allowed, it should be blasted into pieces for its role in the executions, it —

An arm brushing against his shoulder halted his thoughts, like an anchor sinking through the storm-filled maelstrom of his head. All of a sudden he became aware of Sakura Ogami’s presence looming at his side, a wall of tense muscle and coiled sinew as she also stared at Monokuma with the same fixation he’d had.

The same… it was very much the same, wasn’t it? Hardly identical, of course, but even so… Monokuma had stolen someone important from Ogami, just as he’d taken the boy Togami loved. Asahina’s death had been an execution, if only on a technicality, while Naegi’s had been unjustified murder, but still… would that make it any easier? It was difficult to envision their positions being reversed, but he didn’t think that it would. She had to hate the sight of Monokuma just as much as he did.

And if that was the case… well, he doubted she possessed the same ability to control her temper that he did. Before he could allow himself to think of the many reasons not to do so, Togami flicked his elbows sideways, against Ogami’s arm.

Her gaze darted sharply towards him at the touch with all the ferocity of a thunderbolt — and then relaxed, the red-hot blaze of hate receding to a more manageable level. She gave him a brief nod of acknowledgment before turning her attention back to the bear in front of them.

Following her gaze, Togami noticed that Monokuma’s lightning bolt eye gleamed even redder than normal, and the apparently innocent smile displayed the tips of his pointed teeth. Suddenly he found himself very glad indeed that he and Ogami had managed to snap one another out of their fury before they’d said or done anything irreversible.

As much to distract himself from those disconcerting possibilities as anything, Togami drew himself up with all the haughty arrogance he could muster and snapped, “What the hell do you want?”

“Eh?” Monokuma tilted his head, putting on a show of being confused. “Shouldn’t that be my line? I mean, you guys are the ones who came charging in here to find all my most intimate parts on display!” His cheeks went pink with feigned shame as he looked away. “Will I still be pure enough for marriage if people find out about what you’ve seen?”

“Stop acting stupid,” Togami growled, crossing his arms. He’d never had much patience with Monokuma’s idiocy, but now, the day after Naegi’s death, it seemed in particularly bad taste.

“But how can you call a besmirched reputation stupid?” Monokuma asked, pretending to be hurt. “And when so much of it was your fault, too?” His eyes sparkled in a way that Togami didn’t like at all. “Does that mean you don’t intend to behave honorably?”
“It means I have better things to do than listen to your nonsense.” Togami wasn’t stupid enough to turn his back on Monokuma, but he did swivel a step to the side so that he could view the entire room as well as the bear.

“Really? Aw, too bad!” Monokuma heaved a sigh. “And here I thought I had something you might like to see, too!” He held up a loosely closed paw, shaking it to make whatever it held jingle enticingly.

Togami narrowed his eyes suspiciously, trying to hide the fact that his interest had been piqued just as Monokuma had intended. Anything that robot offered would benefit the mastermind more than any of the students, he had no illusions about that… but even the most double-edged gifts could be useful if handled correctly.

“What is it?” he asked at last, when it seemed that Monokuma didn’t intend to say more without prompting.

“Oh, nothing much.” Monokuma’s sharp grin belied his casual words. “Just a little something that someone seems to have misplaced!” He flung out his paw with a flourish to reveal Togami’s dorm room key.

The tension with which he’d braced himself drained away, easing a little of the tightness in his shoulders. “That’s all? Fine, give it to me.” Togami held out an imperious hand for the key.

But instead of handing the key back to its proper owner, Monokuma snatched his paw back like a child playing keep away. “Huh? I don’t remember saying anything about letting you have it! As your headmaster, I could never encourage such a flagrant ethical violation!”

“What are you blathering on about now?” Togami couldn’t suppress his irritated huff of frustration at the bear’s stupid antics. “What possible ethical violation could there be in returning my room key?”

“Your key?” Monokuma tilted his head, pretending to be puzzled. “I think you must be confused! Each of you got exactly one room key — and yours is right there in your pocket! So there’s no way that this one here could belong to you, right?”

Togami scowled at the bear, one hand slipping discreetly into his pocket so that he could curl a protective fist around Naegi’s room key. He could see the shape of the mastermind’s scheme now, and he didn’t like it one bit. The only way he could reclaim his own key would be to admit that the one he had now wasn’t his — and he knew Monokuma would seize the opportunity to deprive him of Naegi’s key. After all, the mastermind had gone to a great deal of effort to make sure that the students had nothing left of the ones who’d died in the previous trials. Why would they let him keep Naegi’s room key?

Well, he refused to give it up without a fight. Togami raised his chin and gave the robot his iciest glare. “Of course the key in my pocket is mine.”

“Is that so?” Monokuma asked. “Then I guess this must be a forgery! I can’t possibly leave something so dangerous lying around — it’s my duty to destroy such a terrible thing!”

Togami gritted his teeth, envisioning a future trapped in this hellhole without access to his own room. He wouldn’t even have clothes that fit properly, let alone any of the other possessions he’d had in the room. But when he weighed that thought against a future where he had no chance of ever touching something of Naegi’s again… the decision wasn’t even worth considering.
“Do what you like,” he said coldly.

Monokuma threw back his head with wild laughter, the sound echoing around the library even after he’d bounced out of sight. Togami grimaced, not quite feeling secure enough in the bear’s absence to release his grip on Naegi’s key just yet. After all, he’d as good as admitted how highly he valued it when he’d chosen to keep this key instead of his own — who knew what Monokuma would do with that information?

His gaze flickered away from the place Monokuma had been standing when he addressed them, darting around the scattered collection of electronics. It was like that godawful bear had spread himself all over the room, his gears and wires slithering into every corner to contaminate everything in reach. Broken furniture, discarded tools, even the walls of books all seemed tainted by the griminess of Monokuma’s presence. Nothing could be clean in a place where that thing had been.

Togami spun on his heel and walked blindly in the opposite direction, brushing harshly past Ogami in his desperation to get away from the blatant reminders of the bear’s presence. Anywhere would be better, any room in the school, as long as he didn’t have to look at that disgusting black and white monstrosity for another second. He should turn and leave, he should walk out of the library, he should —

He should stop short in front of the door to the archives, blood draining from his face as he realized the significance of where he stood. For all that the library had some of the most unpleasant associations for him of any room in the school… it had also been more than that. This room was the place where he’d first kissed Naegi… and where Naegi had done so much more than kiss him back. Their romance had started here… not when they’d kissed, not even when they’d had sex… but in the moments afterward, when he’d first allowed himself to give in to the softness and warmth Naegi had given him so freely.

Slowly, not quite sure that it was a good idea but unable to prevent himself, Togami pushed open the archive door and stepped into the small, dusty room.

Chapter End Notes

Scheduling note: Due to an extremely busy upcoming week at work, I’m not going to be able to post anything this Thursday. Next chapter will be up on Sunday, 6/11. See you then!
Chapter 270

The scent of ancient paper and dusty leather bindings lingered in the air of the archives, as though Togami had stepped into a world of times long forgotten when he passed through the library door. He’d always enjoyed the archives he’d spent time in over the years, full of mysteries and secrets hidden in plain sight for anyone clever and determined enough to discover… but none of the others could compare to the truths he’d begun to learn here.

Even with the wealth of knowledge surrounding him, Togami couldn’t even muster enough interest to focus on the book titles. All he could see were those first few moments when he’d demanded Naegi accompany him into this room, and Naegi had followed without so much as a complaint. Even if Naegi had asked for an explanation, Togami knew he wouldn’t have been able to give one… his only reason for bringing Naegi here had been because he couldn’t wait another second to plant a kiss on the other boy’s startled mouth.

Oh, he’d tried to fool himself with that ridiculous idea of somehow proving his superiority to Naegi, but now he could see his actions clearly. He’d wanted Naegi ever since the other boy had proved his unexpected intelligence during the class trials, when he’d proved he could hold his own even against Togami himself. It was rare enough to come across someone capable of doing such a thing… but to find it in a person with Naegi’s cheerful kindness was unheard of. Every time Naegi had sought him out to spend time together in an offer of genuine friendship, untainted by rivalry or antagonism, the contradiction of his abilities and his actions had only made him harder to resist.

Togami turned to lean against the bookcase that towered across from the door, crossing his arms as he stared at the surface where he’d pinned Naegi to the wall. He could almost see the two of them there, lost to the world around them as they discovered how very good it felt to give in to such a powerful attraction. Or at least it had been the first time Togami could remember craving a specific sexual partner with that intensity… but he didn’t know if the experience had been equally unique for Naegi. He wanted to believe it had… but since he hadn’t asked, he didn’t know for certain.

And now he never would.

Togami swallowed hard against the grief burning at the back of his throat, looking away from the place where he’d lost the fight against his desire for Naegi. Maybe they both would have been better off if he’d managed to resist after all. They would never have shared those few perfect moments they’d had together… but would that have mattered if they’d never known what they’d lost? He would have no reason to suffer through these useless, soul-destroying feelings that ate away at his every conscious thought, and Naegi — Naegi would never have — he wouldn’t be —

He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth until they ached, but it did nothing to ease the pain stabbing through his chest. These thoughts were worse than useless, they were dangerous — he could so easily lose himself in dreams of what-ifs and maybes where Naegi would still be alive if only he’d done the right thing. But there was no point to thinking about what he could have done differently, not when those choices had long since been made. The only choices left to him were about what he would do to shape the course of the future.

Even so… how was he ever going to do this? The archive was hardly the only place he and Naegi had spent time together… was he going to find himself overwhelmed by memories every time he saw the cold halls where Naegi had walked or an empty chair where he used to sit? But Naegi had been so diligent in his investigations that there wasn’t a room in the school without the echoes of his presence. The memories would be inescapable, no matter how badly they affected him.
Even aside from that first tryst, the archives weren’t free from Naegi’s touch. He’d brought Naegi here to show him some documents when they’d been investigating Fujisaki’s murder together — or rather, when he’d been trying to gauge Naegi’s intelligence by manipulating the investigation. He let his eyes blink open, and it was as though he could see Naegi standing there, peering curiously up at the shelves full of documents. He’d understood how fascinating they could be, too, even if Togami’s warnings about the potential consequences of learning too much had stopped him from reading anything other than the documents related to their investigation.

What might Naegi have done if Togami hadn’t so vehemently discouraged him from reading those other reports? Regret coiled bitter and tight at the back of his throat as he stared at the walls of documents, thinking about all the knowledge he’d never had the chance to share with the other boy. He could have introduced Naegi to so many parts of the world he’d never known, just to see the reactions shine bright and brilliant across his open face. Not during the investigation, of course, but later on he could have brought Naegi back and not stopped him when he reached for one of the files on the shelves…

The shelves…

Togami blinked, his dream-like visions of Naegi evaporating as his previously silent instincts began to creak out a hoarse warning in his head. Something was off about those shelves.

He took a slow step towards them, then another, scanning the densely-packed rows of files and reports for the inconsistency that had caught his attention. There was something wrong there, he was sure of it now, something about those dusty shelves was different than he remembered, and —

Ah. So that was it. Togami narrowed his eyes at one particular range of documents where the layers of dust had been ever so slightly disturbed. Whoever had handled those files had been careful — but considering the amount of dust collecting on the shelves, there was only so much that could be done to hide which files had been moved.

And Togami was sure that he hadn’t been the one to touch this particular range of files. He’d skimmed over the titles in his initial survey of the archive, but he’d already been familiar with their contents from his time reading in the Togami family library. For most of the time he’d spent in the archive, he’d been focused on researching Fukawa’s alter ego, and knowing that those documents were unrelated to the genocider, he’d left them untouched.

But someone else hadn’t… and considering that this shelf held documents about the military and related organizations, that was very interesting indeed. Togami reached out to pluck one particular report from the area of the shelf that had been disturbed, paging through the French text until he found the passages he knew would be there.

Paragraph after paragraph of information about Fenrir stared back up at him.
Togami stared down at the text about Fenrir, but he didn’t bother to read the individual words. He didn’t need to, not when he knew their contents so well already. Another copy of this very document resided in the Togami family’s archives — and in fact, this was the source he’d had in mind when he’d explained a bit of Fenrir’s history to Naegi.

He hadn’t thought much of the document’s presence in the archive when he’d first seen it here — but that had been before he’d learned that at least one Fenrir soldier worked for the mastermind. Now that he’d seen Ikusaba’s corpse, definitively marked with the Fenrir group’s tattoo… this document took on a different meaning. What was it doing here, where any of the students could stumble across it?

It had to be here deliberately — he could be certain of that, even if he couldn’t be sure of the mastermind’s reasoning about it. The mastermind had planned every detail of their imprisonment here, down to manipulating the secret data they could uncover with Fujisaki’s programming talent. He couldn’t believe that they would have overlooked something as significant as a book full of information on one of their allies. They had wanted this information to be available, if any of the students were sharp enough to find it.

And someone had. Trying to unravel the mastermind’s thousand possible motives would do nothing but give him a headache — but when it came to the other students, Togami knew he had a far better chance of tracing back their purpose in reading this book. The only reason that someone would have sought out this particular document from an archive full of other indistinguishable ones was if they wanted to research Mukuro Ikusaba.

But to understand exactly what they’d been doing, there was one other piece of information that he needed — when they’d read this report. It was just barely possible that one of the girls had come here today to read more about Ikusaba’s organization after learning about her during the trial. None of the three girls had shown the inclination to rush to the library the day after a trial, but he couldn’t entirely reject the possibility.

And that left a far more interesting possibility — that someone had read this document before the trial. Jill and Ogami hadn’t seemed to know about Ikusaba’s presence in the school until it was revealed in the trial, so they were out unless he found a reason to reevaluate their honesty on that point. And Ikusaba herself should have known all the information in the book from her first-hand experience with the organization.

Which meant that the only people who could have touched the book before the trial were Naegi and Kirigiri.

Naegi had definitely been in the library before the trial, Togami was all too aware of that — but he’d entered to talk to Jill, not to do research. Besides, he’d been unaware of most of the information about Fenrir that Togami had shared during their investigation, so there was no way he’d found this book. And even if he had, Togami doubted the boy had known enough French to decipher the complicated text.

No… Naegi wouldn’t have known French. Togami’s grip on the paper tightened under it crinkled sharply beneath his fingers, but he couldn’t see the creases on the page. The world before him blurred and wavered as his imagination painted an image of Naegi before his eyes, the other boy puzzling over the incomprehensible words with a deep furrow creasing his brow. After finally coming to the conclusion that the text wouldn’t magically turn into a language he could read, he
would have had to ask for help with the translation — and Togami had to shut his eyes against the cruel vision of Naegi looking up at him with complete trust in his linguistic skills.

But closing his eyes to the world only brought the images to him more clearly, a flood of moments that he’d never had the chance to experience. How would Naegi have looked at him as he’d translated French as easily as if it had started in Japanese — would he have been impressed? Togami could see those clear hazel eyes locked on him with admiration and fascination, and he felt his shoulders tremble with his shaking breaths. He had to stop this — he couldn’t let himself go down this road, not if he wanted to stay awake and sane.

And yet… what would it have been like to read to Naegi in French? How would the other boy’s face change as he listened to the musical rhythm of words he couldn’t understand? And if he’d strayed from the text, if he’d taken the opportunity to murmur the truth about the softness and warmth Naegi had brought into his life… would Naegi have known? Would he have understood the meaning even without the words? Would he have known how Togami felt, how much he cared, how much he lo—

The creak of the door handle snapped Togami’s eyes open, and he winced at the sudden stab of light as Ogami opened the door to the dim room.

“So this is where you —” She stopped mid-sentence, and the thought of what she must be seeing in him now made his stomach twist with nausea. He could feel her gaze scraping across his skin, leaving him painfully vulnerable with no way to protect his deepest thoughts.

He expected an attack, mocking comments or at least the twist of a superior smirk… but after a moment, all she did was turn to look up at the rows of shelves around the archive. “So this is where you went. I’d nearly forgotten about this room — I haven’t been in here since the second floor opened.”

Togami wasn’t stupid enough to think she actually had any interest in the archive — she was only looking away to give him a chance to compose himself. Such a reaction would have been unthinkable from the people he usually met — but it seemed that a martial artist scorned such easy victories. That kind of focus worked in his favor at the moment… but he would need to avoid presenting her with a situation where he might appear to be a challenge.

But for now, he was hardly going to refuse to take advantage of the opportunity she’d given him. While Ogami pretended to study the shelves, he shoved away his thoughts of Naegi and closed away his memories of that gentle warmth. He’d just managed to force his expression back to one of his usual scowls by the time Ogami looked back at him.

“If you haven’t been in here often, then are you saying you’ve done no research in these documents?” he demanded, seizing control of the conversation before she could make an attempt. “Have you read this report?”

“No, I’ve spent very little time in the library.” Ogami blinked at the document he held. “Is that in some other language? I would need a Japanese translation if you think it necessary for me to read it.”

So she didn’t know French… he’d thought as much, but the confirmation eliminated her. “Never mind. There’s no point in you reading it now.” He glanced back at the empty space on the shelf, then tucked the file securely under his arm as he brushed past Ogami to head through the door.

There might have been more to learn from the library… but between Monokuma and the archive, he’d had enough of this room. He strode through the door and left the library, noting the tread of
Ogami’s steps echoing his own.

So she hadn’t been the one to read that report… which left only two possibilities. And between the crazy genocider and the secretive detective, Togami knew which one he would suspect of researching in a foreign language. But what he really needed to know was when Kirigiri had looked up this information… and what her purpose had been.
Chapter 272

Togami strode across the rest of the second floor and up the stairs, not even bothering to look around as he emerged onto the third floor. Too many questions filled his head, pounding at the confines of his skull with demands for answers he didn’t have yet. Had it really been Kirigiri who had been researching Fenrir? Had she done it before or after the trial? And above all, the resounding echo of why, why, why?

If Kirigiri worked for the mastermind, why would she have needed to research Fenrir? Did the mastermind keep their agents so ignorant of their different allies that she’d had to rely on documents for information? If that was the case, then the mastermind seemed to be setting up a situation whether their subordinates were nearly guaranteed to distrust and betray one another — just like what had apparently happened. Had the mastermind wanted things to play out this way?

There was a time when Togami knew he would have felt considerable satisfaction at the thought of the mastermind’s supporters being as easily manipulated by their leader as the rest of the students had been — but now it settled chilly and dark in the hollow emptiness of his chest. Was that the truth of it? Had Naegi been taken down as simple collateral damage in the mastermind’s attempts to create an internal vendetta between two malicious young women?

He didn’t know, not yet… but he was going to find out. He’d decided that already, but as he left the third floor to climb yet another set of stairs, he made the promise to himself again. Whatever had led to Naegi’s death, whoever had caused it, he would find answers. He would find out who was to blame and make sure they suffered for it… no matter who it was.

That was the thought ringing through his head as he emerged from the stairwell onto the fourth floor and found himself staring directly down the hallway to the data center door. The door leading to the monitor-filled room where the mastermind kept watch on them all.

No matter who ….

That was right… it wasn’t just Kirigiri and Ikusaba who’d caused this. The mastermind was to blame at the core of it, just as much as anyone else. And not just the mastermind… they’d all figured out early on that this operation had to have a significant organization behind it. And each of those people who had decided to support the mastermind, whether they’d done it for money or ideals or blackmail, each and every single one of them had been a part of taking Naegi from him.

And they had to pay for it. He didn’t know yet how he’d manage from inside the mastermind’s trap, but somehow he would find a way. The girls here had to be first, of course, since they’d been the ones to betray Naegi when he’d only wanted to be their friend… but it couldn’t stop there. Not when people still breathed while they were the reason Naegi no longer could.

“Do you plan to try to go in?”

Ogami’s voice jolted him out of his thoughts, and he spun to glare up at her through narrowed eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“The data center,” she said, not reacting to his dark expression with more than a blink. “You seemed quite intent upon it, and Naegi told me that the two of you found the key during your investigation.”

Togami frowned. He did still have the data center key that he’d found next to Ikusaba’s corpse…
and there wasn’t anything stopping him from using it. And if the mastermind really was watching the camera feeds, if that room really was their stronghold… then that meant that just behind that door…

By the time the thought had formed, Togami was already across the floor, yanking the key from his pocket to shove it into the lock. It slid in, just as it had the first time he’d used it — but when he tried to turn it, nothing happened. He blinked at the key for an instant — and then realization sank in. He had to fight the urge to break the stupid scrap of metal off in the lock when he understood just what the mastermind must have done.

“Is something wrong?” Ogami asked.

So apparently even the most basic of conclusions were beyond her. Togami transferred his glare from the lock to the girl beside him, expression made even harsher by the sharp pang of longing that stabbed through his chest at the memory of what it had been like to work with someone who could keep up with him. He could always count on Naegi to be able to keep up with him, without needing every step of his thoughts spelled out the way so many other people did.

And more than that — every time Naegi had matched him, it had only been so they could work together to achieve something more than either of them could manage alone. He hadn’t done it for his own goals or his own glory… he’d offered everything he had without a second thought, going against everything Togami had learned about intelligent people until now. Anyone clever enough to keep up would use their skills against him in the end. Naegi was the only person who hadn’t… who had chosen kindness when it was in his power to be cruel.

“Oh, obviously something is wrong,” he snapped, reaching for words acidic enough to burn through the lump in his throat. “Or is your head so addled by excessive physical exertion that you can’t even make simple observations? This key worked last time, but now it doesn’t — and that means the mastermind has an additional mechanism on this lock that they deliberately disengaged to lure us inside yesterday!”

“They — what?” She was trying to follow his logic, he could see the effort in the frown creasing her forehead… but it was too far a leap for her to make alone.

“The key can’t open the data center by itself,” he said, sighing heavily as he spelled out the explanation. “The lock needs something else done to it before it can be opened. And if the mastermind is even a tenth as smart as they think they are, whatever makes the key operational will need to be triggered from inside the room.”

“I see,” Ogami said, her frown deepening. “Then it’s still locked… and trying to open it would violate the locked door rule, in spite of your key.”

“Precisely.” Togami glowered at the door another long moment. He could practically feel the mastermind’s presence just a few short feet away, laughing at their images on the monitors, exulting in their failure.

“Even if you can’t enter… perhaps I could help,” Ogami offered, her words slow and halting. “The mastermind summoned me to that room when… well, when I acted as their spy. If I know anything that would be of use, I’d be glad to share it.”

He froze, partway through the motion of returning the key to his pocket. “You were inside the mastermind’s stronghold — and you didn’t think to mention it until now? It didn’t occur to you that we might have wanted to know about the camera feeds?”
She frowned. “We did know. Monokuma made it quite clear that the mastermind is observing us through the cameras at all times. Would it have made a difference to know that they’d set up a room of monitors to keep track of us?”

Togami stared at her in disbelief — but everything he saw on her face proclaimed that her reaction was genuine. Even though she’d been the mastermind’s tool, even though she’d been in the data center… she didn’t know the truth about the worldwide broadcast.
Togami didn’t often find himself at a complete loss for words… but faced with the enormity of this revelation, he didn’t know how to begin. He’d spent years honing his words and voice into weapons that could win whatever goal he had in his sights, but his vocabularies of biting venom didn’t seem to encompass the words he needed now. How was he supposed to explain that the mastermind’s cruelty when further than any of them had imagined?

His mind flashed back to that moment in the data center when he’d finally understood what the mastermind had done. He’d demanded that Naegi tell him the truth… but he hadn’t understood what he’d been asking of the soft-hearted boy. He’d seen the horror in Naegi’s eyes, the soul-stricken pain that could only come from a new twist of the mastermind’s plan — but now he recognized the desperate confusion that had been there as well. Over and over, Togami had insisted on being told the awful truth… and it had hurt Naegi to put the horror into words.

But Naegi had been kind. He cared about the people he spoke to, feeling the hurt himself if he realized he’d caused pain. Togami knew better than to leave himself so vulnerable to the whinging emotional neediness of every idiot he had to address. It didn’t matter if his words slammed into their intended recipient with all the force of a physical blow, not when he had no reason to concern himself with their wellbeing.

And so with the memory of the icy-eyed heir he’d worked so hard to become firmly in mind, Togami fixed his glare on the data center door, crossed his arms, and let the knife-edged words fly.

“The feeds from the mastermind’s cameras are being broadcast around the world.”

She met the declaration with silence, stretching out through interminable seconds. When the explosion had filled his ears with rushing emptiness, he’d longed for the relief of true silence… but now the stillness of the air prickled along his skin until he couldn’t help but shiver. What was keeping her from answering? He’d been prepared for shock, anger, humiliation, any number of emotional outbursts… but he hadn’t expected her to have no reaction at all.

Had she failed to understand him? He’d thought that he’d used words simple enough for even an athlete to grasp, but perhaps the horror of the idea was too complex to convey with a single sentence. She could be confused and waiting for him to provide further clarification.

When the pressure of the silence became too much to bear, he finally turned his head to look at her… and any thought that she might not have understood his meaning evaporated. Ogami had slumped back against the wall, one trembling hand braced at her side to hold herself upright. She’d lost all color in her face, her bloodless lips twisted tight together as though she feared what might escape if she let them part. And her eyes… even if he’d felt the urge to try to meet her eyes, he couldn’t have done so. She looked upward, gaze locked on the nearest camera… and guilt howled out from her broken eyes as plainly as if she’d screamed it aloud.

Paralyzed with dark thoughts as she was, Togami doubted she’d realized how long she’d been standing there in silence. Possibly she’d even forgotten about his presence, if the shadows in her head had grown powerful enough. They’d consumed her for a time after Asahina’s death, and this revelation seemed to have brought them all rushing back. Only the threat that the death toll might increase had been enough to jolt her out of that despair… and even if such a thing would work a second time, he had no interest in raising her protective instincts towards either of the two other girls.
In that case, if she was weak enough to let her guilt destroy her so thoroughly… then he would be better off without her. Another pair of hands might make his investigation easier, but he didn’t need her. He could leave her behind and still accomplish everything he needed to do.

But instead of walking away, Togami found his gaze drawn back to the pain in her eyes. The knowledge that his words had triggered that pain sent a shiver of disquiet through him, faint but nonetheless noticeable. He didn’t like the reaction written so clearly across her face, and even looking away from her didn’t ease his discomfort.

Perhaps it was the striking similarity to his own response on learning the truth about the mastermind’s cameras. Shame had seized control of his body in that moment as well, scorching his cheeks with fiery humiliation and driving him away from Naegi as if physically repelled. The cameras had poisoned a span of the precious time he’d spent in Naegi’s company, ruining his ability to find brightness in the other boy’s touch… so it was only natural that he would hate seeing the same effect occurring in another person. It was as though the mastermind was winning yet another victory before his eyes — and in that moment Togami decided that this was one battle he wouldn’t let them win.

One sharp step forward put him directly in her line of sight and let his mouth curl upward in a derisive sneer. “So it seems I was right to call your redemption a lie.”

The words hit their mark, and Ogami flinched back from the unexpected blow. Hearing him say such a thing had hurt her… just as Togami had known it would. He’d deliberately aimed for words that would echo the darkness in her head, and as her eyes focused on him with sharp betrayal, he knew that he’d chosen them correctly.

If Naegi had been beside him, the softhearted boy would have been outraged at the way Togami had spoken to a girl already in pain. Naegi would have chosen kindness, offering gentle words and comforting tones… and if Naegi had been the one to try, it might have worked. But Togami knew he had no such kindness to use, even if he’d been inclined to offer it. Cruelty was the only path he knew that could pierce through the darkness in her mind and reach her… and so cruelty was what he would use.
Togami didn’t allow his expression to so much as flicker, even though Ogami stared at him like he’d just stabbed her in the back. He’d been aiming for exactly this reaction, after all, and the most important thing in this moment was making sure she understood he wouldn’t relent on his words. Years of practice helped him maintain the cold, unfriendly sneer he’d turned on her, despite the faintly dissonant resistance of his muscles as he forced them to hold the expression.

“I haven’t lied to you,” Ogami said at last, her voice creaking from her throat like she hadn’t used it in years. “I stopped working for the mastermind, just as I said I would. How could I continue to be their pawn after — after what they did to Hina?” She shook her head, the motion carrying on too long as it bled into a shiver that shook through her whole body. “I thought you understood.”

He shrugged. “The only thing I understand is that you obviously place no value on your so-called change of heart. Or are you going to try to pretend that I’m wrong about what you were thinking?”

“No — of course I wasn’t,” Ogami protested, clearly bewildered by his accusation. “I was too caught up in the information you’d just told me about — about the cameras.” Her gaze flickered back up towards the camera again, but this time she bit her lip and forced her eyes back to him.

And that meant that his attacks were working so far. It seemed that she still took his words at face value, so she hadn’t grasped his aim. All to the good so far — but he had to keep her off balance until the effects stuck.

“Your focus on the cameras was entirely obvious,” Togami snapped, his tone sharp enough to cut through any darkness clogging her ears. “What do you think told me about your lies?”

“You — what?” He had nearly all of her attention now as she tried to work out what he was talking about.

Togami raised his chin so he could give the impression of looking down at her, despite the inches she had on him. “Someone who had really made the changes you claim would have no right to let the consequences of her past decisions destroy her.”

She drew away from him — which meant the blow had landed. He leaned forward, pressing the advantage before she could gather her thoughts against him.

“The world may know of your betrayal now — but those of us you betrayed already knew. You swore to us that you wanted to turn your back on the mastermind to make up for your crimes against us. If you let the guilt of your actions break you, then your words to us were meaningless, making you a liar twice over.”

His words hit her hard, that was obvious. Her fingers curled into tight fists in a line of tension shooting up rigid arms to her clenched shoulders, braced as if she had to fight unbearable pressure. She’d fixed her eyes on him with all of her attention now, her gaze not even flickering towards the cameras this time. And if he could see pain and anger roiling in her glare, well, that was better than the empty despair that had been devouring her. And once she took a moment to consider his words logically, he knew she’d understand what he’d meant. He’d said nothing untrue, after all, and —

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Togami couldn’t stop his eyebrows from shooting up into startled arches at the quiet fury in Ogami’s words. He’d expected her to reaction more or less as she had when she’d first fallen into
dark thoughts, when she’d at least retained the ability to think and speak reasonably — but apparently that wasn’t the case this time. It couldn’t be, if she was making such outlandish claims.

“You don’t know how it feels to learn that your name has been smeared with your sins across the entire world,” she went on, words pouring out in a rush that was nothing like her usual deliberate speech. “You’re talking about what I should think and how I should feel — but you can’t possibly understand what it’s like to realize every person alive has seen your greatest shame.”

An incredulous laugh clawed its way from Togami’s throat, painful and cold. “Are you joking? You’re actually claiming that I don’t understand how it feels to have my personal shame plastered across televisions worldwide? Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten that Monokuma called a school assembly specifically to humiliate Naegi and me. The entire world has seen every second he and I spent together, every intimate moment we shared — so I think I understand exactly how that particular shame feels!"

Such a set-down ought to have had any sensible person groveling with apologies — but Ogami had the nerve to shake her head as if he was the one being foolish.

“It isn’t the same. The world seeing what you did with Naegi might have embarrassed you — but there was nothing wrong with the actions themselves. But in my case…” Ogami closed her eyes for a moment. “The worst deeds I’ve ever committed have been proclaimed throughout the world. I don’t intend to deny the consequences of my actions… but it is something else entirely to learn that I will forever be branded with the dishonor of them.”

A sneer twisted its way across Togami’s mouth at those words, uglier than the one he’d worn to snap her out of the darkness. “Is that what you think? Well, clearly aim isn’t your strong point, because you couldn’t be further off the mark if you tried. You might believe that my actions in regards to Naegi were unremarkable — but to my family and the people we work with, they’ll leave me just as ruined as yours!”

She blinked, confusion clouding her face. “Do you mean your family disapproves so strongly of — of relationships between two —”

“Not that,” he cut her off, rolling his eyes at such plebeian assumptions. “None of them would be remotely interested in who or what I have relations with, provided it doesn’t impact my ability to continue the family line as expected. But with Naegi — it was more than a physical relationship. I became emotionally invested in someone I should have seen as an obstacle to winning the mastermind’s game. By all their standards such a thing is an unforgivable failure… and they are unlikely to forget it no matter how much time passes.”

Unlikely — hah, what an understatement. Togami had realized almost from the moment Monokuma had revealed the truth about the broadcast just how much of his life would be affected by these few weeks. He’d made a number of enemies in the process of clawing his way to his current position, and ever since he’d been proclaimed the heir, they’d been searching for a weakness to use against him. And his love for Naegi, powerful enough to keep him from playing the game, had been handed to them on a silver platter.

Even if he managed to escape the school… he’d never be free of what had happened here. He’d see it in the faces of every member of his family whenever they looked at him, derisive smirks on their lips and smug satisfaction in their eyes. He’d had to fight hard to win respect from the grown men and women he worked with, people inclined to look down on him merely due to his age — and now they would feel free to roll their eyes and return to viewing him as an upstart child with pretensions of adulthood.
“You do understand.” Ogami’s soft, stunned words pulled him out of the nightmarish visions, and he looked up to see her studying him intently. “Then… you weren’t just saying those things to be cruel? Is that truly how you’ve decided to think about it?”

Togami blinked, thrown off balance by the question. A few moments ago, he would have agreed that he had chosen his words solely to pierce through her thoughts with the greatest cruelty he could muster — but that had been before she’d challenged him on his own reaction to the cameras. He’d nearly forgotten about it, in all the chaos that had happened since that revelation, but she’d brought it back to the front of his mind. And with those thoughts front and center in his mind, his own words rang through his head once more.

Someone who had really made the changes you claim would have no right to let the consequences of their past decisions destroy them.

If you let the guilt of your actions break you, then your words were meaningless.

He’d been telling himself that he loved Naegi… and if that was true, then letting himself be shamed by knowing the world had seen them would prove him a liar. He might not have had the thought explicitly, but it must have been in his head, motivating the final kiss he’d deliberately chosen to give Naegi before they’d parted ways in the headmaster’s office. That had been the last kiss they’d ever shared… and if he’d allowed his shame over the cameras to consume him, it wouldn’t have occurred.

“Yes,” Togami said at last, shoving his memories away as he looked back at Ogami. “Yes, that’s how I’ve had to think about it.”

She nodded slowly, the last of the anger draining from her gaze. “Then I shall endeavor to do so as well.”

There was something deeply unsettling about the emotions in her eyes as she spoke — something more personal than mere sorrow, but without falling into the condescending sneer of pity. He didn’t know what it was… and he wasn’t sure he wanted to. To avoid the sight, he turned sharply away and strode swiftly down the hall away from the data center.

As he went, he could hear Ogami’s footsteps trailing after, only a few steps behind.
Even as Togami headed up the final set of stairs to the fifth floor, his thoughts lingered back at the doorway to the data center and everything it represented. That broadcast had altered his life forever, marring his reputation and changing how the people who mattered in his world would view him — but as he’d told Ogami, he’d known that almost right away. The sharp awareness of how his peers would react to his public humiliation had left him nearly unable to touch the boy who had sparked it — but he’d been on the way to overcoming it. He’d refused to let the world’s opinion control his actions and stop him from touching the boy he loved.

But now… now the situation had changed. The world’s opinion of him had fallen just as low… but he no longer had the boy he’d lost it for. Without Naegi to fight for, without the brightness of their time together to motivate him… the knowledge of how he would be seen weighed on his shoulders until he had to strain to keep them from slumping out of his perfect posture. His love, his reputation, even his self-control… he’d never thought that it could be possible for him to lose so much during the handful of weeks he’d spent in the killing game.

But… no, that wasn’t right. He hadn’t lost anything — it had all been stolen from him. The mastermind had taken unholy glee in withholding the information about the worldwide broadcast until it was too late for anyone to factor public opinion into their decisions. There surely would have been some way to navigate a romance with Naegi without turning either of them into international laughingstocks, if only he’d thought about it… but he’d never had the opportunity.

And as for the rest of it… much as he might feel loss at Naegi’s absence, that wasn’t the right term for what had happened. His boyfriend hadn’t just disappeared due to some unfortunate act of fate, impersonal and unstoppable. Naegi’s life had been taken by specific people, by the other students who’d twisted the trial against him and the mastermind who’d allowed them to cheat. He’d been murdered… and Togami couldn’t allow himself to forget that glaring fact.

Not that it could ever leave his mind for more than a few moments at a time. Even the sound of Ogami walking half a pace behind him as they began to cross the fifth floor was nothing more than a reminder that the person he really wanted to share his investigation could no longer be at his side. He had to burn that thought into his mind as he searched for clues about the truth, lest he lose track of why he had to keep going. Difficult as it had been to jolt himself into the investigation in the first place, he had the dark suspicion that carrying on each successive day would only become more painful as the reality of his situation truly sank in.

But those were problems for the future, so Togami did his best to push them aside as he approached classroom 5-C. A tight knot of trepidation coiled at the pit of his stomach as he reached for the door, reminding him that every time he’d entered this room, something terrible had resulted. Being tricked into discovering Ikusaba’s body… setting off the bomb that still rang through his deafened left ear… even the first time he’d found this room when the fifth floor had been unlocked, he’d encountered Kirigiri as she dragged Naegi around in spite of his injuries, sparking a vicious confrontation between them. Nothing good had ever come from entering this room.

But there was no good left to be had in a world where Naegi had been killed. Sharpening his resolve, Togami yanked the door open to reveal the shadow-strewn darkness of the ruined classroom. The camping lantern still shone from where he’d left it, but its pool of light didn’t reach far. From where he stood, in the space between the dingy grayness of the corridor’s ceiling lights and the wavering fragility of the lantern, darkness stretched in every possible direction.
“Did the bomb cause this much destruction?”

If the hallway hadn’t been so quiet, he would have missed Ogami’s horror-stricken murmur. He turned towards where she stood at his left before answering, so that his working ear would catch her words more clearly.

“No, the room was already a ruin when we first found it,” he said, frowning at her stunned expression as she stared into the room. She couldn’t tear her eyes away from the wreckage… but then, that made sense, didn’t it? She’d been drowning in her own grief when the rest of them had explored this floor… so this would be the first time she’d seen the ruined, bloodsoaked room. Even if she’d known to expect something dreadful, she obviously hadn’t been prepared for the evidence of even more horrors than what they’d already seen.

“Something like this has been in the school with us all the time?” She looked as though she might be sick — and considering the stench of blood and corpses permeating the room, that was a distinct possibility.

Togami scowled at her. The last thing he needed while trying to investigate was to be saddled with a vomiting girl. “Wait outside if you’re going to be unable to control yourself. I don’t want you slowing me down because you overestimated your endurance.”

But she shook her head slowly. “No… that won’t be necessary.” One corner of her mouth curved upward in what could almost have been the seed of a smile, if such an expression wouldn’t have been so out of place. “But thank you.”

Before he could demand to know what that was supposed to mean, she reached past him to flip the light switch on. Nothing happened, of course, but she flipped the switch again several times, her frown of confusion deepening with each attempt.

“The culprit cut out the lights somehow,” Togami snapped, rolling his eyes. Did she think that they’d hauled that lantern up here for their own amusement?

“Ah, that explains it. Very well, then.” Ogami took a last bracing breath of the moderately fresh air of the hall and stepped over the threshold into the scene of the murder.

Togami gritted his teeth and strode hastily after her, shoulders tensing as the lingering chill of preserved death settled on his skin. He wasn’t about to trail behind her while she tramped all over the room, destroying any hint of a clue that might remain. He caught up to her as she reached the pool of the lantern’s light — and then stopped short as he finally got a good look at the scene.

The wreckage was all just as he remembered, with scorch marks on the floor and debris scattered in all directions. Just as the library was still as it had been the day before, the mastermind had also left the remains of the explosion untouched. In fact, as far as he could see, the room looked exactly as it had the last time he’d been here… with one glaring exception.

Ikusaba’s body was gone.
Togami glared down at the spot where Ikusaba’s corpse had been, every bit as viciously as he would have if the girl herself were standing in front of him. How could the body be missing? Nothing else from the room had been removed. When he took a brief moment to glance to the side, he could see that even the humidifier components, which had unquestionably been a part of the murder trial, still sat piled in the corner where he’d last seen them. Only Ikusaba’s body had been taken.

“Is something wrong?” Ogami asked, eyes darting from him to the empty space on the ground.

He spun to turn his glare on her. “You can’t possibly be that unobservant! Or do you think that there’s no problem at all that we’re looking at a murder scene without a victim?”

“Oh… I see.” She looked back at the ground, tilting her head as though deep in thought. “But… why does that distress you? In every previous occurrence, the mastermind has always removed the bodies after the class trial ended.”

“No,” Togami said flatly, crossing his arms. “No, that’s not what they’ve done. In the past, the mastermind has gotten rid of all evidence that a murder took place, to the extent it’s been possible to do so. But this time they broke with their usual pattern. The body is the only thing missing from this scene, and that doesn’t make sense!”

Ogami’s eyes widened at the furious frustration blazing through his words. “It certainly does sound like a deviation from the mastermind’s usual methods, and I can’t imagine that they would do such a thing without some reason. But I don’t understand what you mean when you say it makes no sense for the body to have been removed. Surely it would have been unreasonable to leave a dead body to rot here.”

Did he really have to explain this? Togami’s lip curled up in a sneer. “If you’re under the impression that the mastermind and ‘reasonable’ belong in the same sentence, you’ve taken one too many blows to the head. Or do you think that trapping a class of new students in this over-the-top game of murder is reasonable?”

She looked away, fingers tightening into fists. “Of course I don’t.”

“Exactly.” He nodded sharply. “The mastermind doesn’t make decisions based on normal perceptions of rationality — but even so, they always have a method to their madness.” He scowled down at the empty floor again. “I just wish I knew what it was.”

“Wow, what a heartfelt plea!”

The bright, cheery voice sent chills down Togami’s spine, even as he spun around.

Monokuma grinned up at him from the center of the room. “What kind of headmaster would I be if I didn’t answer such an earnest request, huh?” He raised a paw to beckon them onward. “Well, go ahead — consider this an extra special tutoring session! If you want to know, all you’ve gotta do is ask!”
Junko leaned back in her chair and beamed proudly at the screen in front of her, showing the Monokuma robot’s view of Togami and Ogami. It did her headmasterly heart so much good to see her pupils excelling beyond all expectations. She’d thought that she’d have to prompt and nudge and nag to get them thinking along the right lines — but nope, here they were, well on their merry way to the conclusions she wanted them to reach.

In fact, it was starting to look like just a little more time might be all they needed to work their way to the finish line by themselves! She knew where the credit for that belonged, of course — who’d have thought Togami would turn out to be such a model student? Seeing him make such leaps and bounds of progress was the sort of thing every devoted teacher dreamed of, no matter how impossible it might have seemed for her students to achieve it. And now, when he’d jumped right up to the top of the honor roll, staring at her Monokuma with such beautifully honed hatred, it all just brought a tear to her eye.

With so much progress, she hated to interrupt his efforts — but unfortunately, even doing his very best wouldn’t be enough to meet his deadlines. He needed one good, solid study session to go the full distance… and she was sure this little pop quiz session would do the trick.

“All right, if you’re going to pretend to be helpful, answer me — why did you only get rid of Ikusaba’s body?” Togami raised his chin imperiously as he asked the question… but someone really ought to tell him that his favorite oh-so-dramatic poses just didn’t have the same oomph when he was wearing a common tracksuit that wasn’t quite long enough for his legs.

Two years ago, when she’d begun to live among them all as the Ultimate Fashionista, she could have told him herself… but that personality was gone forever now, worn out from overuse. She wouldn’t reach back for it even if she could remember how it felt. Monokuma could have said the words, twisting them into a taunt crueler than the Fashionista’s teasing… but the thought of rewording the idea she’d already had weighed down at her mind. Boring, boring, why did everything turn out to be so boring?

So she threw the words away, consigning them to her never-quite-forgotten heap of things that would never come to be, and leaned towards the microphone to answer her impatient students.

“Hm, really? So all you want to know about is the school’s janitorial work? I can tell you all about our super-secret tips for scrubbing the bathrooms, too, if that’s what you’re into!”

For some reason, Togami reacted to her generous offer with an even more vicious glare. “Don’t be ridiculous. I want to know why you didn’t get rid of the other remnants of the murder when you disposed of her body.”

“Oh, so you just expect your headmaster to do all the school chores for you?” Her fingers flew across the buttons as she spoke, sliding Monokuma’s fanged teeth and gleaming claws into view. “You want everything handed to you on a silver platter? Well, I’ll have you know that I’m an extremely busy bear — those Monokuma coins won’t hide themselves!”

“So you’re saying you were too busy to follow your usual post-trial procedure?” The outrage just dripped from the poor boy’s voice as he found himself confronted with an answer that didn’t fit into his tidy, logical framework. “You have something better to do than follow through on your own insane plans?”
“What can I say? A headmaster’s duties can wear you away to a skeleton if you’re not careful!”
Junko grinned as she tapped out Monokuma’s explosion of laughter. She just knew that poor
Headmaster Kirigiri would appreciate knowing that at least one of his former students still kept
him in her thoughts!

Togami sneered at her for that, which seemed awfully uncalled for considering how patient she
was being with him! “I should have known. You never had any intention of answering my question
honestly.”

Junko clucked her tongue disapprovingly at this rudeness. If that was how he wanted to behave,
she had half a mind to turn this classroom around and leave the pair to their own devices!

But on the other hand… it was hardly fair the rest of the class to let one student’s attitude ruin
everyone’s experience.

“What a terrible thing to say! There’s not a single ounce of deception in my one-hundred-percent
genuine stuffing!” She made Monokuma huff indignantly, but for now she kept her fingers well
away from the button that would make Monokuma disappear from the room. “Of course I was
busy. After all, this trial left me with an awful lot of extra work to do!”

It was more of a nudge than she’d expected to need — but at least it did the trick. Togami’s eyes
narrowed as he finally made the final leap to where she wanted him to go.

“So it’s not just the clean up… you’re admitting that there was something unusual about the entire
trial we just had.” He leaned forward, eyes flashing with determination. “And you’re going to tell
me exactly what it was.”

Chapter End Notes

Schedule Note: Due to the mid-week holiday here in the US this week, there won’t be
a Thursday chapter. Next one will be up Sunday 7/9. See you then!
Chapter 277

Togami didn’t really expect Monokuma to answer his question — or at least, not with anything useful. The mastermind had obviously just made the offer of answers to toy with them, judging by that useless flood of nothing that Monokuma had spouted about Ikusaba’s missing corpse. But even if the question itself didn’t bring him any new information, he’d had to take the opportunity to ask. Otherwise, he’d always have wondered if maybe, maybe there had been the smallest sliver of a chance that the mastermind might act against all their proven motives, might have Monokuma open his viciously fanged mouth and say —

“You’re abso-tively right! That last trial sure was different. I mean, we didn’t get the outcome that I expected from the beginning at all!” Monokuma smiled brightly up at him, as cheerful and innocent as if he gave helpful answers to questions all the time.

But Togami couldn’t have been more horrified if the bear had begun ticking with the countdown timer of another bomb. Every nerve prickled to life along his skin, adrenaline sizzling into his veins until his blood burned with the urge to flee. Only his years of holding his ground in high pressure situations kept him from retreating until there was a safe measure of distance between himself and the smiling bear. That… and the fierce presence of Sakura Ogami, looming just half a step behind him. If she wasn’t going to flee from Monokuma’s alarming shift in attitude, then he had no intention of doing so either.

So he straightened his shoulders, clenched his hands into fists so tightly that every scrape and gash on them burned anew, and looked Monokuma straight in his camera-bearing eye. “What do you mean, you didn’t expect this outcome? Do you expect us to believe that you didn’t know who killed Ikusaba?”

Monokuma’s laughter grated through his ear, so painful that Togami wouldn’t have been surprised to find blood trickling down the side of his skull. “Wow, just one day without your hearing and you’ve already forgotten how to listen! But that’s okay — I’ll let you sneak a peek at the Cliff Notes version, just this once!” He leaned forward, one paw next to his mouth as if he was preparing to whisper a secret. “I’ve known exactly what happened to Mukuro Ikusaba from the moment she was killed.”

Togami scowled, his shoulders slumping as the tension evaporated. So Monokuma wasn’t about to launch another of his terrifying information bombs… just more of his usual babbling. He didn’t know whether to be relieved or furious, and the two reactions roiled together in a sickening knot. He was about to snarl out his impatience at having his time wasted on the mastermind’s pointless antics — when the real meaning of the words clicked in his head. “Wait… if you’ve known everything that’s happened, what outcome did you expect to happen?”

“Oh, that?” Monokuma gave a careless shrug. “Well, I guess it’s okay to tell you now that the trial is over. I thought you were all going to vote for the wrong culprit!”

The wrong culprit…? Wrong? Ripples of white-hot lightning spasms through Togami’s hands from wrists to fingertips as fury shook his body. He couldn’t stand to hear such a thing, not from the mouth of that glorified puppet the mastermind used to hide their true identity. How dare they sit safe in their lair, untouched by any of the events they’d set into motion, and declare that the innocent young man they’d murdered had been anything other than the wrong culprit?

The words screamed through his head, battered against his tightly shut lips in their need to be said. His breath trembled with the need to say all of it and more, to shape all his rage and grief and pain
into a verbal onslaught against the monster who had caused it all — but he knew he didn’t dare. If he started down that road, he wouldn’t stop until the barely-controlled storm inside him had destroyed everything in its path. He couldn’t let that happen… not until he’d unmasked and punished everyone guilty of contributing to this outcome. He’d promised himself mere hours ago that he would find a way to avenge Naegi’s death… and he would not fail the boy he loved again.

But he couldn’t just stand there in silence either, not if he intended to continue investigating. He had to learn more, had to ask questions, had to find a way to pry his teeth apart long enough to say something, anything, and —

“Then you’re still claiming that Naegi truly was the blackened from that trial?” Ogami asked, her words cutting short the maddening spiral of bewildering thoughts in Togami’s head.

Monokuma grinned at them both. “Well, it would be an awful shame to break a winning streak, wouldn’t it? Five whole class trials without any innocent students executed — wow, just one more and you could win a freebie!”

The bear kept babbling on, but Togami couldn’t hear the rest of his idiotic rubbish. Fury roared through his ears, an empty rush of meaningless noise that almost felt as though his hearing had gone again, blown to oblivion by the disgusting tripe that had just spewn out of Monokuma’s mouth.

“Liar.” The word burned on his lips before he knew he’d meant to say it. “Liar! You’re nothing but a cheat and a coward who manipulated the trial to save your agent from the execution she deserved. Naegi never killed anyone, everyone here knows that, and he couldn’t have been chosen as the blackened! You murdered him, you and everyone else who helped you, everyone who didn’t stop you, and trying to pretend otherwise only proves how much of a liar you are!”

Monokuma tilted his head thoughtfully, so casual that Togami’s fingers twitched painfully with the urge to claw at the bear’s revoltingly calm face. “You think I’m a liar? Are you sure? I mean, that’s an awfully serious accusation to make about your headmaster!”

Togami hadn’t meant to say anything that blatant, at least not before he’d found some kind of evidence to back up his claim — but now that he’d done so, he wouldn’t take it back. Even if it turned out to be true that Naegi had faltered at the end, even if he’d lost hope in those last moments, that didn’t matter. He should never have been put in a position where that could have happened, and Togami would not dishonor his memory by pretending he’d been anything other than innocent at the moment of his death. He glared at Monokuma, jaw clenched tight and mouth firmly shut.

“I see… so you’re not gonna change your mind.” A glint of fangs showed in Monokuma’s smile, and the gleam in his red eye almost seemed delighted. “Then I guess there’s no help for it — it’s time for an extra special lesson, just for you!”

Togami narrowed his eyes. “You just lied to my face. Why should I listen to another word out of you?”

“Huh? Well, if you’re determined to cut class, I can’t really stop you,” Monokuma said, shrugging. “But how do you expect to pass your exams if you haven’t heard all the material?”

There was a time not long ago when that would have been enough. Togami could almost remember how it had felt to be that person, someone who could be swayed by the threat of missing out on information. But the boy who would have found Monokuma’s words persuasive had been someone else… someone who hadn’t yet been forced to watch his love’s execution. He might remember…
but he could never be that person again.

“I don’t care what you say,” he said, voice colder than any of the tones he could deliberately invoke as heir. “I’m not going to stand around listening to you lie about the boy you killed.”

He’d learned long ago that strong words were meaningless without action to back them up, so as soon as he finished speaking, he turned and headed towards the door. It wasn’t as though Monokuma could do anything to him for walking out, not unless the mastermind was prepared to jump straight to a second unjustified murder. But Togami was nearly certain they wouldn’t escalate matters so rapidly just because he chose to leave instead of listen. And even if they did… even if they did, maybe it wouldn’t be…

“I see, so juicy info isn’t enough of a reward for you anymore.” The taunting lilt of Monokuma’s words brought Togami to a halt, just a step away from the door to the hall. “All right, then — how’s this for an incentive?”

He shouldn’t look, he knew he shouldn’t, not for such an obvious trap — but he couldn’t stop the prickling worry about just what the mastermind might consider sufficient encouragement. Reminding himself that he could always continue walking out after checking, he turned just enough for a quick glance over his shoulder —

And froze, eyes locking on the photograph Monokuma held up. His paw covered most of the image, obscuring what exactly was on it… but just above the bear’s sharp claws, Togami could make out a distinctive outline of unruly brown hair.
Togami couldn’t tear his eyes away from the photograph Monokuma held, staring at the little he could see. Was it really what he thought? Was Monokuma actually offering him a picture of Naegi?

There would be a catch, he knew there had to be a catch. The mastermind would never give out something to make the loss of one of the students easier, especially not for something as simple as listening to Monokuma’s chattering. But as his feet brought him one step after another back towards the center of the room, Togami knew it didn’t matter. Whatever the mastermind demanded of him, he knew he’d have to do it, no matter the consequences.

Finally he came to a stop in front of Monokuma, his stomach lurching with disgust at his own weakness. He scowled down at the bear’s grinning face and said, “Fine. What are your terms?”

Monokuma looked wounded, eyes quivering like he might burst into tears. “What’s that? You don’t trust me?” He shook his head. “All right, if you’re going to insist… you stay and listen to my thrilling lecture, and I’ll give you this picture. How does that sound?”

Togami narrowed his eyes, thinking through the wording as carefully as he could. “You’ll give me the photo immediately after the lecture? Without any delay?”

“No!”

Togami didn’t mean to shout, but the word was out of his mouth before he could stop himself. He knew he was still missing something, some key question that would explain how this benefited the mastermind — but he didn’t have time to ask anything else. “All right, it’s a deal. I’ll hear you out in exchange for that photo. Now let’s get on with it.”

“Of course!”

“And the lecture won’t go indefinitely?” he pressed. “It will end today — before the nighttime announcement?”

“Way before!” Monokuma grinned. “So what do you think — do we have a deal, or do I tear this useless scrap up right here and now?”

“No!” Togami’s lips tightened at its disappearance — but it still existed, even if it was out of sight. “Well, what kind of teacher would I be if I let that thirst for knowledge go unquenched?”

Togami took a deep breath, squaring his shoulders as he braced himself to deal with the coming onslaught of Monokuma’s nonsense. The bear’s cutey facade set his teeth on edge most of the time… but for a picture of Naegi, an actual tangible image that he could keep, he was prepared to do a great deal worse than just spending the rest of the day enduring the bear’s babbling.

“Okay, boys and girls, I hope you’re ready! It’s finally time for an extra special tutoring session with everyone’s faaaaaavorite teacher… Headmaster Monokuma!” The bear beamed up at them, gesturing grandly as if he expected applause. Togami just crossed his arms in frozen silence, gaze never wavering from the robot. He’d agreed to listen, but he had no intention of playing along with Monokuma’s idiocy any further than he was forced to.

But Monokuma had never required encouragement for any of his strange performances. He carried onward with as much energy as if they’d given him the most enthusiastic response imaginable. “If you check your syllabus, you’ll see that the topic we’re covering today is… voting!”
The shadows of the room shifted in the corner of Togami’s eye. He didn’t look away from Monokuma, lest the mastermind claim he hadn’t really been listening after all — but even so, he could tell that Ogami had circled around the room to watch from a slight distance away. From what he could tell, she’d positioned herself so that she could keep a view of the entire room, easily able to reach either the door or Monokuma if the need arose. He wasn’t sure why she’d decided such a thing was necessary, but he could only approve of her decision to take sensible precautions.

“Now, I know math can be an awfully tough subject,” Monokuma went on, “but I’m sure you can do it if you just keep at it! No matter what kind of problem you’re trying to solve, the solution will definitely turn up if you keep trying all the different possibilities!” He heaved a sigh. “But I guess that’s pretty tough, huh? So many questions, and only one right answer… it could be enough to drive a poor student to do something desperate if you’re not careful!”

Togami didn’t let his scowl alter as he watched Monokuma, but the knot of tension in his stomach began to twist a few infinitesimal degrees tighter. He’d agreed to listen to Monokuma’s stupid lecture without making any stipulations about topic, even knowing that it could easily go very badly indeed. Both he and Ogami still had dozens of wounds bleeding on their souls, and it would have been so very easy for the mastermind to use the lecture to exploit one of those vulnerabilities. But even with the opportunity there for the taking, they didn’t appear to be doing so… and that was far more alarming than an obvious attack would have been.

“But none of you have reason to worry about those brain twisting problems!” Monokuma said brightly. “Your headmaster has come up with an extra special bonus tip to help you out with any tough math question you come up against. And since you’ve all been listening to this lecturing so attentively, I’ll give you a special one time only bargain — you can use my math tip for absolutely free!”

A dozen sarcastic responses burned on Togami’s tongue — but he made himself swallow them back. He was not going to antagonize the mastermind over something so minor, not with the photo at stake. If this stupidity was the worst thing he had to endure to get that picture, he’d count himself lucky.

“So remember, when you get stuck on a super difficult problem and you don’t know what to do, just keep this tip in mind to give you that extra edge you need!” Monokuma grinned up at them. “Are you ready? Okay, then, here it is — numbers don’t lie.” His red eye gleamed bright in the dim room. “Be sure you remember it!”

Togami hadn’t been expecting to hear anything useful in the lecture — but he couldn’t quite believe that Monokuma had chosen to go with inanity when he could have used cruelty instead. Was the mastermind really ignoring all the harm they could do in this situation… or was he missing something? It had sounded like nothing more than a lot of gibberish about math, but —

No, wait. Not math, not exactly. Monokuma had told them the topic at the start of his ridiculous lecture, and all his chatter about math had only been in support of his real point. He’d never been talking about math… he’d been talking about voting. Math and voting… which had to mean the vote counts.

Before trying to leave, he’d called the mastermind a murderer and a liar. He’d accused the mastermind of manipulating the trial and cheating at their own game. And this lecture, the one that Monokuma had gone so far as to bribe him to listen to, had been the mastermind’s response.

Numbers don’t lie.

It hadn’t been about math at all.
Togami stared at Monokuma in shock as the mastermind’s real message formed in his head. “Are you trying to claim that you didn’t alter the voting results?”

Monokuma beamed as though he really was a proud teacher watching a student succeed against all odds. “I knew you’d get it eventually!”
Togami knew that Monokuma had to be lying. The mastermind could say that the voting results were true all they liked, but the facts of the situation stood in blatant opposition. There had been five students who could vote in the trial, and he and Ogami had both voted for Kirigiri. With two against the mastermind’s pet detective, anyone other than her would need three votes to have a majority — meaning that it was impossible for Naegi to have won the vote fairly.

In fact, the impossibility of it was so obvious that a chill of unease had begun to slither its way down Togami’s spine. The mastermind might enjoy pretending to be stupid when speaking through Monokuma, but their actions proved they were nothing of the kind. He had no trouble believing that lies were a weapon in the mastermind’s arsenal — but when it came to the thought of the mastermind telling a lie that was so clearly untrue, his imagination balked. Was it possible that he was missing something?

Of course, there was also another possibility — the mastermind might have told an obvious lie for the sole purpose of causing the students to worry about it. Togami could be playing right into their hands with this very train of thought. Looking at the gleaming grin on Monokuma’s evil little face, Togami could believe such a thing all too easily.

But then again, would the mastermind really tell an obvious lie about their own rules? Would they be willing to discredit the very foundation of their elaborate, carefully-constructed game, just to cause a few moments of additional distress to a single player? That idea seemed just as impossible as the first.

So if the mastermind didn’t expect him to swallow a ridiculous lie… and if they weren’t just dreaming up bizarre ideas for their own amusement… was there any way that Monokuma’s words could be true? Numbers don’t lie… meaning that the voting results really had ended with Naegi being chosen. With two votes already confirmed, was there a way it could have happened?

But no… when it was just simple addition, he didn’t even need to rethink the math in his head. Even if both Jill and Kirigiri had voted for Naegi, that still wouldn’t be a majority. A tie wasn’t the same as a clear winner, was it? It shouldn’t be, but they’d never —

They’d never had a tie before.

It ought to mean that the murderer won the trial and got to leave this nightmare of a school behind, that the rest of the students had lost due to their inability to wrangle out a majority vote — it ought to. Logically it would make sense for the rules to work that way… but that assumed that the mastermind operated based on logic. More often than not, they didn’t — and if that was the case now, was it possible that the votes didn’t work the way he’d thought?

Numbers don’t lie… why say that unless there was a lie being believed?

Decision made, Togami looked back at Monokuma, narrowing his eyes at the bear’s oh-so-helpful grin. “All right, then, if you expect me to believe the votes were accurate, tell me this — what happens when the vote ends in a tie?”

“Huh? A tie?” The bear had the nerve to tilt his head in confusion, as if he’d genuinely been caught
unawares by the question. “Wow, you’re right — that would be a really big problem, wouldn’t it? Just imagine all the chaos it would cause if we didn’t have a clear winner for the trial!”

Togami gritted his teeth at the pointless act — why bother keeping up the charade when they all knew the mastermind had wanted him to ask about this? “Yes, obviously it would be a problem! If you understand that, then clarify it — what would happen after a tie?”

Monokuma grinned at him. “It’s so fulfilling to see my students chomping at the bit to learn! Ahh, it makes me feel like I’ve really succeeded in teaching you all the right lessons!” He put one paw to his heart and gave a heartfelt sigh, so slow and deep that Togami thought he might explode from the sheer frustration boiling through his blood.

But before he could unleash it in a furious tirade of ill-advised insults, Monokuma’s eyes gleamed with the bright red that didn’t match his innocent act in the slightest. “It’s a tough question — but what kind of terrible, incompetent headmaster would abandon a precious student in distress, huh?” He laughed briefly, for no reason that Togami could see. “Well, then, I guess I’d better try my best, huh? Well, it’s not so complicated when you think about it! I mean, if there’s a dispute between students that they can’t resolve themselves… it would only make sense for the headmaster to intervene, right?”

“Then you’re saying that you’d be the tie-breaking vote?” Togami frowned, trying to recall everything they’d been told about the voting rules. “But you said that only the students in the game are permitted to vote.”

“Ooh, a right answer when we weren’t even having a pop quiz!” Monokuma said brightly. “Well, what can I say — the chances of a vote turning out in an even split were pretty low! Someone would need to have awfully bad luck for things to turn out that way, huh?”

Togami tried not to flinch at the reference to Naegi — but he knew the mastermind would be able to see the flash of pain it had caused him. He froze his face back into a sneering mask and barreled onward before that obnoxious bear could taunt him for it. “Then is that what happened in the last trial? Did you have to break a tie?”

“You want me to reveal the super-secret voting results?” Monokuma drew back in exaggerated horror. “I couldn’t possibly do such a thing! After all, if I tell you who I voted for, you might be able to figure out all the votes!”

Togami ignored the nonsensical antics and zeroed in on the pertinent facts. “So you did vote yesterday.”

Monokuma’s paws flew to his mouth. “Oops! Uh oh, guess you ripped the truth outta me!”

“So it really would have been a tie otherwise… and you broke it.” A jolt of pain through his injured hands made Togami realize he’d clenched them into trembling fists. A majority from the five students couldn’t work, but this — if both Jill and Kirigiri had turned against Naegi at the last minute, this would make all too much terrible sense. “You were the deciding vote against Naegi.”

Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: Unfortunately, I'm having some medical issues that are being exacerbated by too much computer time. I'd hoped the 4th of July break would help...
but it hasn't had enough of an effect. I'm going to have to take two weeks off, after which things will hopefully be back closer to normal. Sorry about this! :( The next chapter will be posted on July 30. See you all then!
Togami hated the thoughts forming in his head, but not even the full force of his willpower was enough to stop them now that they’d begun. The mastermind had been one of the three votes that had condemned Naegi — the mastermind, who knew all their secrets and watched their every move. If anyone had known beyond a shadow of a doubt that Naegi was innocent, it should have been the mastermind — and they’d voted against him anyway.

He’d known the mastermind had to be complicit in Naegi’s murder, of course. There was no way an incorrect verdict could be confirmed without the mastermind’s blessing — but he hadn’t realized their involvement went further than a lie to extend the game. But if they’d chosen Naegi… if they’d broken a tie between two people who’d each had two votes… then they’d deliberately chosen to frame Naegi rather than vote for the other possibility.

For Kirigiri. With the two votes he’d already confirmed, she was the only possibility for the other half of the tie. The mastermind had voted for Naegi instead of voting for Kirigiri. They’d looked at the students’ voting results, and they’d cast one last deciding vote to ensure that Naegi would die and Kirigiri would live.

A memory of the trial flashed back through his mind, when he’d revealed the evidence that should have been so decisive. The headmaster of Hope’s Peak Academy, the adult man that Fujisaki’s computer program had deemed most likely to be the true mastermind, was named Jin Kirigiri. And he’d saved her, even going so far as to destroy another student to do so. If he’d had any doubts about why the mastermind would choose to intervene here, to manipulate the results of this trial rather than abandoning their agent to her deserved punishment… well, that shared surname more than explained it.

And Naegi had trusted her. He’d called her his friend. Anger surged fierce and hot through his veins, and if there’d been anything breakable within reach, Togami would have smashed it with his bare hands, damn the pain it would have caused his wounds. It was wrong that she was alive, wrong that Naegi was dead, wrong that the trial had been twisted around until this was the result, and he wanted to rip apart the entire world until everything he hated lay in shreds around him.

The thoughts burned red through his brain, painful to acknowledge and impossible to ignore. He couldn’t stand the ideas crowding through his mind, would have given a great deal for them not to be true… but they fit too perfectly for anything else to be the case. He didn’t even need to hear Monokuma’s stomach-churning laugh to know he’d gotten it right.

“Wow, it looks like someone paid extra attention to the lecture! That problem sure had some advanced calculus in it — but you made it right up to the top of the class!”

The bear’s teeth gleamed sharp in his gleeful grin — but Togami hardly registered them. He felt his stare burning through the robot, beyond the metal and wires and programming, to the shadowy figure laughing behind it all. His dissection of the inactive robot had shown him exactly where its camera was located, allowing him to look straight into its lens as he addressed the mastermind.

“Why did you do it?”

But it was still Monokuma who answered, never wavering from his usual cheerful tone. “What’s that? You even have follow up questions?” He went through the motions of a standard head tilt,
without any hint that the mastermind acknowledged the demand. “Sorry, too bad — we’ve just run out of time!”

Togami shut his eyes tight, jaw clenched in a futile attempt to contain the rage simmering just beneath his skin. Of course the mastermind had ignored him — why would they do anything else? He’d known before Monokuma had even begun talking that nothing good could come of listening to this mockery of a lecture. He should have just walked out, should have ignored the summons, should have avoided the entire situation. This had all been meant to hurt him, and like a fool he’d left himself open to the mastermind’s attack. The mastermind had never had the slightest intention of making a genuine deal with him, and he should have —

“Well, before I go, I guess fair’s fair!” Monokuma laughed again. “Consider it a reward for a job well done!”

Togami’s eyes shot open — but even as fast as he’d moved, Monokuma was already gone. And in the place where he’d been standing… a single photograph lay face down on the floor.

He almost couldn’t believe it was there. The photo he’d endured that lecture to obtain, the tool Monokuma had used to manipulate him, the one chance he still had of seeing his love again… and it was there. Monokuma had actually gone through with their bargain, delivering the photograph as promised before vanishing… and it was right there.

He fell to his knees beside it, reached out a hand to claim it — but for some reason, his fingers resisted his commands. His bandaged hand hovered mere inches above the photo as if repelled by a physical barrier. No matter how firmly he told himself that this was ridiculous, that he had to stop acting so nonsensically and take the prize he’d fought for… his fingers did no more than tremble in the air.

“Do you think it might be some kind of trap?” Ogami asked softly, kneeling on the opposite side of the photograph from him. “I doubt Monokuma would give you anything nice.”

No… the mastermind always had more than one motive for anything they did… and none of them were ever pleasant. Even she could see it… and he’d known the offer was suspicious from the start. The photo in front of him could be anything — even if he’d recognized the outline of Naegi’s hair, he hadn’t had a chance to see any other details. For all he knew, the rest of the photo was no more than that limited silhouette. And that wasn’t even the worst possibility.

“It could be his corpse.” He barely recognized the words as he spoke them, the voice too rough and low to have come from his own throat. “If — if they took a picture, back in the trial room — this could be —”

His hand fell back down, hitting the ground at his side with a thump that shuddered through the jagged wounds. He couldn’t do it, couldn’t reach out and flip that photo over, not when there was a chance he might be faced with that nightmare of a sight.

The only scrap of mercy in that execution had been that it spared any of them from getting a good look at whatever remained of Naegi’s body — and that wasn’t much comfort, not against the blood-drenched scene that had faced them when the execution ended. He closed his eyes against the hideous memory, but that didn’t help. It still played out in the darkness behind his eyes, inescapable and unstoppable in a never-ending loop.

He felt a quiver of motion in front of him as Ogami shifted around, and for a horrifying moment he was certain Ogami was about to be stupid enough to make an awkward attempt at some kind of hug. He stiffened, gearing up for a scathing insult — but it wasn’t necessary. She didn’t move
again, the air as still as if she’d frozen in place.

He opened his eyes again to see what exactly she’d been doing — and the first thing he saw was the photograph in her hand. She’d picked it up so its back still faced him, and a deep frown creased her forehead as she studied whatever image was on the other side.

“What exactly do you think you’re doing?” Togami snapped, the urge to snatch the photo from her grip tingling through his fingers. He’d been the one to bargain for that photo, who’d been mocked and harangued by the mastermind to get it. He ought to be the one looking at it, if anyone was going to.

Instead of explaining, Ogami held the photograph towards him. “It isn’t anything from yesterday. I’m not certain what it is, but… I believe it should be safe enough to look at.”

Togami looked down at the picture, despising the hesitation that stopped him from reaching for it immediately. There would still be a trap here, even if Ogami had confirmed it wasn’t the obvious one. And if that was the case… did he really want to see how the mastermind had twisted Naegi’s image into something that could hurt him?

But on the other hand… even if this was a trap, even if the picture was a weapon… it had to be genuine. If it were false, if it didn’t really show the person it seemed, Ogami would have said as much. So whatever else this photograph might be… it was definitely a picture of Naegi. And if so… he only had one choice.

Slowly, Togami took the photo out of Ogami’s hand, taking great care to grip it gently in spite of the awkward bandages. He brought it close, took a last deep breath to brace himself… and flipped the photo over.

Naegi grinned back up at him from the glossy surface.

Togami’s heart seemed to stop at the sight. The world froze around him, colors bleeding to gray and sounds disappearing into static. There was nothing left for him but that image, and he drank in the familiar contours of that precious face. It was Naegi, definitely and without question the same Makoto Naegi that he’d met here… with one key difference.

The boy in the picture was happy. His carefree eyes had the look of a boy who had never seen a friend die, and his bright smile hadn’t yet been dimmed by the mastermind’s plot. Togami had never seen Naegi look so purely happy, even in the brief moments of peace they’d found together. Trapped here in the killing game, he didn’t think that kind of happiness could even be possible.

And he’d never get a chance to see Naegi feel it. No matter how brightly Naegi’s smile looked, Togami felt only the cool, slick paper beneath his fingers. Naegi’s eyes might seem to sparkle up at him from the page, but they weren’t looking at him. They’d never look at him again.

The happy boy in the photo was suddenly too much to bear. Togami looked away, desperate to see something, anything that would distract his mind from the pain of those knife-edged thoughts.

And as he tore his eyes from Naegi, he finally registered that the boy wasn’t alone in the photograph. There at his side, pressed all too close as she beamed happily up at the camera, was Sayaka Maizono.

Chapter End Notes
Schedule note: The break from too much time writing has helped my health stuff... but unfortunately it's going to be a bit of an ongoing issue. I'm probably only going to be able to write on weekends for a while, due to computer time limitations, so I'm going to change my posting schedule up a little. I'm going to try only posting one chapter a week on Sundays, and we'll see how that goes. There won't be a chapter next week though, just to give myself some breathing room in case the new writing schedule doesn't work the way I'm hoping. Next chapter will be up on August 13. See you all then!
Togami froze, staring down at the photograph in disbelief. After Maizono’s corpse had been removed along with all other evidence of her murder, he’d never expected to see her again — and yet there she was, smiling as if she didn’t have a care in the world, clearly recognizable for all that he’d only known her a few days.

And she was next to Naegi. She was touching him, pressing against his side with her hand resting on his arm. Togami could even see the delicate pink tips of her nails where her fingers curled around Naegi’s bicep, and for a moment red-hot rage burned across his vision at the possessiveness of the gesture. How dare she lay a hand on Naegi as if she had any claim to him, when she’d treated him as nothing more than a tool in her failed murder plot?

Except… whenever this photo had been taken… she hadn’t done it yet. She couldn’t have, not when she and Naegi stood bathed in golden sunlight beneath a clear blue sky. This couldn’t possibly have been taken in the midst of the killing game, with the bolted windows and the imposingly locked door. Perhaps when she’d smiled so innocently at the camera, she hadn’t yet had an inkling that she would brutally betray the boy beside her.

But in that case… just when had this picture been taken? He knew they’d had some sort of connection in the past, that much had come up during the first investigation — attending the same school when they were younger, he was almost certain that was it. Middle school, maybe? That would fit with the brown uniforms they both wore.

But he’d thought that the two of them had only known one another in passing. This picture, with their happy smiles and easy touches, suggested much more than that. At the very least, they’d been good friends, close enough that Naegi’s faith in her motives might not have been so blindly naive as it had seemed. And at most… Togami’s eyes dropped again to the pretty pop singer’s hand on Naegi’s arm, and revulsion twisted through his stomach.

It was all too easy to see this as a picture of a happy couple, swept up in a sugar-sweet first relationship. He could see the outlines of it in his head, all shy blushes and nervous handholding, storybook dates and tentative first kisses. It couldn’t have lasted long, not when Maizono had abandoned her previous life to devote herself to her ambitions as an idol… but these few weeks with Naegi had certainly taught Togami that it didn’t always take a long time for emotions to run deep. She might have been with Naegi long before he’d even known Togami existed.

Thinking on it, Togami supposed that he’d known, somewhere in the back of his mind, that he probably wasn’t Naegi’s first relationship. As innocent as he seemed, Naegi had still known how to match him in their first explosive kiss — and afterward, no inexperienced virgin could have taken the lead so smoothly. Someone else must have touched Naegi before him… but replacing that vague idea of “someone” with the face of a girl who’d betrayed Naegi made Togami’s fingers itch with the urge to rip the photo in two, severing Naegi from that girl forever.

No… no, he couldn’t risk tearing up the portion of the photo showing Naegi, not after enduring so much to get his hands on the picture. Togami took a deep breath to calm himself, forcing his fingers to relax their grip on the paper. He could think this over rationally, and hunt down a pair of scissors to slice Maizono’s face away later. He could preserve this image of Naegi in a brief moment of happiness, without the constant reminder that she had been the cause. He looked away
from the photo, lest the image break his fragile resolution.

“Are you all right?”

Togami blinked at the unexpected question, looking across at Ogami with a start. Caught up in the whirlwind of confusing questions that the picture had caused, he’d all but forgotten the girl was still in the room with him. It seemed ridiculous that he could have lost his awareness of someone as dangerous as a wall of walking muscle… but the photo had left him more off balance than he’d expected.

“Of course I’m fine,” he said, hoping the brusque response would forestall any further prying questions. It was bad enough that she’d seen the picture of Naegi with Maizono — the last thing Togami wanted was to have to discuss it.

“But that picture… something about it almost appeared as though…” Her voice trailed into silence when his glare intensified. “Very well, never mind.”

Togami gave her a single sharp nod, sliding the photo into the back of his e-handbook so it would remain uncreased. He tuck it safely into his pocket beside Naegi’s key and forced himself to his feet. “Now come on — we’ve wasted enough time here.”

Ogami frowned, eyes darting over him from head to toe for some inexplicable reason. “You mean… you intend to return back to your investigation immediately? But after so many shocks, shouldn’t you —”

“I said that I’m fine!” Togami snapped, shoulders stiffening at the implication that the mastermind’s tricks had left him unable to think clearly. “It will take more than a bizarre photograph to stop me from investigating.”

He knew his voice had been steady and firm, but even so, her frown didn’t clear away. “Then do you plan to continue through the night? The nighttime announcement will be sounding shortly.”

He would have sneered at the thought of continuing to acknowledge the restriction Celeste had imposed on nighttime activities — but a dull pang in his stomach reminded him that he hadn’t eaten all day. The idea still sounded about as appealing as shoveling sawdust into his mouth… but he didn’t want to risk collapsing from something as stupid as malnutrition. “I have every intention of returning before that happens.” He scowled, not liking the way his words had sounded like a concession. “But not yet — I’m going to finish here first.”

Junko drummed her fingers on the table as she watched Togami putter uselessly around the wreck of a classroom. He was so close to where she wanted him, she could feel it… but the silly boy kept resisting the truth with all his might. For someone who never hesitated to force others to confront painful truths, he was being awfully hypocritical now that he was on the other side of it!

But he could only avoid the revelation for so long. After that big fat hint she’d dropped, it was only a matter of time before he understood what had happened. The only question left was whether she’d see it coming with enough warning to make some popcorn before the real fireworks could start.
Not that anything would happen while he insisted on rummaging around up on the fifth floor, though. Junko heaved a sigh and began a quick scan of the other monitors. It never hurt to make sure everything was back on track, especially after all the recent deviations... but even so, the empty screens were still boring, boring, boring. Maybe she should call up Monokuma in the cafeteria to give Jill someone to play with.

But before she could take more than a step toward the control room, a faint rustling stopped her in her tracks. That hadn’t been from one of the monitors. She spun in the direction of the sound — and a wide grin spread across her face at the sight of Naegi shifting restlessly as sleep began to recede. Clearly boredom wasn’t going to be an issue now!

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully that marks the end of the last break I'll have to take for a while. Fingers crossed! The update schedule is going to be one chapter a week on Sunday. See you next week!
Chapter 282

Hope ’s Peak had been beautiful once. Naegi remembered thinking so, back when the school had been full to bursting with the energy and enthusiasm of the Ultimates. The school had seemed to glitter golden and bright, home of everything good and worthy in the world.

Or maybe the school had only seemed that way because of how very happy he ’d been there. Looking back on that brilliant first year, when he’d made truer friends than he’d ever expected to find, Naegi thought that maybe he hadn’t seen the school for what it had been. The beauty had been in the people he’d met, not the building.

But no matter what had been true in the past, the walls stretching cold and blank around him now certainly couldn ’t be called beautiful. The older building had lacked many of the main school’s decorative elements even before Headmaster Kirigiri had converted it to a shelter, and the alterations had done nothing to make it more welcoming. Heavy plates on every window, sounds swallowed up by hallways meant for larger crowds, abandoned classrooms around every corner as a mocking reminder of the world they’d lost… the shelter might keep them all safe, but looking around it hurt in a different way.

And the sight only cut deeper when Naegi remembered that these empty walls, a world away from the school where he’d been happy, might be the last sight he’d ever see. Naegi stared up at the heavy metal door they’d used to bar the entrance hall, watching the last few slivers of light dance across the floor as Headmaster Kirigiri went through the last few security checks necessary. Were they really going to be able to do this? How would these walls look after they’d been sealed away for weeks, or months, or years? Would their promise to live safely as hope for the future really be enough to keep this shelter from turning into a prison?

A hand settled on his shoulder, warm and comforting and real enough to hold the chill of his thoughts at bay. Naegi turned to look up into his boyfriend ’s face, and he saw the same fears that haunted him reflected back in icy blue eyes.

“Last chance to change your mind,” Byakuya murmured, one corner of his lips twisting upwards. It could almost have been a joke, since the time when they could have backed out of this decision was long since past… except that it touched on wounds too raw for humor.

Naegi shook his head, hoping he looked braver than he felt. “No. We all agreed that this is the best choice. But… it won’t be easy. I was just thinking about what it’s really going to mean to lock ourselves in here.”

“It certainly isn’t what any of us wanted for our futures,” Byakuya agreed, and in those words Naegi could hear the echo of grief for the heir’s murdered family. “But with the world in ruins, none of those options are possible. The only thing left for us to do is hide here to preserve what sanity we have left.”

“Right.” Naegi sighed. “We’ll just have to keep hoping that it doesn’t take too many years before people start coming to their senses.”

Byakuya stared at him a little too long, eyes narrowed in the way Naegi knew meant that he was thinking hard. He hoped he hadn’t inadvertently triggered memories of one of the many painful incidents they’d endured since the Tragedy… but with so many horrors to remember, it was hard to be sure.
“That’s really what you think will happen, isn’t it?”

“Huh?” Naegi blinked. “Well, yeah, I guess. I mean, it would be great if the world got fixed in less time... but with the way things have been going, I don’t see how it could be anything shorter.”

Byakuya didn’t answer, lips pressed together till they turned white. Naegi frowned up at his boyfriend. He was starting to get the feeling that something really might be wrong, even if he didn’t quite understand it.

But before he could ask, Byakuya swept forward to close the distance between them, pulling Naegi fully against him. Naegi could feel the hint of a tremor in his boyfriend’s breathing as Byakuya buried his face in Naegi’s hair, and tension vibrated through the arms pressed tight against Naegi’s back.

“I’m glad you won’t be out there.” The whispered words were so soft Naegi could barely hear them, even as close as they were. “I’m glad you’ll be safe.”

Oh... so that was it. Naegi relaxed a little once he recognized the too-familiar fears. He might not like it, but at least he understood how to handle this type of nightmare. He held Byakuya close in turn, tightly enough that there could be no doubt that he was here. “I’m here,” he whispered back. “I’m here, and I’ll stay. I promise, I promise, you don’t have to be afraid. I’ll stay as long as you need me.”

The cloth of Byakuya’s shirt muffled the words... but the words themselves didn’t matter. Each of them had whispered the same promise over and over, curled up close in the darkness on nights when too many horrors made sleep impossible. Stay... stay... promise you’ll stay. Naegi clung tight to the man he loved, the words thrumming through his blood.

He could have stayed there wrapped in his boyfriend’s arms forever, but a softly cleared throat reminded Naegi that they weren’t actually alone in the hall. He pried himself away just enough to see Kyoko beside them.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said, words spoken with genuine regret where she might have once teased. “But... it’s time.”

No... no, don’t...

She didn’t have to say for what. Naegi reluctantly disentangled himself from Byakuya’s arms so they could join their clustered friends standing in front of the imposing metal door. Headmaster Kirigiri waited there, lines of exhaustion etched deep around his eyes.

The headmaster had always been as disinclined to waste words as his daughter, and even this life-altering moment proved no exception... or maybe it was just that everything important had already been said. He looked each of them in the eyes, waited for all sixteen nods of final confirmation, raised his hand to the lock...

And it was done.

Naegi closed his eyes, the click of the lock ringing through his head. That was the end of it. They had sealed themselves away, the last dream of hope for a broken world. All they had to do now was wait... and try to keep that hope alive.

“Wow, guess we’re really gonna be stuck together for life now, huh?”

No... not her...
“Good thing we're all such good friends — otherwise we might end up killing each other!”

Killing each other… killing our friends… killing the people we should have fought hardest to protect…

Naegi ignored the words, dismissed them as a bad attempt at a joke, never thought for a moment that they meant anything else…

Except for the part of him that didn’t. Screaming in his head, trapped in a memory, caught between nightmares he’d dreamed and those he’d lived… Naegi thrashed against the boundaries of his mind, fighting against the false sense of safety drifting through the dream. It was a lie, he knew that now, any safety they’d thought they’d found had always been a lie…

Her lie… she’s lied all along, lied from the start…

But the knowledge couldn’t reach the person he’d been. The boy of the past turned back to his boyfriend, found moments of comfort in the other boy’s arms, and never understood what he’d missed until it was too late to matter. He walked away from the other students and never knew how close to the darkness he’d been.

And at the same time… he didn’t. He stayed, torn apart from himself by knowledge of the truth. He knew what had happened, he knew what was happening, he knew it all… and he knew that there was only one thing left to do.

Naegi opened his eyes… and looked Junko Enoshima in the face.
Junko Enoshima… even the name felt knife-edged and vicious as it echoed through Naegi’s head, calling up too many memories for his sleep-addled brain to process. The Ultimate Fashionista, icon of the fashion world, her appearance artlessly stylish and stunningly trendy. There had been so many threads about her in the online forums he’d read before classes started, every message splashed with new pictures glorifying the girl’s effortless beauty… but her looks hadn’t won her the coveted invitation to Hope’s Peak. No, the talent they’d recognized came from her deep well of charisma, the desperate desire she could inspire in those around her to be near her, to emulate her, to find some tiny way to bring a piece of her into their lives. She could change the course of people’s thoughts without ever meeting them, as easily as changing her hairstyle.

And she had. Oh, but she had.

Staring up at the girl beside him, pain lurched up from somewhere deep in the pit of his stomach. The perfect makeup, the schoolgirl outfit modified until it was more costume than uniform, every aspect of her appearance hurt him as it resonated with memories he hadn’t known he had… but looking past them was worse. Her face, her face, it had haunted his nightmares ever since he’d woken into the killing game, even though the haze of his sealed memories kept him from seeing her clearly. He hadn’t remembered her… but he’d known her anyway. The wounds she’d inflicted had gone too deep for neurological tricks to erase. He knew her… and he knew what she’d done. The memories ached as they sank into his body, every grief a fresh pain as he felt it anew. Except… it wasn’t just the memory of past pain that he felt echoing through his body. Real pain existed here, in the present, throbbing through his bones in time with the slow beat of his heart. It warred with the tangled hurt in his mind, bleeding into one another until he couldn’t tell where one stopped and the other began.

Fuzzy-headed, in pain, and vulnerable… it was definitely not the state Naegi wanted to be in when coming face to face with his darkest nightmares. But as a sudden, brilliant smile snaked across Junko’s glossy lips, he knew he wasn’t going to get a choice. He scrambled desperately through the disconnected pieces of his half-asleep mind, doing his best to brace himself against whatever vicious new assault she was planning.

“Hey there, sleepyhead! Man, for a while there I thought you were never gonna wake up!”

Normal words.

“I’ve seen some marathon naps, but a full day is like a whole different league!”

Not attacks, or insults, or poisonous sweetness. Just an ordinary greeting.

“Sure, it’s not the best I’ve seen, but hey, pretty impressive for a first attempt!”

She was just talking to him… talking like she was a normal person. Talking like they were friends.

Confused and off-balance by the unexpected lack of menace, Naegi’s gaze darted back to her face again, skimming over the familiar features until he met a pair of pale blue eyes.

And in that moment… there was no electric shock, no burst of agony, no physical proof that the memories in his head were real. Even now, looking her straight in the face, he couldn’t see the simmering hatred or wild madness that had to exist in a girl capable of the things she’d done. All he could see was… a face he knew.
Junko Enoshima. A girl who’d been his classmate… and his friend.

“W… wha…” Naegi’s tongue felt thick and heavy in his mouth, too clumsy to ask any of the questions he needed her to answer. What was going on? Where were they? Why was she here? Why was he here?

Why wasn’t he dead?

He should be dead. Naegi couldn’t quite recall the specifics of those last dizzying moments before he’d lost consciousness, but he knew that much was true. He’d been declared guilty at the end of the trial, thrown into one of those flamboyantly staged murder sequences in spite of his innocence… and executed. He should be nothing more than another crossed out portrait in their circle of classmates… so why wasn’t he?

But when he managed to muster the breath to ask again, the words came out as a dry, hacking cough. Each spasm jolted through his entire body, and oh god, oh god it hurt everywhere, every injury screaming from this new assault. His left arm screamed with the almost-familiar agony of his run-in with the genocider, but now his right arm answered with its own deep rumbling of soreness. Whatever had happened between the execution and now, he certainly hadn’t escaped unscathed.

“Wow, you’re that desperate to talk to me?” Junko laughed — not the cruelly mocking cackle that Monokuma would have used, but a bubbly giggle that any teenage girl could have produced. “Well, I get it and all — it’s been forever since we had a chance to catch up! But it sounds like you’re not up to that much excitement yet. We’ll have to save the gossip for later!”

Naegi wouldn’t have known how to answer a speech like that even if he’d been capable of talking. It didn’t mesh with the world as he knew it, a world where the horrors of the killing game were only one small part of the all-encompassing Tragedy. No one talked like that, so light and cheerful and friendly, not unless there was an undercurrent of madness in their words. There had to be one in Junko, dark enough to inspire her to twist her friends into murderers… but no matter how he searched, Naegi couldn’t see it.

“Oh!” She gasped, jumping to her feet. “I was so excited to see you that I totally forgot what I meant to do!”

And with that she launched herself over to the space just behind Naegi, where his inability to move his head kept her well out of sight. He had idea what she was doing back there, but it seemed to involve a great deal of clattering, and… sloshing?

But he only had a few moments to worry before she returned, clutching a plastic thermos with a straw sticking out of it. “That’s better! Man, what kind of crappy hostess would I be if I didn’t even offer you refreshments?” She plopped back down beside him and held the thermos so the straw was at his mouth.

Naegi kept his lips tightly closed, eying the straw like she’d shoved a live viper in his face. His throat might be as dry as old paper, but he wasn’t about to drink anything she gave him.

“Huh? You’re not thirsty?” Junko tilted her head, pigtails swishing. “But you sure ought to be, after all the blood you lost! Come on, think how much better you’ll feel after a few sips of water!”

The temptation of cool, soothing water sliding down his parched throat was almost enough to sway him — but still, Naegi knew he didn’t dare. Why would she offer him water when she could just as easily give him some horrible concoction of poison instead? He clenched his jaw in spite of his
bruised face’s objections to the tension.

“’You really don’t want any?’” Junko blinked at him for a puzzled moment. “Wait… don’t tell me you think I did something to it!” She giggled again, as if the implication that she would casually murder a friend too ridiculous to consider. “Oh, come on, I thought you were smarter than that! Why would I go to all the trouble of helping you if I was just gonna off you the second you woke up?’

Helping him? Naegi frowned a hair, as much as he could manage. She didn’t really expect him to believe she’d done anything to help him, did she? He knew the truth now, knew that she’d been the mastermind behind the entire killing game. Even safe in the shelter that Headmaster Kirigiri had worked so hard to create, she’d given in to the despair sweeping through the outside world. After betraying the friends who’d trusted her, after turning their last safe haven into a nightmare, why would she suddenly decide to help him?

Except… if she hadn’t intervened… how had he ended up here, on the floor of what appeared to be the data center? He ought to be in a body bag after that execution, but… he wasn’t. And that could only have been possible if the mastermind had allowed it to happen.

Then… did that mean she was telling the truth? Had she really helped him after the execution? He didn’t know why she would’ve done a strange thing like that, when it seemed to go against everything she’d spent the last few weeks working towards… but he couldn’t see any other explanations.

A surge of longing rose through his chest, briefly dwarfing the physical pain as Naegi was consumed with the sudden, intense wish that Byakuya were here with him. With all his experience navigating a landscape of suspicion and mistrust, the brilliant heir had grasped the new and bewildering world of despair far more easily than Naegi had. He would have known what to do.

But Byakuya wasn’t here. He couldn’t be. Junko had wiped him out of existence, deleted him from the world like an errant keystroke along with all the rest of their classmates. And though the boy who remained might be the same person in fundamentals… he also wasn’t. This Togami had never dug through wreckage of a bombed tower in a desperate search for evidence that even one family member might have survived the blast. He’d never strapped on a heavy gas mask beneath a sky burnt orange and streaked with ashy clouds. He hadn’t heard the headmaster’s proposal to safeguard the last sixteen students from Hope’s Peak, or agreed to spend the rest of his life locked away in a shelter to preserve what hope they could.

And he hadn’t kissed Naegi in the park, in the quiet moments after sunset when the stars had just begun to shine. He hadn’t arranged for a private jet to fly him halfway around the world in the middle of the night after finishing an international business conference, just so he could see his boyfriend a few hours sooner. He had never fallen in love, or let himself light up with incandescent happiness at learning that his love was returned.

And Junko had been the one to take all those things away. Naegi looked up at her, the image of a kind girl helping out a friend in need, and he deliberately locked his jaw tightly in place. Even if she’d helped him, that didn’t erase all the other awful things she’d done. He couldn’t just give in and trust her, even if she’d been his friend once… not when she’d used that trust to hurt so many of their friends.

Junko sighed, setting the thermos down on the floor beside him. “Still no, huh? Oh, well, guess it can’t be helped.” She gave him a brilliant smile, the same one that graced dozens of magazine covers. “I mean, it’s not like I only helped you – I did try to kill you, too!”
Junko’s brilliant smile, so apparently open and friendly, came very close to blinding Naegi to the actual content of her words. Even knowing that she was the mastermind behind the killing game, even after seeing the horrors despair had caused her to unleash on her own friends, he still felt the pull of her charismatic spell. Her casual comment, spoken as part of a normal conversation without any hint of malice, slipped easily through his tired mind… until it didn’t.

*I did try to kill you, too!*

The words echoed back through his head, changing as they replayed. Junko’s overwhelming energy and manic brightness shifted, another voice overlaying hers and drowning out the false kindness with the sound of real friendship.

Kyoko’s voice snapped through his head, flat and sharp as it always became when she was waiting impatiently for him to realize the flaw in his thinking. He’d heard that tone a hundred times, whether reviewing forgotten class notes the night before a test or working out the ending of a popular television drama, and it inevitably led to the realization that he’d missed something painfully obvious.

… *tried to kill you too…*

And that time he really heard them. Kyoko’s voice replayed the words in his head, stripping them of whatever magic Junko infused them with until only the chilling facts remained. Any scrap of hope still lingering in the back of his mind that he might have been wrong about Junko had to evaporate now, when faced with her unprompted confession. Using the same friendly voice that greeted him each morning back in their long ago school life, Junko had admitted that she had been the one to try to execute him.

… *tried to kill you…*

No… that wasn’t quite right, was it? He could hear his friend’s admonishment to *pay attention to details* as clearly as if she stood there at his side. Junko had said that she’d tried to *kill* him… not “execute” or “punish” or any of the other words she used when speaking to them through Monokuma. She’d always been very careful when talking about the game, choosing words that implied the responsibility for the deaths belonged elsewhere. It had infuriated Naegi every time he’d heard her do it, because obviously the mastermind behind the game was more at fault than the unwilling victims she’d forced to play it… but even if what she’d said was wrong, she’d still been consistent.

But if she hadn’t been referring to his execution at the end of the trial… what had Junko meant when she’d said she’d tried to kill him? He blinked up at her with a frown — only to realize that she’d leaned forward to watch him, chin propped on both hands as she rested her elbows on her knees. And while the bright smile gracing her lips looked identical to the one she’d worn just a moment ago, now feeling it directed at him for more than an instant sent chills down his spine.

“Look at you, plugging away at those tough questions even when you’re down for the count!” Junko beamed at him in delight, as if he’d been trying to figure things out solely to please her. “But what kind of friend would leave to work so hard all by yourself? I’ll be glad to give you a little help, at least till you’re back on your feet!”

Terror crawled down Naegi’s arms, leaving a stinging trail of goosebumps in its wake. Any help
she offered would only be meant to hurt him further in the end, he knew it — but when he tried to say as much, nothing but a dry rasp came out of his mouth.

Junko tsked, shaking her head sadly. “Aw, is it really so hard for you to rely on a friend when you’re in trouble? I know it’s a tough lesson for some people to get the hang of… but don’t worry! I’ll be sure to work extra hard so that you understand your situation!”

She bounced forward and patted the top of Naegi’s head, an almost affectionate touch that sent sparks of pain flickering across his vision. Had he hit his head during the execution, or had she found the remnants of one of his slightly older injuries? He couldn’t be sure, not when he had no way to gauge what had happened to him or how badly hurt he’d been. All he knew was that it was bad enough to stop him from moving… leaving him entirely in Junko’s power. And if even a brief tap of her hand could cause so much pain… what else could she decide to do?

The possibilities were too horrifying to contemplate. The only saving grace was that at least she wasn’t doing any of those other things… not yet. But the threat still lingered in the air between them, underscored by the pain ringing through his skull. She could change her mind at any moment, if she got bored of this new game… so it was in his best interests to make sure she didn’t.

The realization must have shown on his face, because Junko leaned back and clapped her hands in absurdly childlike glee. “And we’re starting to understand each other already! Isn’t this great?”

She paused for a moment, like she was waiting for a response. Naegi had never thought he’d be grateful that his injuries prevented him from speaking, because he had no idea what she wanted him to say.

After a few seconds of silence, she shrugged. “Well, it’ll be better once you’re up to joining in on the fun. Until we can have that great big gossip session I promised you, I’ll just have to guess what you need!” She put her hands up to her temples, squeezing her eyes closed like a terrible fake psychic.

Psychic… like Sayaka had pretended to be whenever she could see right through him. Like she’d done again at the start of the killing game, when they’d reforged just enough of their friendship for the mastermind to manipulate them.

Why had Junko done this to them? That was the question he really wanted to ask, the one thing he needed desperately to know. Was it that they’d never meant much to her at all, so that they’d simply been the most convenient victims after the Tragedy had driven her into despair? Or had she hated them all along, even when they’d thought of her as a friend, and the despair had finally allowed her to express her true feelings? If he’d had the strength to speak, he didn’t know if he could have restrained himself from asking the questions screaming through his mind.

But no matter how much he wanted to know, those weren’t the questions that Junko wanted to answer. She dropped her hands from her temples and grinned. “Aha! I get it now — you’re worried about how I told you I wanted to kill you! I’ll just bet that you can’t bear to think it was the truth, huh? You’re hoping it was all one big nasty lie!” Her cheerful giggle scraped his nerves raw. “But sorry — I’m not gonna tell you any lies. That was one hundred percent truth!”

So it was true… if he could trust her word, anyway. But it made sense, when he thought about it. The mastermind had to know the real killer’s identity… but she’d chosen to declare Naegi guilty anyway. If she hadn’t wanted him and only him to die, all she would’ve had to do was announce that wasn’t the one who killed Mukuro Ikusaba.

The one… who’d killed… Mukuro…
Naegi stared up at Junko again, eyes narrowing as he took in the details of her features. Her face, that was definitely her face, he’d know her anywhere… and he’d know who she wasn’t.

Another face flashed before his eyes, a face that didn’t fit the bouncing pigtails and playful grin she’d worn. But it was another face he knew, one that belonged to short dark hair and careful eyes that never seemed to smile.

It hadn’t been Junko Enoshima that they’d met at the start of the killing game. It had been Mukuro Ikusaba, putting on an awkward facsimile of Junko’s identity. It wouldn’t have fooled anyone who knew the real Junko, of course… but they’d all forgotten that they did. But even without remembering, too many questions might have ruined the disguise… except that they’d never gotten the chance to ask. She’d died before anyone had tried to get to know her, the first death of so many.

She’d been killed by the mastermind… several weeks ago.
Naegi could feel the insight rushing through his thoughts like a tidal wave, sweeping away Junko’s rickety walls of lies until only the solid foundation of truth remained. Junko was here in front of him, alive and well… so the girl murdered by Monokuma before the first trial hadn’t been Junko at all. Mukuro had taken her place all along, from the day she’d met them in the entrance hall… to those horrible final moments when Monokuma launched his Spears of Gungnir.

No… not Monokuma, not the mastermind, not any of the other masks of anonymity she’d worn. Junko had been the one to launch the spears, using a mechanism so elaborate that it had to have been set up in advance. She’d planned on killing her double all along.

The moment flashed before Naegi’s eyes again, blood splattering across a girl’s horrified face. Pain and confusion flooded her eyes as she used her final breath to ask the mastermind why… and now, Naegi understood what she’d really meant to ask. Why had the mastermind decided to kill one of the allies who’d brought her plan to life?

As much as Naegi hated to sling such a horrible accusation at a girl who could no longer speak in her own defense — a girl who he’d considered a friend both of the times he’d met her — he couldn’t see any other possibility. Both her appearance and mannerisms had to have been altered so that her introduction as Junko Enoshima would be believable… and such an elaborate disguise could only have worked with her active participation. Mukuro must have been involved with the plan, not one of the innocent students who’d been mind-wiped and thrown into the killing game. But in spite of all of that, she’d still become a victim in the end.

Because Junko had murdered her own twin sister in cold blood.

Sick horror lurched upward from his stomach, burning a path up his throat to flood sour and sharp into his mouth. He retched, dry heaves of pain shaking through him as his empty stomach tried to rid itself of the disgust. Her sister, her own sister… the thought throbbed through his blood, filling his own veins with slime. He wanted it out, out of his head, out of his life, out of the same world where he had to live — but the truth of it only grew clearer as he struggled against it.

Without a way to purge his body of the horrors, the waves of nausea turned to coughs, tearing open new avenues of pain with every hacking shudder. He tried to swallow it back, tried to hold it down, but his sandpaper-dry mouth spasmed violently against every attempt. He couldn’t even draw a full breath of soothing air without violent tremors interrupting, building into a dull ache in his lungs.

It was too much to bear, too much pain and too much knowledge, and he couldn’t find the strength to endure both. In spite of his best efforts, he could feel himself losing the battle to keep his heavy eyelids open, and every time they fell shut the charred remnants of Mukuro’s corpse blazed against the darkness. And even if she’d betrayed them, even if she’d helped create the nightmares of the past few weeks, that didn’t make it easier to see how she’d been abandoned by the sister she’d betrayed them for. Every fresh grief hammered away at his weakened body, pain on top of terrible pain, blurring into each other until he could barely tell one from the other. It all hurt, every nerve and every neuron, everything hurt so badly that he didn’t know how he could bear it —

And then cool hands brushed across his forehead, smoothing his clammy skin with softly repeated motions. It didn’t stop the pain, nothing could… but the gentle sensations gave him a small space of relief. And when the nightmares in his head tried to reassert themselves, tried to fill the newly freed space with worse ideas than before — a quiet murmur shushed the horrors before they could form. He could hardly hear the sound clearly enough to recognize it as a voice, but even so it was
enough to keep the terror at bay.

There was something familiar about the sound... something he knew... but the answer was tangled up with pain and screaming and fear. He knew he could find the reality of it if he only tried... but even the thought of reaching back towards the source of all that pain sent him cringing in the opposite direction. He couldn’t bring it all back on himself, not knowingly. Even though it was important, even though he knew he’d regret the choice, he couldn’t. Not again.

But without warning, the soft hand lifted from his brow and the murmuring faded from his ears. Without those fragile barriers, the pain came roaring back at full force, even worse than it had been. Thoughts had been the cause of it, he knew that somewhere in the back of his mind, but they’d fallen away under the force of overwhelming physical sensation. He would have cried if he’d had the strength, would have wept and pleaded for anything, anything that could help. Even if the price was high, even if he regretted it later, none of that mattered if only the pain would stop.

But it didn’t, of course it didn’t. This had been coming for days, injury after ignored injury biding their time until they could launch an assault that his weakened body couldn’t wish away. Telling himself that he had to try harder to work through it didn’t work, not this time. The pain screaming through his veins didn’t weaken at all — if anything, it got worse, with a sharp new twinge pinching the skin of his inner right elbow. It was a strange feeling, small against the rest of it... but present in a way the larger pains weren’t. Why did it feel different from everything else...?

Why was he able to think coherently enough to ask himself that question?

Naegi blinked slowly, the data center ceiling wavering into focus above him as he regained some small measure of control over his senses. What had just happened? All that pain out of nowhere... well, that much made sense, considering what he knew of the scope of his injuries and the continual emotional stress. He could still feel it, woven through his blood and bones... but it had receded just a hair back from his awareness, just enough to give him space to think. He didn’t understand why it would do that, though... he might not be a doctor, but he didn’t think bodies worked that way. Not unless —

His gaze shot towards his right arm, just as the pinch of fresh pain eased — and he was just in time to see Junko withdrawing a syringe from his elbow. Their eyes met, and a brilliant smile lit up her face.

“Welcome back, sweetie! Man, I’m sure glad I remembered where I left those needles before the pain drove you off the deep end!” She laughed, as if she’d made some kind of joke. “I mean, I’d rather chat when you’re clean and sober, but drugged up is way better than crazy!”
Junko had drugged him… even the thought sent shudders of revulsion twisting through Naegi’s insides. He could almost believe that he could feel whatever horrific concoction she’d injected into him, using the slow beat of his heart to pump itself deep into his veins. What had she decided to do to him now that she’d given up on murder?

“Aw, don’t look at me like that!” Junko pouted theatrically at him, twirling the empty syringe between her fingers. “Seeing you act so suspicious when I’m only trying to help hurts my feelings!”

Coming from anyone else, the words would’ve sounded sincere… but Naegi knew better than to believe her for a second about any of it. No matter what she said about wanting to help, it had to be a lie. After being an enemy for so long, she had no reason to make such a sudden about-face to an ally, especially when he hadn’t done anything to change her mind. There had to be a trick to it somewhere, even if he couldn’t quite work out where.

And as for the rest of her claim… he didn’t believe that the mastermind had any feelings left to hurt. She’d manipulated her friends into murdering one another, executed the ones who fell victim to her traps, even murdered her sister — horrors that should have driven even the most stoic person to tears. But he knew she hadn’t cried… she couldn’t have, not when she’d taunted them with tasteless jokes and malicious laughter through Monokuma’s mouth. If she could still smile cheerfully after all of that, there was no way his frown could affect her.

But even as he reminded himself how easily Junko could lie to him about wanting to help… he realized that the pain wracking his body had begun to recede. It wasn’t that it stopped hurting, not exactly… but he felt as though he’d drifted away from it, leaving the physical sensations somewhere far away. That couldn’t be his own body healing itself… it had to be some kind of reaction to whatever Juno had injected into his arm. There was something worrying in that, since facing down the mastermind was dangerous enough without the influence of drugs… but his thoughts didn’t feel any fuzzier than they already had. So what had she given him…?

“Worrying like that will give you wrinkles!” Junko’s hand snaked forward, and Naegi blinked as her fingertip bounced against the furrow between his eyebrows. “Chill, okay? It was just some of the super strong painkillers I cleaned out of the clinic before I gave you guys free rein. Can’t leave the good stuff lying around for anyone to mess with — my network has a strict anti-drug policy!”

Painkillers… well, that did make sense. The kind of painkillers that hospitals used could definitely push away even the terrible pain from his injuries. But… Junko’s talents weren’t anything medical… so how had she decided how much to give him? Had she just guessed?

“I even checked the dosage before I gave you anything,” Junko went on, waving the syringe above him as if presenting evidence. “Like I said, I want you as sane as possible. We already met the class lunatic quota, and watching someone writhe around in mindless agony is way more boring than you’d think.”

Boring… yes, that was right. Naegi’s newly restored memories reminded him that Junko hated being bored, and she would never tolerate doing anything repetitive or by rote if there was a way to change it halfway through. Doing group projects with her had been nearly impossible as she jumped from one good idea to the next before they could make even a few steps of progress. He could almost twist his mind around enough to see that she’d prefer a captive capable of interacting with her to one too injured to amuse her.
Was that the piece he’d been missing? Had she brought him here just for some kind of entertainment during the moments she didn’t have to give the killing game her full attention? She did seem to be finding some enjoyment in pretending they were friends… but he didn’t see how that entertainment value could last long while he was immobilized and unable to interact with her. What would she do when she finally lost interest in him?

“But man oh man, that was some fit you had!” She shook her head disapprovingly as though she thought he’d been overcome by pain on purpose. “You’ve really gotta be more careful of your health, sweetie — just think how terrible it would be if something completely preventable did you in after all the other stuff you’ve been through!”

Was that a threat? It almost sounded as though it could be… but she sounded so genuinely concerned for him that he found himself doubting his own ears. Why would she be concerned about one of her victims? But then again, why would she threaten him after going through so much trouble to help him? His mind swayed between the two possibilities, unable to confirm or rule out either of them.

“I really would’ve thought you’d be more responsible about your own life after promising all your friends you’d take care of yourself,” Junko went on, eyes wide and sad. “But you won’t even try to stay hydrated after losing all that blood!” She bent down to pick up the glass of water again, the soft slosh of liquid filling the air.

Naegi tried to swallow, but his dry throat couldn’t quite produce enough moisture to manage it. He was still thirsty, now more than ever, and the sound of the water splashing gently against the edge of the glass only made it worse. He needed to drink something, needed it badly, and he could feel himself losing his grip on his certainty that it was a bad idea. After all, she had him at her mercy, didn’t she? He hadn’t even had the power to stop her from emptying that syringe in his arm. If Junko wanted to poison or drug him, she didn’t need to trick him into drinking it.

And in the end, it didn’t really matter whether this was a trap or not — he was stuck here either way, his injuries holding him prisoner more effectively than any restraints could have. He couldn’t leave, even if she opened the door and let him try. And if he wanted to keep any hope of surviving whatever she had planned for him… then he would have to drink what she was offering.

Naegi looked up to meet Junko’s eyes, wondering how to communicate when his mouth was too dry for speech — but a wide grin blazed bright across her face before he could even make an attempt.

“Smart choice, sweetie!” She held out the glass, tilting it so the straw fell just in reach of his mouth. “I’m glad you’re finally starting to see things my way!”

A voice in the back of Naegi’s mind still screamed that no, no, couldn’t he see that this was a terrible idea — but he did his best to force it into silence as he closed his lips around the straw. He didn’t have any other options, no matter what his instincts had to say.

And then, finally, water flooded into the desert of his mouth. Cool and clean, sweeter than any sugar-laden drink he’d ever tasted, water washed away the sandpapery roughness coating his tongue and soothed the ache in his burning throat. He’d never known that plain water could be so delicious, and before he knew it the straw slurped along the bottom of the empty glass.

“There we go!” Junko beamed proudly at him as she set the glass back on the floor. “I bet you feel a whole lot better now, right?”

Naegi took a long, slow breath through his nose, steadying himself as the air flowed in and out of
his lungs… and then opened his mouth again. “Yes.”

The word barely stirred the air as he forced it out of his mouth… but at least it hadn’t hurt, not like his last agonizing attempt at speaking. That had to count for something.

Junko clapped her hands cheerfully, pigtails bouncing at the impact. “Awesome! Then we can get started on that nice long gossip session we’ve been putting off!” She leaned forward, lowering her voice even though there was no one else around to hear. “So… where do you want to start?”
Naegi’s mind went blank as it finally hit him just what Junko was saying. If he understood just what she meant by a gossip session, then she was suggesting that they could talk about anything. He could ask the mastermind anything, right to her face without the mask of Monokuma between them. She might not answer, of course… and even if she did, he’d never be able to tell how much of it he could trust. But even the chance to ask was more than he’d ever thought they’d get.

And he had no idea what to do with it. Kyoko would have been neck-deep in her interrogation already, doing her best to pry out new information about the game and the mastermind’s goals. Sakura would have demanded the truth in a blaze of righteous fury, and Jill would have simply foregone answers in favor of immediate vengeance. And Byakuya… he would have lashed out with biting insults and brilliant insights, commanding the mastermind to give up her answers while mentally working out the truth from what she didn’t say. Any one of them would have known how to seize this opportunity. They wouldn’t have been like him, speechless and confused about what to ask the mastermind.

No… not the mastermind. Naegi knew what he wanted from the mastermind, the faceless entity behind so much horror. He’d been able to imagine standing up against the monster he’d envisioned as the culprit, demanding an explanation for their actions. He was pretty sure he could have done it, if the offer had come through Monokuma or one of the television monitors. He could have figured out how to handle the mastermind.

It was Junko Enoshima that he didn’t know how to face. Questions that he wanted to ask the mastermind twisted out of his grip when he thought about applying them to the girl who’d been his friend. Knowing her identity, knowing who she’d been… he knew so much more than he had just a day ago, and he still felt like he didn’t know anything at all. What was he supposed to ask her, when he barely understood what was happening? After everything that this knowledge changed, what still mattered?

But even so, he had to ask something. If he squandered this chance, he’d never be able to look his friends in the face again. In a desperate fumble for anything that might start her talking, Naegi reached for the first thing, the only thing, that he could think when he looked at Junko.

“Why… did you kill… Mukuro?”

Junko tilted her head. “Huh? That’s what you’re gonna go with after I gave you a blank slate? I thought you’d at least ask about where I got my super-cute new hairclips!”

Naegi couldn’t stop his gaze from flickering up towards her hair - and icy shock shot through his blood when he realized two tiny Monokumas were grinning down at him from the top of each bouncy pigtail. The clips seemed to belong so naturally in her hair that he’d hardly noticed them… but they’d been present all along, quietly proclaiming her true identity. No one other than the mastermind would wear Monokuma as an accessory… and no one but Junko would joke about discussing fashion instead of her sister’s death.

If it had been a joke at all. Dozens of offhand quips about annoying siblings rang in Naegi’s ears as he looked away from the grotesque hairclips, imbued with a greater gravity than they’d had at the time. He glared up into Junko’s heavily made-up eyes and mustered just enough breath to say, “No.”

She sighed. “Ugh, should’ve known that a boy wouldn’t appreciate these little details. But what the
hell, right? It sure would’ve made her day to hear you ask about her, and I’d be a pretty terrible twin if I didn’t do nice stuff for my big sis once in a while! Fine, then — it was because I didn’t need her anymore. Now come on, let’s get on to the important stuff — what do you think about the soap we’ve got stocked in the storage room? Because the label says it ought to moisturize, but my poor hands are definitely drying out after using so much of it!”

She thrust one delicate hand in front of his face, close enough that the back of her wrist nearly brushed his lips — but Naegi could hardly focus on it. He asked for the reason she’d killed her sister, the motive behind the worst betrayal of everything she’d done… and Junko had thrown the explanation away in a single dismissive sentence before leaping on to a new topic. It was exactly the same way she’d always spoken, twirling from thought to thought as her interest shifted… as if her sister’s death hadn’t affected her at all.

“Don’t you… care?” Naegi knew the words were dangerous, challenging the friendly facade Junko still wore… but the memory of a blackened corpse wouldn’t let him stay silent. “She was your… your sister… and you…”

“Killed her?” Junko filled in helpfully, when the rest of the sentence was too much for Naegi to manage. “Well, yeah, I guess it does kinda suck not to have a spare pair of hands sometimes… but the rest of you would never have taken me seriously without making an example of someone! And you’ve gotta admit she was a pretty awful fake me, right? So dying like this was really the best use such a disappointing girl could ever expect to be!”

She said the horrifying words so lightly, denying her sister’s memory even a moment of dignity… and Naegi didn’t understand how she could do it. Even if she’d hated the rest of her classmates, could she really have despised the sister that she’d always kept close by her side?

“Aw, what’s the matter?” Junko leaned forward, propping her chin on one fist as she peered down at him. “Don’t tell me thinking about Mukuro’s gonna send you into another panic attack! I mean, sure, I get the impulse, but she’s not worth —”

“Stop!” Naegi shoved the word out with all the force he could muster. “Don’t… say that. Even if… you hate her… don’t talk about her… like that.”

“Huh? Hate her?” Junko blinked, mildly taken aback. “Well, that’s a weird idea. Who’d hate her own twin sister?”

She was so convincing that for a moment, Naegi almost believed her. But... no, he knew he couldn’t, not when he still had a grip on the facts. Whatever she said, he had to remember what had really happened. “You killed her.”

“Sure — I told you I had to!” Junko shrugged. “And if she had to go, it wasn’t like I could let anyone else do it.” She looked off into the distance, an eerie smile touching her lips. “There’s nothing like it… and there will be again.”

For the first time since Naegi had woken up, the look in Junko’s eyes wasn’t one he remembered from his lost memories… but he recognized it anyway. It was the look of someone who had fallen so far into grief and sorrow and horror that they began to embrace their own nightmares. He’d seen it too many times, in those awful days after the Tragedy as the world he’d known collapsed around him. He’d seen it through the cloudy lenses of gas masks as the sky burned, frozen on the faces of corpses and splashed across the blood-splattered faces of their killers.

Despair. That was why she’d done it. Of course it was. Naegi had never quite been able to grasp the way people thought once it seized them — he wasn’t sure he wanted to — but after it had
played out so painfully over and over, he knew what they would do first. A person who had fallen into despair would always target the ones they loved best in the most horrific ways. And so Junko hadn’t hated Mukuro… not really. She’d gone to the trouble of killing her first, in a vicious betrayal that added emotional destruction to those final moments.

“So you… you loved her. That was… why.” Now that he had the answer, Naegi almost wished he’d never asked the question.

Junko clapped her hands, her strange smile melting into a much friendlier expression. “I knew you’d get there eventually! Nothing stops you from plugging away when you’re determined, huh? You know, I never really got why Mukuro liked you so much, but I’ve gotta say I’m starting to see it!”

Naegi blinked. Mukuro had liked him? Well, everyone in their class had gotten along, of course, but he hadn’t realized that the standoffish girl had considered him a particularly close friend. Or… a pang of sadness hit him with the thought that maybe she’d just wanted to be closer friends… but the Tragedy had prevented it from happening.

Shying away from that idea, he looked back at Junko. She seemed to be waiting for something as she watched him, one eyebrow slightly raised in anticipation. He wasn’t quite sure what, though… was she waiting for him to continue the conversation? Was there a conclusion he was meant to draw?

Although now that he thought about it… that did raise another question. “Is that… why you used her… to frame me? Because she… wanted to be… my friend?”

Junko giggled, although Naegi wasn’t entirely sure why. “And he completely misses the point!” She rolled her eyes and shrugged. “Oh, well. Nope, that didn’t have anything to do with it. I mean, how could it? That trap wasn’t meant for you!”

That was news to Naegi. “You said…”

“That I tried to kill you?” Junko broke into the silence as he paused for breath. “Sure, sweetie, but not till later. No, that trap was for Kirigiri - shame it didn’t work out!”
As if summoned from his memory by Junko’s words, Naegi heard Kyoko’s voice whispering through his head. *I can see the trap being set in this trial*… that was what she’d said in those last moments they’d had to confer in the bathhouse before the trial began. She’d believed the trial had been staged as a trap for her, because of something that she’d learned by using her stolen key — and now Junko had confirmed that her deduction had been right.

Except… how could it have been? For all the suspicion directed against Kyoko during the trial, she hadn’t been the one named as the culprit. He would have liked to believe that Kyoko had managed to avoid the trap through some clever plan… but that would mean Junko had failed. And the girl sitting in front of him definitely didn’t look like someone who’d seen a plan go up in flames.

“Why?” Naegi asked at last, when it became clear Junko didn’t intend to say more without prompting.

“Hmm?” Junko tilted her head inquisitively, in a manner a little too much like Monokuma for comfort. “Why didn’t it work out — or why is it a shame? Oh, or is it supposed to be why did I set the trap in the first place?” She shrugged helplessly. “Sorry, sweetie, but you’re gonna have to be a little clearer!”

Even the thought of trying to find the breath to explain made Naegi’s lungs ache with exhaustion. The most he could manage was to tell her, “All of them.”

Junko raised an eyebrow. “Someone’s getting gree-eedy!” she sang, her voice taking on a childish lilt for a moment before she stopped and giggled again. “Aw, but don’t worry — I get it! I mean, we have *so much* to catch up on after all that time apart! Who could blame you for wanting to know absolutely everything you missed?” She clapped her hands together once, taking on the air of an over-enthusiastic elementary school teacher. “Okay then — all of them it is!”

For a moment Naegi had the distinct impression she was about to jump out of the chair with the sudden burst of inappropriate enthusiasm, and he tried his best to brace himself for the impact. But no — no, she managed to stay in her seat, though frenetic energy all but vibrated visibly through her.

“I mean, it’s not like I *wanted* to have to organize a verdict for one of you! You get that, right, hon?” She clasped her hands together in front of her heart, eyes wide and deceptively innocent. “I promised that all of you would have the chance to win the game yourselves, and I just *hated* to go back on my word! But after Kirigiri took advantage of all the freedom I’ve given you guys to steal her daddy’s key… well, I couldn’t ignore that, either! If she’d rather sit by herself than play with the rest of you, she can go right ahead and embrace her inner stick-in-the-mud — but I couldn’t let her spoil the game for everyone else!”

Spoil the game — the casual reference to the killing game could have come from Monokuma’s mouth. Before waking here in Junko’s clutches, Naegi would’ve expected the mastermind to speak more seriously about their plans once the ridiculous mask was stripped away — but Junko still talked as if they were playing at nothing more significant than a hand of cards.

Did that mean that even now, after he’d learned her true identity… she still didn’t have any reason to treat their attempts to defy her as genuine threats? Had nothing they’d worked so hard to do even come close to breaking her control? Faces of the friends he’d lost flashed through his mind, friends who’d only wanted their freedom… and two years’ worth of forgotten affection welled up until
tears burned at the corners of his eyes.

“Oh, man — tears already? Before we even hit the part of the sleepover where we watch sappy movies and eat way too much chocolate?” Junko asked, falling back against her chair with shock too blatant to be sincere. “Well, you always were too soft for your own good!” She shook her head, bouncing back from the shock like it had never happened. “Don’t worry your concussed little head about it, sweetheart — the game’s still going strong as ever! Our Detective Princess hasn’t dragged us off the rails yet — and of course I got to you before you could do any damage either!”

A frown creased Naegi’s forehead, and the changing pressures in his skull whispered of a different new pain somewhere far away. But he pushed the warning away, Junko’s alarming words consuming all of his attention. He could understand why Kyoko’s investigation might have been a problem… but what damage did she think he could have done? When she’d put her plot in motion, he’d been injured and unconscious after the accident in the library. Even afterwards, during the investigation, he’d barely been able to stand on his own — he’d even collapsed halfway through the trial! He should have been the least dangerous person left in the game, not a threat she had to neutralize.

He should have been… but if he could believe what Junko told him, that hadn’t been the case. Was she just playing mind games with him… or had he actually had the power to strike at the killing game somehow? If he’d had a chance like that… if he’d missed it…

“Wha…” Half a word croaked out of his throat, unrecognizable as his own voice. It had to hurt, even if he couldn’t feel it now, that couldn’t be a healthy way for his voice to sound… but leaving the question unasked would hurt more than any physical pain could. “What… did I… do…”

“Huh? You’re worried about that?” Junko tilted her head, sending the tiny Monokumas bobbling above each pigtail. “It’s okay, sweetie, I know you didn’t do it on purpose! You’re such a good kid — it’s not your fault you got caught up with so many bad influences!”

Did she mean Kyoko? Or maybe one of the others? Either way, Naegi didn’t think she had any room to talk about people being bad influences… not after what she’d done to the friends, the sister, who’d trusted her.

“But even if yours was an accident, the Princess’s sure as hell wasn’t,” Junko went on, tapping her nails against the chair’s armrest in a chaotic sequence that never quite matched a single beat. “Poking her nose all around those second floor dorms, like she had no respect for the fact that the door was locked for a reason! Man, it was a lucky break for the rest of us that her detective skills aren’t quiiiiiiite as sharp as she thinks they are, you know? For a minute or two I was worried she might knock the whole game board right over!”

So she’d gotten that close? The soft glow of pride in his friend’s abilities warmed Naegi’s chest. He might not always understand what she was trying to do, but he could always have faith that she was doing it well. Not even the mastermind herself could deny that.

“But hey, at least I figured from the get-go that she was gonna be a problem student,” Junko said, the air around her going abruptly silent as her nails stopped tapping mid-beat. “So there were all kinds of options ready to deal with whatever she cooked up. But you — you came out of nowhere! And by the time I caught on that you were an even bigger wrecking ball than the Princess, it was nearly too late!”

He’d been worse for Junko’s plans than Kyoko? That didn’t make any sense. He hadn’t even had the strength to lift his head by the end the trial — he couldn’t imagine anything further away from a wrecking ball.
“But hey, it turned out okay — because I still figured out how to salvage the game!” She beamed happily, like she expected him to congratulate her. “I mean, we were only about halfway through the trial — so there was still time to redirect attention to the bigger target. Because sure, there was plenty to worry about with the high odds that all the clues in the locked dorms would help her lost memories start breaking through… but that chance that her memories might come back was nowhere near as bad as the fact that yours already were.”
Junko had tried to kill him because… his memories had been coming back? Naegi frowned. Could that be true? He remembered the past two years now, but that had only been the case since he’d woken up after the execution. And while yes, exhaustion and injuries had made his thoughts kind of unstable the last few days, he was pretty sure he would have noticed if he’d suddenly had a lot of new memories about people he’d thought he’d only met a few weeks ago.

Or… would he? There had been those strange dreams, scenes of a peaceful school life that he’d dismissed as wishful thinking… but now he knew they hadn’t been anything of the kind. Phrases that had echoed through his mind had been fragments of actual words he’d heard his friends say. The sunny hallways from his dreams had been the corridors of the real Hope’s Peak Academy, before it had been reduced to rubble. And the moments he’d imagined sharing with Byakuya… they hadn’t been a string of wistful might-have-beens. He’d somehow managed to glimpse the relationship they’d had before, strong and sweet enough to help the both of them find more courage than they would have had facing the Tragedy alone.

Was that the danger Junko had wanted to avoid? If her goal was to keep them playing her nightmarish game, then maybe it made sense that she couldn’t let them remember the truth. After all, just a few days of a new relationship had made Byakuya give up on his plan to participate — so how much more impossible would the game have become if the students had realized the strength of their friendships? The motives seemed almost insignificant now, when he compared them to how much all of them had valued one another. With despair sweeping the world and destroying everything they’d loved, those friendships had been all the sixteen of them had had left. Not a single one of them would have considered murdering the rest of the group, just to escape from the shelter.

Especially not when it would only take them back into the chaos outside.

The image from the motive video he’d received at the start of the killing game flashed before Naegi’s eyes, his home in ruins with no trace of his family — but now the scene filled in beyond what the video could show. The stench of charred ash burned through his nostrils, and the screams of nearby looters rang in his ears. They’d left the house little more than a skeleton, robbed of everything that had made it the childhood home he’d loved.

The same was true for all of them. Even if they’d escaped the school… they had nowhere left to go. They’d thought they were fighting to get their lives back… but that chance had been lost long ago. Nothing they did here, not participating in the game or fighting against the mastermind’s control, could alter that painful reality.

A burst of enthusiastic applause startled him away from the horror, and he looked back to see Junko beaming at him proudly.

“There you go — I knew you’d get there eventually!” Her hand shot forward to give him an approving pat on the head, too fast for him to flinch away even if he’d had the strength to move. “You’re so much smarter than you pretend, sweetie — that’s why I picked you for my scrapbooking project after every trial! If your memories had stayed erased like they were supposed to, you’d have used all those clues to figure out just enough to make things more exciting! But I didn’t count on the erasure weakening from all the physical trauma.”
day, when Mondo had knocked him out with a punch meant for Byakuya. Physical trauma couldn’t be the only way to retrieve lost memories, not if Junko had been worried Kyoko would find something in the dorms — but he supposed he probably had been through enough to make it happen. When he thought about it that way, it made sense.

But if he took the thought just a step further, it didn’t. So yes, injury on top of injury had restored enough of his memories to make him a threat to the killing game, one that Junko had taken seriously enough to frame him as a culprit. But in that case…

“Why did I save you?”

Junko spoke the words at the same time they ran through Naegi’s mind. His eyes widened at the sound of his own thoughts in her voice, and she laughed.

“Oh, come on, sweetie, it was written all over your face. Man, you’re so open and honest — how were you not the first victim?” She shook her head, looking puzzled. “Ultimate Luck strikes again, huh?”

No… it hadn’t been luck. Naegi remembered Sayaka huddled alone in a classroom after seeing her first motive video, terrified to the point of desperation. Luck hadn’t led her to play the killing game… she’d been driven to it by a deliberate act of cruelty. Throughout the entire game, every culprit had been manipulated into killing by the mastermind’s determination to keep the game going.

The same mastermind who had gone on to save Naegi’s life after the execution failed to kill him. Why had she done that? As long as he knew the truth, he was a threat to her plans — she had to know that he’d try to stop the game if he got a chance. So why —

“You don’t need to overthink it so much, you know?” Junko propped her chin on one fist and smiled down at him with what almost looked like affection. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m flattered that you just can’t get me out of your head — but it’s just not all that complicated.” She shrugged. “Everyone knows quality television is even better when you watch with a friend — that’s all.”

Television…? At that word, the chill of new horror spread its icy fingers through his stomach. Until now, he hadn’t spared much thought for the fact that they were in the data center… but maybe he should have. After all, if she’d only wanted to get him out of the trial grounds so he could recover, she could easily have found a place more suited to medical treatment. But instead, Junko had brought him here, to the room where she could watch the camera feeds from the rest of the school. So then… what had she wanted him to see?

Naegi’s frantic gaze shot past her, scanning every monitor in his limited range of vision. His eyes darted across screen after screen of empty rooms, desperate for a glimpse of his few surviving friends. Where were they? What had Junko done to them while he’d been unconscious?

After an eternity of terror, a flicker of pale movement snagged his attention up to the monitors showing the fifth floor. And — yes, there, frowning at the armor display in the fifth floor dojo he could see Sakura Ogami, whole and unharmed. She looked unhappier than ever, face shadowed by painful grief… but she couldn’t be otherwise, not after losing Hina so horribly. She was alive, that was the important thing, alive and no worse off than she’d been before. And if she was alive, then maybe… maybe…

He didn’t dare finish the thought, just focused on the other dojo camera feeds until finally, finally, there at the edge of the lined up dojo lockers — he saw Byakuya. His eyes locked onto his boyfriend —
And cold horror stole the breath from his lungs. Misery had torn Byakuya’s handsome face apart, rending deep lines into pale skin and twisting his mouth into a thin-lipped slash. His hair hung lank and untended, and he’d given up on his finely tailored uniform for an ill-fitting tracksuit. Makeshift bandages covered both his hands, the material flecked with the ugly brown of dried blood. And when Naegi looked into Byakuya’s eyes… even from this distance, even separated by the monitors, when he looked into his boyfriend’s eyes he could see a grief too deep to hide, laid bare for the world to see. And there was only one reason for Byakuya to have those eyes.

He thought Naegi was dead.
Naegi didn’t want to think that his boyfriend had spent the last day believing something so horrible… but the timing matched up too well for it to be anything else. It might be a little self-centered to think he could be so important to Byakuya after just a few weeks together, but what other explanation could there be for the pain in his heartbroken eyes? He couldn’t have learned the truth of the outside world while Junko’s cameras monitored his every move, and there wasn’t much else left in the school that could hurt him.

But even so… why would Byakuya believe he’d died when it wasn’t true?

Naegi’s gaze dropped away from the screens to fall on Junko. She wasn’t even trying to hide the fact that she was watching him, that same horrifyingly friendly smile painted on her lips. Watching like she always did, watching every move, sitting here behind her cameras and watching her friends suffer.

“Why?” The word slipped out before he could think of the thousand reasons it shouldn’t, answers to the question that it would only hurt to know. “Why didn’t you… tell him?”

“Hmm?” She had the nerve to act confused, tilting her head with so much force that it made her pigtails swish. “Was I supposed to tell someone something?” She tapped one finger against a temple, as if she were actually considering it. “Nope, nothing’s coming to me! You’ll have to do better than that if you want me to understand you!”

She was just trying to torment him, Naegi knew it. She’d practically read his mind earlier, so this sudden inability to understand his question had to be a lie. She was just forcing him through the pain of speaking because she could, like it was some kind of twisted game. Had she hidden this side of herself for the years he’d thought she was his friend — or had he never seen just how cruel she really was?

It didn’t matter. Whoever she’d been before, however much of it had been a lie, it didn’t change anything now — he still had no choice but to play along with her terrible game. He took a deep breath, struggling for the strength to speak as useless tears burned at the edges of his eyes. “Why… didn’t you tell… Byakuya… I’m alive?”

There were more words to say, more protests to make, but he couldn’t muster the breath to say them. His empty lungs burned for air, even when he tried to fill them. He couldn’t keep pushing himself so hard, he knew it… even with the pain so far away, he could still feel how terribly wrong something was. Why was Junko forcing him to speak through this when she’d said herself that she wanted him alive and intact?

He didn’t know… but the excited sparkle in her eyes said she didn’t plan to relent any time soon. She wanted to watch the ache in his chest as he struggled to draw in enough air, the trembling of his lips as he fought to shape words. Her gaze scraped his nerves raw, reminding him of his utter vulnerability in a way that mere physical weakness couldn’t.

The feeling only got worse when a bright smile of comprehension spread across Junko’s face, as though she truly hadn’t understood what he meant until that moment. When she could lie so easily without saying a word, how would he ever know what to believe? His head ached from the painful
impossibility of the task.

“Huh? That was what you wanted to know?” Junko tilted her head from side to side in confusion, hairclips flashing in a dizzying monochromatic blur. “Wow, maybe I should’ve spent more time checking you for head injuries. I can’t believe you’ve forgotten something so important!”

Naegi frowned up at her, an echo of pain throbbing between his eyes as his forehead creased with the effort of trying to understand her words. Could there really be something important he’d forgotten…? There was no way to be sure, especially when so many of the trial’s final moments had faded to a blur.

“Well, guess it’s up to me to jog your memory!” And with that, she leaned abruptly forward, an oddly serious expression overtaking her face. “At the end of the trial, you were declared the culprit and executed.”

Naegi had the disorienting sensation that he’d been thrust into the middle of a different conversation without warning. Of course he remembered the verdict, and at least the first few horrifying moments of being dragged off to the execution before everything dissolved into agonizing chaos. He hadn’t forgotten any of that — and he knew it didn’t answer his question. The execution wasn’t the point. He glared up at Junko, forcing out words that could point out her error. “I’m… not… dead.”

“Technicalities.” She let her shoulders lift in an easy shrug. “You lost the vote and even admitted live on the air that you were the culprit — and the rules say culprits have to be punished. What kind of game would this be if the players could jump right back in after getting eliminated?”

The killing game. God, of course her top priority would be her nightmare of a game. It wouldn’t be fair to let a culprit go back — and both Kyoko and Byakuya had noticed the mastermind’s dedication to making sure the game stayed fair.

“I mean, we all know how games break down when you start making exceptions,” Junko went on, waving a manicured hand expressively through the air in an arc of bloody red. “First it’s just you, but then everyone starts asking about Asahina, or Fujisaki, or Maizono, and before you know it I’ll be emptying out the whole morgue! And don’t even get me started on Fukawa, because two of you chipping away at a perfectly good memory erasure is enough ingratitude!” She shook her head. “Nope — sorry, sweetie, but you’ve hit your official game over.”

There was horror lurking in her words, but Naegi didn’t dare let himself think about it too hard, not with her eyes on him. Instead he did his best to focus on the meaning beyond the horror, the point she was really making. She wouldn’t send him back because it would break the rules… but that wasn’t what he’d asked. But maybe… if she realized he wasn’t asking her to break a rule…

“Don’t… send me back.” It took the last of his strength to say the words… but if they worked, it would be more than worth it. “Just… tell him… I’m alive.”

“Oh?” Junko tapped a red nail against her lips as they curved into a thoughtful frown. “Hmm, I guess that is a loophole, huh? Weeee-eell…” She dragged the word out as long as she had the breath for it. “I guess I could humor you with this one teeny request. It does bend the rules a little, but I think it’ll be okay if it’s just him. After all, you’re one of my darling friends — and all I want is to take care of you!” She gave him a sweet, gentle smile. “Okay, then — I’ll be sure to let Byakuya know about you just as soon as the right moment arrives!”

Naegi would have liked to insist that she tell him now… but even if he had the strength, arguing for further concessions might just make her mad. This was probably the best result he could have
hoped for. He looked back up at the monitors, tracking his boyfriend from screen to screen as he and Sakura made their way down the stairs. Byakuya still looked so painfully miserable… but it was a little easier to bear now that he knew it wouldn’t last forever. Byakuya would know everything wasn’t as bad as he thought soon.

Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: Due to upcoming work travel I have to do, there won't be a new chapter next week. The next chapter will be up on Sunday, October 29. See you then!
Chapter 291

Togami didn’t lift his eyes from the ground ahead of him as he trudged down the stairs back to the first floor, watching his feet take step after careful step. If he filled his head with the inanities of such basic motions, perhaps it would be enough to distract himself from the sinking realization that his determination to search for clues to the last trial might be futile. He and Ogami had scoured the fifth floor for any hint that might point to the truth of Ikusaba’s murder… but they hadn’t uncovered a single clue the earlier investigation had missed.

It seemed impossible that he and Naegi could have been that thorough in their initial investigation, with exhaustion clouding their judgment and injuries slowing their steps. And it was just as unlikely that this killer had managed to avoid leaving any trace of her crime.

Could there have been outside interference? It would have been easy enough for the mastermind to dispose of any other clues when they’d removed Ikusaba’s corpse from the scene. If it was something the initial investigation had overlooked, there’d be no way to know.

Togami’s fingers curled into fists, undeterred by the needle-sharp slivers of pain shooting through his injured hands. Finding out the truth of the murder was the last thing he could do for Naegi, ripping away the lies to show how badly the kind, trusting boy had been betrayed. With his promise to protect Naegi so brutally shattered, this was the very least Togami owed him.

But what was he supposed to do when the mastermind was determined to conceal the truth? With their complete control of the school, they could easily keep him away from the information he wanted. He didn’t have any leverage to use against the mastermind, any knowledge of the person hiding behind their robotic mask. With a real person, he would at least have had a chance at getting the truth out of them, but Monokuma was —

Wait. Togami stopped short as his mind hurtled down a new path. Getting Monokuma to talk would be impossible, he’d seen that too many times to count since getting imprisoned here… but the robot wasn’t the only connection left to the mastermind.

Togami knew the mastermind had shifted the blame for Ikusaba’s murder to Naegi in order to protect Kirigiri, the real murderer. Not to let her win, as the rules said she should have if the vote went to Naegi… but to keep her in the game. Add that to the last name she shared with the headmaster of Hope’s Peak and the Ultimate Talent that was a little too suited to a killing game, and the only possible answer was spy. She had to know more than she was admitting.

And maybe not just her. After all, if that vote really had been accurate, Kirigiri couldn’t have been the only one to vote for Naegi. The math wouldn’t work unless the genocider had done so, as well. But Naegi hadn’t even been under serious consideration at the time — they’d all been arguing over a choice between Kirigiri and Togami himself. Jill might be a psychotic serial killer, but that didn’t make her stupid — she wouldn’t have switched her vote to Naegi unless she had a reason.

But what exactly did she know? That was the real question. Would it be worthwhile to tackle her first, or should he head straight for Kirigiri? And whichever girl he confronted first, he’d need a plan…

“Togami? Are you all right?”

He glanced sharply to the side, where Ogami had been following half a pace behind him. She’d stopped in her tracks as well, but she seemed somewhat puzzled as to why they were standing in
the middle of the first floor hallway. And while it wasn’t as though he owed her any kind of explanation for his actions… it couldn’t hurt to give her a general idea of his plans. After all, if the confrontations with the other girls turned sour, it would be far preferable to have Ogami on his side instead of confused by the situation — or worse, supporting the other two.

“I’m considering alternative approaches to gathering information,” he said at last. “Going over the crime scenes hasn’t produced anything — but discussing the trial with the other two girls might.”

“Now?” Ogami’s frown deepened. “Is there time before the nighttime announcement?”

There almost certainly wasn’t, even if he knew where the other girls were. “We’ll track them down in the morning,” he decided after a brief moment of thought. Frustration tightened across his shoulders at the thought of putting his investigation on hold for so long — but he needed the time to plan his approach.

Ogami nodded, her expression clearing. “Very well. Then that should give us time to stop in the cafeteria before the announcement sounds.”

Togami grimaced. That was right… he’d finally given in to her badgering and agreed to eat something after they’d finished searching the fifth floor. But even though he hadn’t eaten all day, the hunger pangs drowned beneath the wave of nausea that lurched through his stomach at the thought of sitting down at one of the dining hall tables without Naegi beside him. Grief tightened through his throat at the memory of how Naegi had always tried to make sure they ate breakfast with the others, as though it could somehow make them bond into a unified group. Swallowing past that would be impossible, no matter how hungry he might be.

“Or perhaps it would be better to remove a few simple foods for consumption elsewhere,” Ogami said suddenly, and Togami’s eyes narrowed at the unexpected shift in her tone. “It would be best to leave quickly so that we do not run the risk of staying beyond the curfew.”

She was lying. Togami didn’t even need to draw on his years of practice with skilled manipulators to spot the deception easily. She knew perfectly well that they had a reasonable amount of time to eat a meal in the cafeteria without risking the curfew, and she had to be aware that he knew it too — but she’d made the claim anyway. She’d come up with a flimsy excuse to avoid eating in the cafeteria… before Togami had to scramble for one of his own. But why…

Her eyes flickered once, in the direction of the nearest camera, and Togami understood. She was trying to help him. She’d seen his moment of weakness and rather than taking advantage of the vulnerability, she’d sought to hide it from the rest of the world. It had been a clumsy attempt, easily seen through by anyone with multiple working brain cells… but even so, she’d made it without hesitation. She’d… been kind.

It was a strange thought, and one that he would need more time to consider. For now, Togami pushed it from his head and gave his best effort at an indifferent shrug. “If you think so, then I suppose we might as well.”

He turned and strode down the hall, pretending not to notice the relief in her eyes. At least this would make it easier to get through the night. He could distract himself from the pain of reality long enough to eat, and then —

*Crash!*

An avalanche of loud metallic clangs echoed through the halls as they entered the dormitory. It took Togami a disoriented second to pinpoint the source of the sound using his only working ear,
but Ogami didn’t hesitate. She charged forward through the large open area, veering right to charge through the cafeteria doors. Togami followed close behind, bracing himself for whatever new problem had arrived.

But even so, nothing could have prepared him to see Genocide Jill on her knees in the middle of the cafeteria floor, pinning a struggling Kirigiri to the ground.
Chapter 292

Togami froze in the doorway, trying to make sense of the scene before him. He had no idea what could have set Genocide Jill and Kirigiri at one another’s throats, but whatever the cause, he had no interest in getting in the middle of it. He had half a mind to turn around and leave them to tear each other apart as much as they liked…

Except that he’d never learn the truth about the last trial if things went too far. Silver scissors flashed in one of the genocider’s hands, and even from across the room he could see blood-red fury blazing in her eyes. But even pinned to the ground, Kirigiri was still a threat. She twisted against the hold with skill that could only have come from years of training — skills that she’d oh so conveniently never mentioned she possessed.

Jill’s uncanny speed and strength were the only reason she was still keeping Kirigiri in place, and Togami could see the stalemate wouldn’t last long. Either Kirigiri would shake herself free and turn the tables on her attacker, or Jill would lose patience and use those scissors to end things more permanently. Togami didn’t like the thought of either scenario… which meant the only question was whether he had to interfere.

But even as those thoughts rushed through his head in his initial assessment of the scene, Ogami took the decision out of his hands. She charged forward toward the struggling girls, alerting them to the fact that they were no longer alone and eliminating any chance of a stealthy approach. Togami scowled, taking a few more steps into the room as though he’d intended to do so all along. Clearly he should have taken the time to establish an appropriate chain of command for unexpected situations like this.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Ogami demanded, though it wasn’t at all clear which girl she was addressing. “Brawling amongst ourselves will accomplish nothing — surely you’ve realized that by now!”

“Fighting?” Jill somehow found the breath to laugh, her grip on Kirigiri never loosening in spite of her wild grin. “No way, I’m not looking to horn in on your turf — keep the shounen-style sweating to yourself! Nope, I just had a taste for some late night rat-catching — and wouldn’t’cha know it, I caught me a big one!” She slammed her fist onto the floor, just in time to block Kirigiri’s snake-fast snatch for her braid.

Togami watched the scuffle through narrowed eyes, tracking the way both girls couldn’t quite manage to overpower one another. So Jill had been the one to start this? Well, he couldn’t say he was surprised — Kirigiri had far subtler ways to go after her enemies than fistfights. But the rest of Jill’s words were something else altogether.

“What are you talking about?” he demanded, once it was clear that Jill was too occupied with holding her captive in place to pick up the conversation again. “Explain yourself properly.”

“Huh? You can’t even get that far?” Jill’s words were bright and cheerful as ever, but her red eyes burned straight through him. “Yesterday must’ve really done a number on you!”

Yesterday… at her casual reference to what had happened, the trial, the execution, all of it flashed before Togami’s eyes, a blaze of fierce grief that blurred the dim present out of focus. He could feel himself flinching back at the blow, proving her words had found their mark — but what did it matter now? All the stoicism in the world wouldn’t change the fact that she’d witnessed the root of his pain.
The past could easily have consumed him, dragging him back into darkness — but a flash of silver sliced the vision to shreds. Togami blinked, the present rushing back around him just in time to see Jill’s scissors stab down towards Kirigiri’s face.

Ogami flung herself forward at the girls, her wordless roar of protest echoing through the room. She caught Jill’s hand just as Kirigiri twisted away, taking advantage of Jill’s distraction to break her grip and tear herself free.

No. Togami spun toward the doors, slamming them shut before Kirigiri could take so much as a step towards them. He was too tired, too hungry, too unprepared for a confrontation with her now — but that didn’t stop him from putting his back against the doors and glaring at her with all the haughty confidence he could muster. If she wanted to leave, she’d have to get past him first.

Not that she seemed inclined to try. Kirigiri crossed her arms at him with a faint frown. “Don’t tell me you’re going to start making a scene as well,” she said, as bored as if she felt nothing more than mild annoyance at the situation.

She was certainly good at the act. He might almost have believed her… if it hadn’t been for the lines of blood trickling down her neck or the tilt of her head compensating for the newly jagged lines of her hair. She might like to pretend that nothing anyone did could touch her… but the truth was right there for all of them to see.

“All I want to do is talk,” Togami told her, leaning pointedly back until the door handles pressed against his spine. “Any scenes will be entirely of your own making.”

“I have nothing to discuss with you.” One finger tapped a rapid rhythm against her upper arm. “Now move. I want to get this cut disinfected before the nighttime announcement and you’re in my way.”

“Oh, so now you wanna keep your mouth shut?” Jill snarled, glaring across the room at the other girl like Ogami wasn’t an immovable presence between them. “Now you’ve got nothing to say? But you were oh so ready to talk yesterday, when you sang out all those pretty lies so we’d dance to your tune!”

Lies? Togami’s eyes shot from Kirigiri’s icy mask to Jill’s incandescent rage. He was missing something here, and considering the two girls involved, he didn’t like that thought at all. “I was under the impression you’d bought into her ideas.”

“Sorry to break it to you, baby, but even a gal smart enough to avoid the dumb mistakes of your average murderous fiend can’t be perfect,” Jill said, one hand on her hip as her gaze skittered away from his. “Yeah, I was sold on the idea you’d gone after the mastermind right up till we voted — the lightbulb didn’t go off till I saw Makyutie’s face up in lights where it never should’ve been.”

“You —” The fury boiling through him at those words nearly drove Togami away from his post at the door. He caught himself at the last moment, clenching his hands into fists that throbbed with pain. “You have the nerve to say such a thing — after you went against all your own arguments and voted for him?”

“Not me, darling,” Jill said, tossing her braids. “You were my one and only, just like I said. I never voted for your sweetheart — but she did.”

Jill’s hand shot out, scissors extended to point straight at Kirigiri.
Togami let his eyes flicker in the direction of Jill’s pointing scissors for only a moment before his lip curled up in a sneer. “If you’re going to lie, at least try to come up with a more believable story.”

Ogami frowned at him. “But weren’t you convinced that was indeed the way Kirigiri voted?”

“Yes, I’m sure she was more than happy to stab her friend in the back yet again,” Togami snapped, bitterness twisting through the accusation. “But anyone capable of simple math would see she wasn’t the only one. Naegi could only have ended up with the majority of the votes if both of you voted to condemn him.”

“You sound quite certain about that,” Kirigiri said, one eyebrow raised. “I didn’t expect you to be the one arguing that this trial was fair.”

“Fair?” Laughter burned at the back of his throat, dark and hysterical, and Togami didn’t dare let himself speak until he’d swallowed it back. “Nothing about this sham of a trial was fair. But just a few hours ago Monokuma made it quite clear that fair or not, the voting followed the rules.”

“And you believed him?” Kirigiri asked, staring at him with her usual unnerving lack of expression.

Togami shrugged. “The math works.”

“I suppose it does.” Kirigiri turned aside and walked over to one of the tables that hadn’t been upended in the struggle, sinking down into the nearest upright chair.

It was probably nothing more than her attempt to convince them all she’d given up on escaping. Togami didn’t move from his post in front of the doors.

“Hang on, darling!” Jill bounded past Ogami with an almost inhumanly high leap, landing directly in front of Togami. She leaned toward him with her hands on her hips, tongue curling far too close for comfort. “I told you once already — your math doesn’t work at all.”

“Repeating yourself won’t change anything,” Togami said, steeling himself not to flinch at the genocider’s proximity. “Ogami and I voted for Kirigiri, meaning that the rest of you —”

“You and the Ogre?” Jill’s startled exclamation drowned out the rest of what Togami had intended to say. “Come on now, baby, don’t tell me you’ve been doubling up with some other girl on the side, cause that’d just break my maidenly heart!”

“Are you just spewing nonsense, or was that supposed to mean something?” Togami demanded.

“It means no way the vote went down that way,” Jill shot back. “Maybe you voted for Nancy Drew, but the Ogre can’t have.”

“She did.” Togami didn’t even have to think about that one — in a choice between Ogami and Genocide Jill, he knew exactly whose story was more credible. “Ogami and I voted for Kirigiri, you and she voted for Naegi, and the mastermind broke the tie. That means —”
Kirigiri’s voice broke through his impatient explanation, so flatly spoken it could hardly be called a question. Togami shot a dark glare in her direction, but it wasn’t as though she could see him — she hadn’t even bothered to look in his direction when she spoke, staring statue-still at the wall in front of her.

“Stop trying to derail the conversation,” he told her. “Just because you’re incapable of saying —”

“No.” She underscored the word by thumping her open palm against the table, leaving her five gloved fingers splayed out in front of her. “You said that the mastermind broke the tie. Tell me what you meant.”

Togami rolled his eyes. “So now you’re going to pretend you didn’t know about the voting rules all along?”

But even as he said so, it occurred to him that this particular piece of information could put a stop to Jill’s attempts to argue with his math. He shrugged. “Fine, if you really insist on hearing me say it — while Monokuma was trying to convince us the voting was fair, he also told us about tie-breaking. If there’s no clear majority, the mastermind gets the deciding vote — and that’s what happened here.”

“The mastermind decided?” Kirigiri’s voice was so soft that Togami had to turn his good ear towards her to catch the words. “They had the opportunity to vote for either Naegi or myself… and they chose him?”

“Obviously.” Togami sneered in her direction, burying the jolt of fresh grief her words had caused beneath a sharper attack. “What else did you expect?”

She didn’t answer, staring down at her black-gloved hand against the table.

“So you were getting your numbers direct from the head honcho?” Jill’s words brought Togami’s attention snapping back towards her, just in time to see her tapping scissors thoughtfully against her fingers. “Yeah, okay, with another vote in the mix I guess the Ogre’s claim adds up after all. But darling, there’s still one part of the problem I don’t get.” She lunged forward until her face was mere inches from his own. “Why are you still calling me a liar if you know so much about how the votes went down?”

Togami jerked his head back by reflex before conscious thought kicked in. “Back up immediately!”

Jill heaved a put-upon sigh as she took a small step backwards. “Only for you, baby! So?”

Apparently she was going to insist, no matter how stupid the question was. Togami rolled his eyes and addressed her as if she were a small child, since anything more complex was clearly beyond her. “Ogami and I both voted for Kirigiri — that’s two.” He held up his left hand with two fingers extended. “Kirigiri hasn’t denied her vote,” he raised the index finger of his right hand, “but that’s still one short of a tie. One vote… and only one person left.” He raised a fourth finger while looking her square in the eye. “Four people, four votes. If you can’t work out the rest, you have even less sense than I thought.”

Jill looked from one hand to the other, frown deepening. “Uh… darling? Don’t you think you’re forgetting something?”

“You’re not going to distract me by —” Togami stopped mid-insult as the strange silence of the
room crept into his awareness. None of the girls were talking for once, that was hardly a problem… but the expressions on their faces sent shivers of ice down the back of his neck. “What are you staring at?”

“Sure, it works out the way you’re saying when you count up four votes,” Jill said, her usual energy visible only in the rapid clicking of scissors, too loud in the quiet room. “But baby… you know that’s one short, right?”

Togami froze. She couldn’t be suggesting what it sounded like… not really, not as a serious possibility. It was ridiculous, completely beyond the bounds of belief.

“You’re wrong.” He made sure to say it coldly and sternly, as viciously as he could… so the tremor of emotion shaking through the words had to be a mere trick of his damaged hearing. “It doesn’t matter if there was another vote. It can’t have made a difference in the totals. You’re only claiming otherwise to hide from your own guilt.”

Jill shook her head. “Come on, White Knight, you should know by now that murder by proxy isn’t my style. If I wanted to take out your sleeping beauty, I’d’ve been way more upfront about it than a sneaky voting trick.”

She was right… except that no, no, she couldn’t be. The situation twisted through his mind like a maddening optical illusion, each pathway becoming impossible as soon as he looked at it from a different angle. He knew there had to be a way it would all make sense… but no matter what he tried, the answer eluded him. There had to be something he was missing, some fact he didn’t know, some way to prove that —

“Naegi wouldn’t do that.”

The words echoed Togami’s thoughts so precisely that it took him a moment to realize he hadn’t been the one to say them. He looked toward the table where Kirigiri had gone… and found her gaze frozen on the genocider.

Jill spun towards Kirigiri, tensing like she was prepared to launch herself across the cafeteria at the slightest provocation. “You’re gonna say that after the way you played him during the trial? Anyone who heard you talking would’ve bet their whole bundle on a two-way tie between you and my white knight! What’d you think our sugar-sweet little Macaroon would do if he couldn’t be sure his vote would nail the real killer?”

The iron grip of terror clenched around Togami’s chest at the words, pressing against his ribcage with enough force that even the shallowest breath required painful effort. Naegi… oh, god, Naegi, kind and honest and so terribly trusting… faced with such an impossible choice, what would he have done?

“It wouldn’t be in his nature,” Kirigiri said calmly, apparently unperturbed by Jill’s verbal assault. “If we’ve learned anything about Makoto Naegi during the mastermind’s game, it’s that he is sincere to a fault. A dishonest vote would not occur to him as a possibility without outside interference.”

That was true, wasn’t it? Togami could hardly believe he was thinking such a thing about words from Kirigiri’s mouth… but it was true. She’d described Naegi perfectly. Lies never came naturally to him, and even in a dire situation they wouldn’t be his weapon of choice. He wouldn’t have done this, of course he wouldn’t — Jill didn’t know what she was talking about, that was all. The weight crushing inward on his lungs began to ease until he could finally take a clear breath again —
“You’re right,” Ogami said slowly. “He wouldn’t think of it… without interference.”

Togami looked sharply across the room to where Ogami stood, gray pallor tinging her face. What was she talking about? Why did her words send ice stabbing through his chest?

“But someone did interfere,” Ogami went on, voice quiet and relentless. “When he asked me about votes from the earlier trials… I told him that in order to avoid voting for another student, I voted for myself instead.”

Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: I'm going to try out a new writing schedule for the next couple weeks. Rather than one chapter each week, I'm going to try to write a double length chapter and post it two weeks from now. Depending on how it goes, I may make it a permanent change. So the next chapter will be posted on Sunday, November 26. See you then!
Chapte 294

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ogami’s words turned the air in Togami’s lungs to ice, freezing his chest from the inside out. He’d known how to use the cold once, before he’d ended up at Hope’s Peak. He’d known how to take these shards of ice and turn them to a shield that could protect his soul. But the killing game had torn that knowledge from him… and the cold burned through him.

“So that’s what happened.” Kirigiri’s voice seemed to come from far away, even though she was less than halfway across the room from him. She looked abruptly down at the table in front of her, breaking her locked stare with Ogami. “Yes… I suppose you would have had the opportunity to put the idea in his head.”

The opportunity… when she’d been alone with Naegi. The ice trickled down Togami’s spine and coiled into his stomach as he tried to remember just how many times he’d left Naegi confused and vulnerable in Ogami’s care. With the slow weight of a shifting glacier, he looked across the room at Ogami…

And she flinched away. No physical attack could break her guard, but now, faced with this, she couldn’t meet his eyes.

“I didn’t intend for him to take my explanation that way,” she said, voice dull and flat. “I had no idea he’d consider it.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” Kirigiri said, before Togami could find the words to respond. “Naegi has proven himself to be… surprisingly difficult to predict accurately.” She closed her eyes, and for a moment Togami almost had the impression that she’d been overwhelmed by exhaustion.

But then he blinked, and all trace of it was gone. She shrugged, looking as though she were afflicted with nothing worse than boredom. “It hardly matters how that happened at this point.”

She might have said more, but the rushing white noise of those words crackled through Togami’s mind until he couldn’t hear anything else. It didn’t matter? She was going to say that, after every word Naegi had ever pleaded in her defense? Togami could still see Naegi’s face twisted with misery when he’d thought Kirigiri might be the burned corpse on the fifth floor — and even after he should have known the truth, he’d spent the last precious hours of his life fighting to clear her name. Kirigiri had been one of the beloved friends Naegi had wanted to protect — and now that he was gone, she was saying that it didn’t matter?

“You’re not even trying to hide it anymore.” The snarled words tore themselves from his throat without a conscious decision to say them. He could see Kirigiri turning towards him, eyebrows drawing together like she actually had the nerve to be confused, and any thought he might have harbored about biting back the words was lost beneath the ice freezing through him. “You don’t care about him — you never did. You never once did anything but manipulate him into getting hurt for you. He called you his friend, and you used that until he thought he had no choice but to —”

He would have gone on, but something tight and painful seized the back of his throat when he tried to form the words. Even with cold reality staring him in the face, with too many pieces of evidence to ignore — his body rebelled against saying the words himself. He’d thought nothing could be more painful than living in a world where Naegi had been unjustly executed… but the thought that
Naegi had been tricked into signing his own death warrant brought new shades of misery into the nightmare.

Because surely, surely there had to have been a trick. Even with Ogami’s suggestion poisoning his mind, Naegi couldn’t really have chosen to throw his vote away. If he’d believed the other votes would end up as a tie between Kirigiri and Togami, then voting for himself should have meant guaranteeing the blackened’s victory, since the mastermind hadn’t revealed their tie-breaking rule yet. Making a decision would have been terribly hard… but even so, Naegi couldn’t have decided to condemn them all to death rather than face it. Togami knew there had to be another piece to this, if only he could figure out what.

“I’m not going to argue with you,” Kirigiri said, razor-edged words slicing through the whirlwind of his thoughts. “There’s no point… not when you’re right. I never took Naegi’s claims of friendship as seriously as he did, and I didn’t answer him with sincerity.”

“I don’t need you to tell me that,” Togami snapped. “I’ve known it all along whether you admitted it or not.”

“True enough. But even taking that into account… this wasn’t the outcome I wanted.” Kirigiri’s hand curled into a fist, stark black against the light tabletop. “It wasn’t what I expected.”

“Really? You think you can do a couple sidesteps to dance around the issue?” Silver flashed around the room from the scissors Jill spun in both hands. “Then maybe you need some hands-on instruction about getting to the point!” The scissors froze in unison, at just the right angle to send light gleaming down the edges of the blades.

But of course Kirigiri didn’t bother to acknowledge Jill’s theatrics, looking straight ahead like she wanted them to think that she didn’t even see the enraged serial killer glaring at her. “No… I’m not avoiding anything. I just don’t think I’m ready to say it yet… not here.”

Togami knew what she was getting at. After weeks of dodging the mastermind’s cameras, it was obvious that she wanted them all to follow her into the bathhouse locker room so that she could talk freely without being overheard. Taking that kind of precaution had seemed so reasonable when they’d been trying to work together to escape… but it hadn’t been, had it? Being careful hadn’t done a thing to protect Naegi — all it had done was give each of the girls here the chance to hurt him one on one. What was the point of caution if the situation still ended up like this?

“No. You don’t get to play those games anymore.” Togami glared at her, settling firmly back against the door. “No more excuses about how we can’t let the mastermind hear us — not when we know for sure that they’ll side with you if push comes to shove. You can say the truth where they can hear it, or not at all.”

He expected her to clam up, to roll her eyes and refuse to talk if she couldn’t do it on her own terms — but she shrugged. “All right, if you’re so sure you want to know. It’s exactly as I told Naegi — I intended to use the trial to reveal the mastermind’s true identity.”

Togami froze, clenching his jaw until the tension spasmed up through his temples. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Jill and Ogami turning to sneak worried glances up at the security cameras trained silently on the scene — but he refused. He’d challenged Kirigiri to speak her mind without regard to any observers. If he flinched away now that she’d done as he demanded, it would be as good as saying she’d won.

Instead, he forced himself to raise his chin and do his best to match Kirigiri glare for glare. “Quite an impressive goal — if you’re telling the truth, that is.”
She didn’t answer, ignored the baited remark as if it were too obvious to acknowledge. Togami narrowed his eyes. “All right, then, if you expect me to believe you, then let’s hear it — who is the real mastermind you thought you were going to unmask?”

Kirigiri flinched.

It was quick, over before Togami could fully recognize the reaction — but no matter how fast she repaired her emotionless mask, she couldn’t erase the fact that it had slipped. And while he couldn’t rule out the possibility she was faking, it would be tricky to change her expression so quickly with so little warning. The ability to hide her emotions didn’t necessarily mean she was also a good actress, after all. So whatever had broken through her defenses for that brief instant, it had almost certainly been genuine.

He just couldn’t be sure what it was.

Togami tried to sort through the possibilities in his head, spinning through options in an instant of whirling gears — but he found his own mind rebelling against the attempt. Every time he tried to focus on an idea, it snarled together with a dozen other thoughts in an impenetrable mess. Logic had always been his most reliable tool, one that he reached for as easily as breathing — but now, it seemed that even his brain had turned against him.

Something in his head was actively opposing him, preventing him from following the question to whatever conclusion was waiting at the end of this train of thought. He ground his teeth together until needle-sharp frustration jabbed through his temples, physical pain underscoring his sudden inability to think logically. It was almost like something in his own head was actively opposing him, keeping the knowledge he wanted just out of his own reach.

“So you mean you got Makyutie to jump through all those hoops for you without even naming names?” Jill put one hand on her hip, tapping her scissors against her upper thigh. “Gotta say, I’m not buying this repeat performance — you must’ve been way more convincing on opening night if you got him to believe you!”

Believed her… the words almost didn’t make sense when Togami tried to translate them into meaning. She was a liar, a manipulator, a traitor who’d hidden every important part of her true identity… and yet… Naegi had believed her.

It seemed so obvious now that someone else had said it. Naegi called Kirigiri his friend… he cared about her… he trusted her. Of course he would have taken her at her word if she said she had a way to reveal the mastermind, even without a shred of proof to back up her claim. He’d wanted nothing more than to find a way to end this killing game without losing any more of his friends. Wasn’t that the excuse he’d offered for every one of the times he’d risked his life? If he’d thought there was a chance that Kirigiri could stop the mastermind once and for all… what would he have done?

Togami could feel the world shifting into focus around him, all knife-sharp edges and searing colors. He didn’t want to see this world, didn’t want the knowledge it held, but he’d moved beyond the point when that was possible. He could see too easily how the pieces fit together around this new revelation, and it didn’t matter that he no longer wanted the answers to his questions. He could see the truth all too clearly.

If Naegi had really believed Kirigiri’s claim that she could reveal the mastermind, then he would have seen the other students’ attempts to identify the culprit as a distraction from their real goal. With that in mind, it would have been more important to make sure the trial gave Kirigiri the opportunity she needed… and of course she couldn’t reveal the mastermind if she were dead. The
moment she got a majority of the votes, the mastermind could have put a stop to her plan permanently. And so the only way to make sure that didn’t happen, to give the plan the best possible chance at successfully saving everyone — it would have been to make sure the votes didn’t name her as the culprit.

Naegi wouldn’t have considered deliberately voting incorrectly to ruin the trial or to hide the real killer’s guilt… but faced with a chance to take down the mastermind, he might have. And with Ogami’s story about her own past votes ringing in his ears, he would have had an obvious way to do it. He would have expected the result to be a tie between Kirigiri and Togami, giving them one more chance to take aim at the mastermind.

Except that it hadn’t turned out that way. Togami’s eyes snapped shut, squeezing tightly together until pain stabbed between his eyebrows, but even that couldn’t hold back the onslaught of knowledge.

Naegi had voted for himself… but he’d only meant to tie the vote. Everyone had known that his injuries made it impossible for him to be guilty, so he wouldn’t have been expecting to see his own face shown as the result of the votes. Not when choosing the wrong culprit meant that they’d all die.

But choosing the right culprit would have let them live.

Togami bit down on his lip to hold back the useless protests running through his head as Ogami’s words about the final moments after the vote whispered through his mind once more. Naegi had admitted he was the culprit. It hadn’t been true, it couldn’t have been true — but he’d admitted it anyway. Togami hadn’t been able to believe it at first, because why would Naegi tell such a suicidal lie? The boy Togami loved wouldn’t have given up on fighting like that. He wouldn’t just throw his life away.

But he would sacrifice himself to save the rest of them.

The bitter tang of blood soaked through his mouth, but he could barely feel the pain of his teeth digging into his lip. Such a small pain couldn’t reach him any longer. Words flew through the air around him, but he couldn’t bring himself to make sense of them. What was the point? If he was right, if the nightmare his logic had shown him was the truth… then what was the point of anything?

Naegi hadn’t been a passive victim in his own death. Everything he’d done had been to oppose the mastermind, to try to escape this terrible game… and it had left him with only one choice. They had all left him with only one choice.

Naegi had died to protect them.

Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: For now I'm going to keep trying the new writing schedule of posting longer chapters every other week. I'm still undecided if it's permanent or not, though. If anyone has feedback on the chapter length, please let me know! Next chapter should be posted December 10. See you then!
Chapter 295

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Togami slumped back against the door, palms braced against the smooth surface like the world might lurch around him at any moment. This new knowledge trickled through his mind like tendrils of acid, eating away at the last few solid foundations he’d been able to use for support. He’d thought that Naegi had been a helpless victim murdered by the mastermind and their allies while he was too weak and injured to fight back… but the truth was so much worse.

Naegi had chosen to die — not because he’d given up, as Togami had feared when Ogami first brought up the possibility, but because he hadn’t.

“Hey, White Knight? You doing okay back there?”

In the time it took Togami to blink, Jill had spun in place to peer directly into his face. “Cause even if you beat out everyone else, I’ve gotta say that this isn’t your best look.”

He could hear the words, but he couldn’t quite make sense of them in his head. It was as though his brain had stopped accepting new input, shutting down entirely as it tried to process the information already overwhelming it. He needed to think, needed time to think, if he ever wanted to realign his mental landscape into a place he knew how to navigate.

“Togami… are you all right?”

But time was the one thing he couldn’t have here, with those girls surrounding him and flinging even more words his way. Concern prickled out from Ogami’s voice, stretching out to scrape against the raw wounds exposed and vulnerable on his heart.

“Perhaps you should sit down, at least until you stop shaking.”

She stepped towards him — but he jerked instinctively backward, cracking his head on the wall in his haste to maintain some semblance of protective space around himself. White-hot stars burst across his vision, but even with the room obscured for a brief moment he could still feel the weight of the other people pressing in around him. So many people, there were so many more than just the three girls standing here watching in person. Billions of eyes stared at him through the mastermind’s cameras, gawking at the moment when the last piece of his heart fell apart into dust.

An entire world was watching… all except the one person whose gaze didn’t hurt. For all the times Naegi had seen right through Togami’s defenses, it had never left him feeling so weak and raw. When Naegi had looked at him… it felt like he wasn’t alone.

But that feeling had only been a brief illusion, underscoring the painful reality until he couldn’t ignore it any longer. Even though he’d asked Naegi time and again to stay, stay with him, stay… it hadn’t mattered in the end. Naegi had left him alone here, stripped of the emotional shields he needed to defend himself against the staring eyes of the world. And with all his weak points laid bare in this sharp-edged world, how could there be any hope that anyone else would ever be on his side again?

“Togami? Can you hear me at all?”

And suddenly Ogami was there, directly before his eyes where he could no longer ignore the look
in her eyes as she frowned at the broken mess Naegi had made of him. Nausea twisted through his stomach at the knowledge in her eyes, the living proof that the world could see his pain. What right did she have to look at him that way, staring straight at the truths he would have done anything in his power to conceal?

His face curled into an instinctive sneer before he had to make the conscious decision to defend himself. “Clearly the idea of taking a hint when someone ignores you is too difficult a concept to master.”

The words should have been an attack — but for some reason his voice sounded thin and breathless in his ear. If he really sounded so horrifyingly fragile, it was no wonder Ogami didn’t back away as he’d intended. If anything, the lines of tension in her face actually eased, as though she’d found something reassuring in his attempt to lash out at her.

“I see… then I’m glad that was all,” she said, with a twist to her mouth that set his teeth on edge. What was that look supposed to be? Was she **humoring** him now? “In that case… perhaps you can stop guarding the door now. You can sit down for a few moments to rest before the announcement, and —”

“I don’t need to **rest**!” he snapped, and that time he had the bitter satisfaction of seeing her draw backward. “Do you actually think that trying to nursemaid me into eating and sleeping will **help** anything?” He couldn’t stop the shudder in his voice — it took all the strength he had left to stop it from turning into a sob. And even then he couldn’t swallow it back entirely, his shoulders shaking as the sound twisted its way out of him in a low, unsteady laugh.

Ogami blinked once, then glanced off to either side where Kirigiri and Jill were watching. Did she actually think either of those two vipers could contribute anything useful? The thought only made more laughter choke its way through Togami’s throat.

“You — you’re not all right,” Ogami said slowly, as though she were only coming to that shockingly obvious conclusion now. Of course he wasn’t all right — he could barely even stretch his memory back to the time before he’d come to Hope’s Peak, to know what **all right** felt like in a world without Naegi in it. “Then do you need —”

“I don’t need anything!” The suggestion was intolerable, drawing the world’s attention straight to his inability to cope. “Is leaving me alone that difficult a concept to grasp? Or is it just that you need me as a crutch to ease your own guilt?”

He’d only said it to push her back, to get the breathing space he needed — but all the color drained from her face the instant those words left his mouth. Togami froze for an instant, the accusation settling through the dust of his mind until he could see it clearly. Guilt, of course she felt guilt, it had left her broken and on the brink of despair after her actions led to Asahina’s death in the fourth trial. All that she’d done to help Naegi had stemmed from that moment, her guilt over her dead friend leading her to protect the only one she could still save.

And now… it was the same thing. There was a cold sort of satisfaction in the way the pieces finally clicked together in his head, bringing an almost triumphant smile to his lips at the realization that yet another person had proved his cynical worldview right. “I see. Well, that certainly explains a lot.”

She was already shaking her head before he’d even stopped speaking. “No — that wasn’t why!”

But the truth was written right there on her face for anyone to see. Togami raised an eyebrow. “So you don’t feel a shred of guilt for giving Naegi the weapon he used to bring on his own death?”
Even with his damaged hearing, he could hear her hiss of pain as the blow landed. Well, that was only fitting, wasn’t it? After all, Naegi had suffered so much more… Naegi, who had never done anything to deserve it…

“Not that I’m complaining about hearing you talk, darling — but you sure you wanna waste your gorgeous voice on words like that?” Jill punctuated her words with the rapid click of scissors as she tapped them too fast against her palm. “I mean, you start giving it away for free, what are you gonna have left to throw at someone who’s really to blame?”

“You mean like you?” Togami turned his glare on the genocider, still wearing a skirt shredded to display rows after row of self-inflicted wounds. “You nearly murdered him yourself two days ago — and it’s your fault he was too weak to defend himself during the trial!”

Jill’s fingers snapped closed over the scissor blades as they hit her palm. “That’s what you think, baby?” Her voice sounded bright and cheerful as ever… but Togami could see a few flecks of blood at the edges of her palm as she clenched her fist around the scissor blades. “You’re gonna say I’m the one at fault?”

“Not just you.” Kirigiri’s voice sliced through the room, speaking Togami’s thoughts in the instant before he could say them aloud. He turned to glare at her — but his expression faltered as he met her steel-cold gaze. “You see it, don’t you, Togami? You know exactly who to blame.”

Her calm, quiet words brought fury blazing red behind his eyes. “You’re going to say that? You? What have you ever done but try to lead Naegi into danger? If he hadn’t trusted you —”

“He’d still be alive.” When Togami couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence, Kirigiri did it for him. “Yes… you’re probably right.”

He couldn’t stand there and listen to her any longer, not with the flat voice and emotionless eyes she had as she spoke about the boy she’d all but murdered. He wanted to scream, to lunge at her, to tear at her skin with his nails until she bore a physical mirror of every invisible scar he could feel on his heart. He wanted to see her hurt.

And there was nothing he could do about it. He could feel his hands shaking, his knees on the verge of collapse, his heart pounding against his ribs as if he’d already run a marathon. He couldn’t touch her, not when he was like this. He couldn’t — couldn’t do anything —

He spun and threw the cafeteria doors open, rushing out of the room and away from those three girls who had done so much to send Naegi to his fate. He didn’t think about where he was heading, too desperate to put as much distance between himself and the girls as he could — and he only realized that he’d been moving on instinct when he found himself in front of the locked door to his dorm room.

A door he no longer had the key to unlock.

Togami reached into his pocket and pulled out the only key he still had… Naegi’s key. It felt impossibly leaden in his hand, even though he knew it was no different than any of the other dorm keys. No… the only difference was that this key had stayed in the dorms, while its owner… hadn’t.

He felt as though some outside force turned his body slowly in place, rotating him around the key in his hand until he found himself staring blankly at the opposite side of the hall. And before he could even decide whether he wanted to look, the undeniable pull of gravity dragged his eyes straight to the door across from his own. The door that the key in his hand would open.
Naegi’s door.

Togami walked across the hall and slid the key into the lock… but then his hand froze, unable to complete the final motion necessary to open the door. For all that he’d wanted this key so desperately, the thought of actually using it felt like an impossibly daunting task, as far beyond his reach as flying to the moon. Entering Naegi’s room without him… the one room in the school where traces of the other boy would linger in every corner… what kind of strength would it take to face such a thing? He could have stood there for the rest of the night, too ensnared by indecision to move either way — but he didn’t have such a luxury.

*Ding dong, ding dong.*

The nighttime announcement rang through the hall… meaning that the cafeteria had just become off limits. Any moment now, those girls would leave… and the only thing worse than having the cameras capturing his inability to open the door would be if Jill, Kirigiri, and Ogami saw it in person.

Without giving himself the time to think the better of it, Togami turned the key and opened the door… and stepped into Naegi’s room.

Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: I'm still undecided about a permanent schedule... but first, I have to adjust for the end of the year. Due to various holiday travel plans and other time-consuming things, I'm going to stick to an every other week schedule for now, but the chapter length might get shorter again. Next chapter will be posted on Christmas Eve, December 24. See you then!
Chapter 296

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Naegi recognized the look on Byakuya’s face as he walked through the door to his room… and it was a look he had never wanted to see again. His throat closed tight around a sob that he didn’t have the strength to make, and no matter how the bright glare of the monitors burned his eyes he couldn’t tear his gaze away. He followed every slow, mechanical motion of locking the door, tracking the way that his boyfriend’s bandaged fingers closed so tightly around the key that it made his whole hand tremble… and the way that Byakuya didn’t notice at all. From the empty expression on Byakuya’s face as he turned slowly around to face the room, Naegi knew he wasn’t seeing much of anything.

How much was it hurting him to be in Naegi’s empty dorm room? All Naegi could tell for certain that it was too much, far too much for someone who’d been through what Byakuya already had. Why had he even gone back there — just because that was the only room he could still lock, now that his own dorm key had been lost in the execution? Naegi wanted to believe that was the only reason… but a horrible certainty whispered through the back of his mind that Byakuya had gone in search of some memory of him.

And there wouldn’t be anything to find, not in that bland and unadorned room. Of course there wouldn’t — Naegi had never kept anything there. Even if Headmaster Kirigiri had thought it was important for everyone to have a room of their own in the shelter, Naegi had kept everything of his that mattered in the room he’d shared with Byakuya. Photos, keepsakes, a thousand objects with memories woven into their existence… objects that Junko had to remove in order to create the illusion that the last two years had never happened. Everything of his was gone, except for the traces of these last nightmarish weeks.

But Byakuya didn’t know any of it. As far as he knew, that room was the place closest to Naegi that still remained in the school. And as he took one slow step after another into the center of the room, with all the quiet reverence of walking through a graveyard, he took painful care not to disturb a thing. He skirted around a pillow fallen haphazardly from the bed rather than replacing it, even though Naegi knew how untidiness grated on him. And when he reached out to run a light finger across the faint wrinkles in the bedspread, letting his touch linger on every mark of disorder without smoothing them away, Naegi had to close his eyes.

Seeing the effects of grief was bad enough… but watching as the self-contained, guarded heir openly mourned him was too much to endure. Pain was woven through every movement, knife-sharp and raw — the same pain that had been there in those first days when Byakuya had to learn to live in a world without the rest of the Togami family. Naegi remembered seeing that look before… but he couldn’t understand why it blazed again so intensely now. For all that the amnesia Junko forced on them had caused a thousand griefs, shouldn’t it at least have made this one hurt less? After all, it wasn’t as though Byakuya was able to remember the place Naegi had in his heart.

Except… it almost seemed like he did. Naegi forced his eyes open again and made himself look at his boyfriend again, doing his best to study the grief instead of experiencing his reaction to it. The way he didn’t notice his hands shaking, the emptiness stretching through his eyes, the careless disregard for the image he presented to the world… it was all too similar to the way he’d reacted to his other losses.

Or rather, the way he would have reacted if Naegi hadn’t intervened. With support from Kyoko,
Celeste, and the rest of their friends, he’d made sure Byakuya knew that the loss of his family didn’t mean he was alone. Even if the sixteen members of their class had no one else left in the world, they had their friendship with one another. And more than that… Byakuya had him. And every time Naegi had seen a hint of that look in his boyfriend’s eyes, he’d promised once again to stay.

A promise he’d broken. Guilt clawed at Naegi’s stomach, a sharp reminder of just when the worst of this look had reappeared. It hadn’t been there when Naegi had first seen his boyfriend on the monitors… no, not until the cafeteria, when the last four of his friends had pieced together the end of the trial.

“Man, talk about ingratitude!”

Junko’s voice scraped through Naegi’s thoughts, making every open wound bleed just a little more. His eyes moved towards her before he could think the better of it, and the sympathetic smile she wore made his throat twist closed with a scream he couldn’t voice.

“It’s like they don’t appreciate what you did for them at all,” she went on, clapping her hands together in front of her chest. “I mean, seriously — what’s the point of all that boring self-sacrifice if it’s just gonna make everything worse?”

She was trying to manipulate him. Naegi knew her words were a deliberate attempt to make him feel guilty about how he’d chosen to end the trial. But just because she wanted him to think so… that didn’t make it a lie. He hadn’t wanted this to happen… he hadn’t had any other good options… but he’d still made the choice that had driven his friends to fight rather than stand together. Even if Junko was the one pointing it out… everything happening now was still his fault.

“Just think how awful it would be to watch your poor prince charming cry into your pillow all night because he thinks you pretty much killed yourself!” Junko heaved a heartfelt sigh, looking sadly up at the monitor — just an instant before bouncing to her feet with a brilliant grin. “Good thing we don’t have to!”

Even if Naegi had the strength to ask what she meant, she didn’t wait to answer. Junko threw herself across the room like she had an enemy chasing her, flinging open the bizarre black and white door and disappearing into the room beyond. Naegi tried to squint past it to see what horrible thing she’d gone to do, but he couldn’t catch more than a glimpse of some very high tech equipment blinking and whirring. He could hear her clattering away at something just beyond the doorway, moving around and pressing buttons. She slammed down her hands and laughed —

And Monokuma’s bright laughter echoed through the room as he bounced onto the monitor of Naegi’s room, landing on the bed directly in front of Byakuya. “Looks like someone could use a little company!”

Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: Next chapter will be up in two weeks, on Sunday January 7. After that, I’ll be resuming the weekly posting schedule. Happy holidays!
“Looks like someone could use a little company!”

Monokuma’s voice hit Togami like a slap across the face, shattering the still air of Naegi’s room into jagged shards of grief. Togami snatched his hand away from where he’d let it rest on the bedspread, but he couldn’t erase the feeling of new wrinkles shifting beneath his fingers when the mastermind’s robot landed on the mattress. He’d almost been able to convince himself there had been a connection to Naegi of sorts, when he’d touched the bed left just as Naegi had last made it… but Monokuma’s weight on the bed destroyed that illusion, pressing into the mattress until his presence obliterated any trace Naegi had left behind.

There was something obscene in the knowledge that the mastermind had been watching him as he walked through Naegi’s empty room, seeing every grief he hadn’t been able to hide… but he couldn’t expect anything else, not with the cameras still staring down at him. And after everything the mastermind had done so far to prevent the survivors from properly mourning the dead, he couldn’t be surprised that Monokuma had popped up to prevent him from finding any measure of comfort.

But that didn’t mean he had to be calm about it. Togami crossed his arms and glared at the bear, doing his best to hide all trace of emotions. He knew from the stiffness of his cheeks and burning around his eyes that he didn’t succeed, but the attempt made him feel enough like himself to demand, “What do you want?”

“Eh?” Monokuma drew back as though the words had hurt his nonexistent feelings. “Is that all you’ve got to say to the only one around to comfort you in your hour of need?”

It took all the self control Togami had not to pick up the nearest heavy object and hurl it at the bear. Much as he ached for the momentary relief of breaking the robot’s disgustingly cute face into a scattered collection of gears, he knew it was impossible… not while the mastermind was watching. Instead, he poured all the revulsion the bear inspired into his tone. “I don’t want any comfort, especially not from you. Get out and leave me alone.”

“So cruel — and here I was going to tell you something nice!”

The cheerful grin spreading across Monokuma’s face brought bile rising in the back of Togami’s throat. “There’s nothing you can say that I want to hear.”

“Oh? Are you suuuuure?” The bear sang out the last word with the grating lilt of a child’s taunt, making Togami’s fingers curl into fists. “Not even if it has to do with a very special someone?”

Togami froze. As much as he loathed the paralyzing hesitation that seized him at the implied reference to Naegi… he didn’t know how to fight against it. Not here, in the room where the two of them had spent part of their too-brief time together. And most of all, not when the photo of Naegi still lay reassuringly in his pocket. He knew, he knew that anything Monokuma said would be cruel… but he couldn’t quite extinguish the flicker of hope that there might be something more as well.

“Fine,” he snapped, spitting the word out before he could remember any of the dozens of reasons
not to make such an emotionally-driven decision. “You have two minutes to say whatever you came to say — and then you’re going to leave me alone for the rest of the night.”

“Wow, such a tough negotiator! That must be the legacy of the Togami family — the confidence to make demands when you don’t have a leg to stand on!” Monokuma laughed gleefully at his poor attempt at a joke. “Okaaaaay, if you’re gonna be so stubborn about it, give me a second to make sure your terms are acceptable!”

And then Monokuma stopped moving, stuck in the middle of his signature smile. Togami frowned, eying the bear suspiciously. What exactly was that supposed to mean? Yes, he and the other students knew that there had to be someone voicing Monokuma on the other end of the robot’s operation… but the mastermind usually refused to so much as hint about it. But now, with the way the robot had frozen… it looked almost as if someone had pressed a pause button and stepped away from the controls. But why would the mastermind want to —

“And I’m back!”

Monokuma’s bright voice rang through the room, disrupting Togami’s train of thought before he could come up with any conclusions. He saw the bear’s gleaming smile complete the spread across its robotic face, and felt an instinctive glower curl his own lip in response.

“Oh, what’s that?” Monokuma squinted up at him theatrically. “Are you saying you missed me? Were you lonely when I left you here all by yourself?” He threw back his head and laughed. “Too bad! I had to make absolutely sure this was the right decision for everyone involved before doing anything. I mean, just think how awful it would be if your beloved headmaster made a mistake that he couldn’t take back!”

“The clock is ticking,” Togami gritted out through his clenched teeth. “Waste your time if you want, but after two minutes, I’m done.”

“Is that so?” Monokuma tilted his head quizzically. “Does that include the time I had to spend checking with Naegi?”

The world seemed to freeze around the words, all other sounds drowned out by the sheer force of those last few syllables.

Naegi.

Togami could feel his heartbeat pulsing hot through his ears, but the sound was gone, as unreachable as it had been after the explosion. The only thing he could hear, the only sound left in the world, the only words that had any meaning rang through his ears over and over again.

Checking with Naegi … with Naegi …

The room shook and wavered around him, blurring in and out of focus — or maybe he was the one who was shaking, unable to stand firmly on his own two feet in the wake of those words. He couldn’t stop hearing them, cascading through his head in an unending litany that blocked out every other thought since Monokuma had said…

Since Monokuma had said those words.

Ice settled in the pit of Togami’s stomach, dragging him back into reality. Monokuma had always been the mastermind’s mouthpiece, and every word he uttered was only intended to drag them further into this twisted killing game. Whenever he’d pretended to be anything else, it had been only a pretense so that he could hit them with greater cruelty further down the line. Anything he
said… anything he implied… it was only meant to cause pain.

It wasn’t true.

Chapter End Notes

Schedule Note: After trying it for a few weeks, I've decided that the new schedule wasn't really working that well for me. I'm reverting to my previous posting schedule of one chapter per week, every Sunday, until further notice. Next chapter should be up next week!
It wasn’t true.

Togami clenched his teeth until pain shot up through his temples, but it didn’t help. Mortification flooded through him as he realized what should have been obvious from the start.

Of course it wasn’t true. He knew it couldn’t be. He’d seen what had happened back in the execution room. He’d watched the entire nightmare play out, eyes fixed on Naegi until the collapsing building erased the innocent boy from view forever. He hadn’t allowed himself to look away once… and so he knew there was no escape from what he’d seen. Monokuma’s words had been nothing more than a vicious lie… and Togami had no right to let himself be deceived. Naegi deserved better from him.

“Get out,” Togami said quietly, dropping his gaze to the stretch of bed marred by Monokuma’s shadow. Even knowing the creature in front of him was just a robot with no inherent intelligence of its own, he couldn’t stand to look it in the eye.

“Huh? Are my two minutes up already?” The bed shifted as Monokuma went through one of his typical overblown reactions, but Togami didn’t bother to look up to see which it would be. It didn’t matter — nothing Monokuma said could ever matter again.

“I said get out.” The words sounded empty even to his own ears, drained of all the imperiousness he tried to inject into his commands.

“Really? Aw, and here I was expecting you to be excited,” Monokuma said sadly. “I guess you must not’ve liked Naegi very much after —”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence.” Somewhere in the far-off reaches of his mind Togami had a vague awareness that speaking this way to Monokuma wasn’t safe… but that wasn’t enough to stop the furious words. “I don’t know what you’re trying to accomplish with these lies, but —”

“What’s that? You think your beloved headmaster is lying?” Monokuma gasped. “I’ll have you know that I’m a bear of my word — and I promised Makoto Naegi that I’d tell you he’s right here with me, safe and sound!”

“Stop talking.” It was enough to make Togami wish his hearing had never come back… at least then he could protect himself from Monokuma’s words.

“Wwllll… okay, maybe not exactly safe and sound!” Monokuma obviously had no intention of listening to Togami’s orders. “Let’s face it, not even the Ultimate Lucky Student could make it through one of my executions without a few scratches — but he’s in much better shape than I expected when I went to scrape him off the rubble!”

Togami couldn’t stop himself from flinching back at the image, air hissing through his clenched teeth in a gasp of pain. Whatever had been left in the execution chamber when the debris stopped falling, it hadn’t been Naegi any longer… but that didn’t make anything easier. His mind kept conjuring vision after gruesome vision of what those remains might have looked like… and what Monokuma might have done to them.

“You know… I’m starting to think that you still don’t believe me!” Monokuma had the gall to sound shocked at the idea.
Togami didn’t even bother to answer — his expression ought to tell the mastermind everything they needed to know.

“Well, that won’t do — I can’t have one of my precious students doubting the veracity of his headmaster! It might make you start questioning the truth of your entire school experience!” For some reason, Monokuma took this opportunity to cackle loudly, echoes ricocheting around the small room too chaotically for Togami’s limited hearing to track.

“Guess I’d better prove it!” Monokuma said in his brightest, most innocent voice — and a chill snaked down Togami’s spine at the sound. “Want me to put him on the line? You’d believe me if you could hear his voice, right? Right?”

Naegi’s voice… Togami’s own throat grew tight at the thought, choking back the angry words he wanted to hurl in Monokuma’s direction. Even though he’d seen Naegi at the end, he hadn’t been able to hear the weak, injured boy’s final words. He hadn’t had that one last chance to burn the sound of Naegi’s voice into his memory before it was erased from the world forever. And now he never would. Naegi’s voice would fade into the depths of his mind, disappearing bit by bit until he was left with nothing but the knowledge that such a kind, friendly, open voice had once existed.

And that was what Monokuma had used to mock him.

“What?”

He hadn’t known he meant to ask the question until it crossed his lips — but once it was out there in the world, raw and broken as he’d never thought his voice could sound, he couldn’t stop the rest of the words from following after.

“Why are you doing this? You never did before, not for any of the other deaths, not even when Ogami lost Asahina. You left her alone in her room all that time, even though you could have done anything you liked in the name of punishment for rule-breaking. So why are you doing this to me?”

“Huh?” Monokuma asked, sounding as if he were genuinely confused by the question. “Doing what to you?”

It was exactly the response Togami could have predicted the mastermind would make — so obvious that he couldn’t even muster an explosion of rage at their refusal to stop the lies. What was the point of getting so angry? He’d always used his anger as a motivator, fuel for his determination to succeed… but what was left for him to strive towards? Nothing seemed worth the effort… nothing left in the world could.

“You must have hated us.” Togami didn’t need the mastermind to say the answer… the answer was right there in front of him, emblazoned in each of their cruel actions. “You wanted to show the world murder, violence, despair… but we didn’t follow your script. We lo—” The word froze on his tongue… the word he’d never gotten the chance to say to the person who deserved to hear it. “We… cared about each other. And as long as we did, we weren’t capable of playing the game you wanted.” He let his head fall forward, so that the shadows falling across his face might mask at least a little of the pain scrawled across his face. “No wonder you jumped at the chance to murder him.”

“What a terrible accusation to make,” Monokuma said sadly. “You know, nothing hurts a headmaster more than finding out how his students really feel about him!”

There was a riddle hidden in those words, a clue to a mystery that the mastermind understood and he didn’t… but Togami couldn’t find the strength to care. Even if he could puzzle out the answer,
it would only lead to more questions. Riddle after riddle, mind game after mind game, with no end to any of it. Why even try to solve the mysteries if there was no hope left for a good resolution?

“Just go away,” he muttered, knowing the mastermind’s cameras could pick up the words no matter how little energy he put into making them audible.

“Hmm… yep, looks like my time limit’s up!” Monokuma said, sighing theatrically. “Too bad! But I always keep my promises — and now no one can say this one didn’t get fulfilled!”

With a last gleeful laugh, he bounced out of the room. Togami waited a moment for the last echoes of the bear’s presence to fade before sinking down to the floor. He couldn’t bring himself to sit on the bed, not with indentations from Monokuma’s feet still fresh on the comforter. He turned so the bed was behind him, pressing his back against it and drawing his knees up against his chest. It was the smallest he’d ever tried to make himself, the least amount of space he’d ever occupied… and he only wished he could find a way to make it even less. If it would get rid of the empty exhaustion stretching through him, he wouldn’t mind taking up no space at all.

He closed his eyes, rested his chin on the top of his knees, and tried to stop thinking. It was the only thing left that he could do.
Naegi didn’t know how he could have been so wrong. All he’d wanted to do was ease some part of Byakuya’s grief, to let him know that his pain wasn’t necessary… but he’d forgotten how the truth would sound coming from Monokuma’s mouth. Of course smart, cynical Byakuya wouldn’t believe such an impossible story — not from someone he had every reason in the world to distrust. Naegi should have realized that it wouldn’t work from the start, as soon as Junko agreed to his demand so easily.

But instead, he’d helped her hurt Byakuya more deeply than ever.

The consequences of his stupid decision were still there on the monitors above him, showing the dorm room now that Monokuma had left it. From most of the camera angles, it seemed to be an empty room… all but the one that showed the place beside the bed where Byakuya had collapsed. He still sat there now, huddled against the bed in an almost childlike posture that Naegi had never seen before.

No… he had seen it… just not on his boyfriend. It was the same way he’d found Sakura the morning after Hina’s death, alone in the darkness and on the brink of despair. He hadn’t understood the full significance of it then, with the Tragedy still wiped from his memory… but he’d still recognized it as something terrible, something that he had to stop however he could.

And they had. Somehow, the few surviving members of their class had pulled Sakura away from that precipice. She’d still grieved for Hina, and for all the others they’d lost, but the emptiness of despair no longer lurked in the depths of her eyes. She’d needed their help… and they’d found a way to give it.

But who was left to help Byakuya? With memories of their friendships erased and replaced by the suspicion-fueled killing game, who would be able to reach him? After they’d all argued in the cafeteria, after he’d refused to face them any longer… was there anyone he would still let himself trust?

Naegi had to hope there would be. The Byakuya Togami he’d known these last two years had found a way to trust his classmates and rely on his friends. That person couldn’t be entirely gone… the person he loved so much couldn’t have been erased from the world. He had to hope that enough of the man Byakuya had been still remained… enough to help him remember the way out of despair. Because if he couldn’t believe in Byakuya any longer…

“Aw, what a disappointment he turned out to be!”

Shock jolted through Naegi at the sound of Junko’s voice far closer to his head than it should have been. He craned his eyes upward as far as he could — and he could just see a flash of pink curls behind him. Had he really been so absorbed in watching the monitors that he hadn’t noticed her leave her control, or had she deliberately tried to sneak up on him? He wasn’t sure which possibility left him more unsettled.

“I mean, after you put all that effort into doing something nice for him, he didn’t even appreciate it!” Junko laughed — but even though the sound was bright and cheerful, the fact that she stayed out of his vision sent spidery chills crawling down his neck. “Who wouldn’t want to forget all about a guy like that, right?”

Forget…?
The way she said the word made it linger in Naegi’s mind, echoing long after she’d finished speaking. And every time *forget* whispered through his thoughts, cold prickles of fear spiked across his skin. He couldn’t stop thinking about all the precious memories the killing game’s amnesia had made him forget —

No. The memories that *Junko* had made him forget.

Junko… who was standing behind him now. Who had gone to a lot of trouble to make sure he couldn’t see her. Who still had whatever tools she’d used to erase memories in the first place.

Fingers slid through Naegi’s hair, feather-light touches that he could barely feel. His breathing sped up instinctively, his body reacting to the threat without heeding the fact that it was only making his wounds hurt more. And it was so useless, so horribly useless, because there was nothing he could do even if adrenaline forced his tired heart to pound against his aching ribs. He couldn’t do anything to stop her, not if she decided to —

To bend down and press her lips against his forehead with a loud smack of a kiss.

The terror swirling through Naegi’s mind stuttered to a confused halt as Junko’s laughter filled the air around him. She… she *hadn’t* done anything to him? After acting so suspiciously that he’d thought… of course he’d thought…

“Well, that sure got your blood pumping!” Junko said brightly, spinning around to drop down beside him in a cross-legged position that was really not appropriate for a girl wearing that short of a skirt. “You looked so down when I came back in that I just *had* to find a way to pep you back up!”

Naegi stared blankly at her helpful smile, trying to keep up with everything that was happening. Junko leapt from one thought to its opposite so quickly that it made his head ache even apart from his injuries. And when everything she said was so superficially friendly, directly contradicting the facts he *knew* about the awful things she’d done to people she should have cared about… how was he supposed to understand any of it?

She’d terrified him on purpose, he *knew* she had to have done it on purpose… but she spoke like it had been nothing more than a lighthearted prank between friends. And she acted like she was concerned for his wellbeing after seeing him in distress… except that all his unhappiness had its roots in her actions. It made no sense… not even if she wanted to hurt him. He was trapped here with no way to defend himself — she could hurt him all she liked without the disguise of kindness. She definitely didn’t have to go so far as to kiss him… a memory that still burned uncomfortably hot on his forehead. Why was she bothering?

“But I’m so relieved you’re feeling better! What kind of friend could have fun by herself when her buddy is down in the dumps?” She beamed at him expectantly — like she was waiting for some expression of gratitude. And the impulse to respond with the thanks she wanted nearly had his lips parting before he realized what he was doing.

No… no, that wasn’t right. He didn’t owe her *anything*, not after all she’d done to their friends. And especially not after the terrible cruelty she’d just inflicted on Byakuya, for no reason at all. He couldn’t let her distract him with all her confusing games… he had to remember who she really was.

“Your… fault.” Naegi’s ribs screamed out in protest with every additional breath it took to speak the words, but he knew he had to say them. He couldn’t let Junko keep up her act of friendship… not when she’d almost started to trick him into going along with it. “You… hurt him.”
“Huh?” She tilted her head from side to side, hair swinging back and forth. “You think I hurt someone — like me personally? But how could I do that when I’ve been locked up all alone with you?”

Naegi blinked, but the confusion only lasted a moment before he realized that she was just playing another game with him. Of course she hadn’t forgotten the heartrending words she’d spoken to Byakuya just a few minutes ago. She just wanted to make him think she had. He didn’t understand why… but he didn’t have the energy left to try to track her inexplicable thoughts.

“B… Byakuya.” Speaking his boyfriend’s name now, to her, made Naegi’s stomach churn as if he were sneaking around behind the other man’s back… but he didn’t know what else to do. “You… hurt him… on purpose.”

“Oh… that.” Suddenly, Junko’s entire body drooped as she answered, chin falling, shoulders slumping, and even her hair losing some of its bounce. “That’s all you meant? And here I thought you were going to say something interesting.” She heaved a sigh, as though even those few words had taken too much energy out of her. “Of course I did it on purpose. I mean, obviously. I had to, you know?”

He had to admit she was right… he did know. He could see it now, all too clearly, and he couldn’t stop the sour regret burning at the back of his throat at how stupid he’d been to think anything else would happen. He’d given her the opening to hurt Byakuya… he’d even confirmed that he wanted her to do it.

But she was still the one who’d chosen to go through with it. Naegi swallowed back the feelings of self-disgust, reminding himself that he wasn’t the one who’d acted maliciously. He should have known better than to believe her… but she was still the one who’d done it.

And from what she’d just said, she must have been intending to do this from the moment she agreed. She’d never had any intention of following through on the spirit of what he’d asked. Naegi tried to glare at her, but he couldn’t quite muster the strength the expression required.

“You… lied,” he told her, reaching for words that had a chance of knocking that uninterested look off her face. It wasn’t quite what he wanted to say, but it was the closest he could manage.

But it wasn’t enough to hit the mark. She shrugged a single shoulder, like it wasn’t even worth the full gesture. “Mm… not really. I did what I said I would… told him the honest to god truth about you. Kept my word and everything. Lies are too much work… it’s so much easier to tell the truth. That’s why I don’t bother to lie to my friends.”

She didn’t lie? Naegi had to forced back the snort of disbelief before it caught in his throat and sent coughs shuddering through his body. “Lied… about me.”

“Yeah?” Her expression didn’t even flicker at the accusation. “When?”

“Said… I killed… Mukuro.”

“Oh, right… guess I did do that, huh?” Junko sighed again. “Well, whatever. You’re not dead or anything, so it’s not like that one really counts.”

What was he even supposed to say to a statement like that? Naegi had no idea. This weird depressed attitude she’d taken on had to be some kind of act, just as much as the bubbly facade of friendship… but he had even less of an idea how to respond when she acted like this. How was he supposed to treat someone who acted like nothing mattered to her?
“You know… I thought it would be more interesting if you were here.” The sheer lack of emotion in Junko’s voice filled Naegi with the desperate instinct to flee from danger. It wasn’t the same as Kyoko’s emotionless mask, the result of her detective’s training to conceal what she really thought… no, this was as if there was nothing behind Junko’s eyes that she needed to conceal. As if there was nothing inside her at all.

“But it’s just the same as it always is. You know what I mean?” She shook her head a little, barely enough to disturb a few strands of her hair. “I guess there’s no help for it. I mean, if you’re gonna be here with me the whole time… we’re gonna have to liven things up.”

Naegi didn’t like the sound of that at all. “What… do you mean?”

She looked down at him — and clapped her hands together with a child’s hyperactive glee. “We should play a game!”
A game? After living through day after day of Monokuma’s nightmarish killing game, even the word sent a jolt of ice through Naegi’s chest. What kind of game was Junko talking about? She couldn’t mean…

“Oh, don’t worry, sweetie, I’m not talking about any replays!” Junko cut in, as if she could see the exact moment his thoughts turned in the direction of the killing game again. “Who wants to keep playing the same old boring game over and over and over again? No, I have an even better way to keep things fun — a brand new game, just for you and me!”

She grinned at him happily, inviting him to share her delight… but Naegi could only stare back at her in confusion. What was going on? He didn’t really understand any of her strange mood swings, but this one was even more bewildering than the rest. A moment ago she’d been so empty, so lost to any hint of emotion… and then in an instant, she’d flipped back around to the playful, lighthearted persona. They couldn’t both be genuine… but he didn’t see any hints that one might be more or less real than the other. Was it that she was both of them at once… or was neither of them really her?

“There were just so many games I wanted to play with you that it was awfully hard to pick just one,” she went on, picking up the thread of her monologue as if she hadn’t just waited a full thirty seconds to see if he would answer. “But you know, the very best part about games is playing them with other people — it’s sooooo boring by yourself! And since it absolutely had to be a game you could play with me even though you’re stuck on the ground, I decided we should play… a guessing game!”

Guessing…? That wasn’t what Naegi had expected at all, and relief surged through him at the realization that she didn’t intend to start up a new round of a “killing game” with him as her defenseless opponent. Could she have switched herself around so much that she’d actually decided to come up with an innocuous game that didn’t hurt anyone?

No… not even all the optimism he had could let him believe that. There would be some dark twist to this new game… she just hadn’t told him what the worst part would be yet.

“Hmmm?” Junko leaned forward to peer down at him, blinking with innocent confusion. “You know, you sure don’t seem as excited about this as I am.” Her mouth fell open in a perfect O of dismay. “Oh no, don’t tell me you’re so tuckered out from that nasty execution that even a brand new game won’t do it for you now!”

Arguing with her didn’t sound like a good idea… but with the way her opinions kept flip-flopping, Naegi wasn’t sure he wanted to agree, either. Talking hurt, and if he guessed wrong then he’d only have to speak more to explain himself. Was anything safe to say?

“And now you don’t even wanna talk to me?” Junko sounded so heart-broken that it made his own chest ache in sympathy, no matter how firmly he reminded himself that she couldn’t really mean it. “Wow, you must really be in bad shape if you can be so awful to one of your beloved friends!” She shook her head sadly.

He could feel the words pressing against the inside of his lips, heartfelt reassurances tingling across
his tongue. Even knowing that Junko had been the one behind so many horrors, he couldn’t quite squish the part of his mind that thought it recognized her as a friend. She wasn’t a friend… after everything she’d done, she couldn’t be… but it was so hard to keep remembering that in the face of her apparent distress.

“And you know, I can’t just leave a friend in that state! Soooo… I guess there’s only one thing left for me to do.” She clenched her fists, nodding to herself with renewed determination. “I’m gonna have to make extra sure you’re excited!”

No… oh, no. Naegi knew the look gleaming in her eyes, knew the words she was about to say, and he fought to find the strength to protest before she could utter them.

But he never got close to having a chance. “We need stakes!” Junko beamed at him. “Nothing gets your blood pumping like a little risk, right?”

She’d said it before, over card games and races, friendly competitions among classmates… but he knew this would be nothing like the tame forfeits she’d suggested back in those peaceful days. And no matter how much it had felt like she had bowled over any opposition at the time, this wasn’t even in the same league. This time, he really didn’t have the option to refuse.

“But what to bet, that’s the question,” she said, tapping one finger thoughtfully against her bottom lip. “I mean, it’s gotta be something you want, right? But hmm, what do I have that I could wager that you care about? It’s just so hard to know!” She tilted her head at him, eyes wide and sugar-sweet. “Do you have any ideas, sweetie? I’m wide open for suggestions!”

Naegi didn’t believe her. No matter how genuine she looked, there was no way that she’d actually ask him for ideas. It was exactly like back in school… she would only listen to suggestions if they were what she’d already decided she wanted anyway.

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“Huh? You mean there’s nothing you want?” Junko asked. Then she gasped, eyes widening. “Or is it just that you don’t think I can give you what you really need? Do you really have so little faith in me? That would be just the worst!” Her lower lip trembled like she was about to burst into tears. “You aren’t gonna be so mean to me, right, sweetie? You’re gonna tell me what you want, right? Right?”

Should he answer her, or should he stay quiet? Naegi didn’t know which would be safer… if any option could be safe, with all Junko’s attention focused squarely on him. But even if he wanted to give in to her demand… it wasn’t like he had anything to say. He would have liked to ask her to end the killing game, but —

“Come on, come on, don’t aim low!” Junko urged, leaning forward until her shirt gaped open even further. “Go on, sweetie, think! If you could have absolutely any dream come true in the whole entire world… what would you want?”

Naegi hesitated, wishing he had one of his friends at his side to help figure out what to do. It almost sounded like she wanted him to ask her to end the game… except he didn’t understand why. Did she just want him to admit that he dreamed about ending the game so that she could show him it was impossible? Or was there something else she was trying to do?

He didn’t understand any of it. Nothing she was doing made sense… at least not to him. Naegi was sure that Byakuya or Kyoko would have understood… but they weren’t here. They weren’t anywhere in the world, not really. Not the people they’d been, the people he’d cared for so much. Tears burned at the backs of his eyes, blurring the room around him as he wished… he just wished…
“There we go!”

Junko’s triumphant voice sliced through his mind, leaving a bloody trail of fear in her wake. “You want your friends back, right? You should’ve said so!” She laughed. “And here I thought you were gonna ask for something that couldn’t be done!”

She — what? In spite of himself, Naegi felt the beginnings of fresh hope stirring in his heart. He knew there had to be a trick to it somewhere, it couldn’t really be what she was implying — but he missed them all so much that he didn’t know what to think. She had to be lying to him again, just like she’d lied about telling Byakuya the truth… but what if she wasn’t? What if there really was a chance he could see the people he loved, the friends he’d shared so much with?

“It’s not like the amnesia’s irreversible, you know,” Junko said, lowering her voice like she was confiding a secret. “I mean, you broke it all by yourself, just by accident! But there are easier ways to do it, too.” She grinned. “If you’re interested, that is!”

He should tell her no, he knew it. Even if it ended up being meaningless defiance, he should refuse this bait. But… memories of Byakuya flashed before his eyes, two years of precious memories that had been destroyed… and he couldn’t summon the words to tell her no.

“So you’re going to play with me after all?” Junko’s face lit up. “That’s so wonderful — I just knew you’d want to! We can start when —” She stopped short, frowning. “Oh, wait… I didn’t tell you all the rules, did I? I guess I’d better do that before we get going!”

Rules? For a moment Naegi could almost hear echoes of Monokuma’s gleeful laughter in her voice, and terror twisted through his stomach.

“So like I said, it’s just a fun little guessing game!” Junko explained. “And since you’re at a disadvantage being oh so injured, we’ll keep it casual — one bet for one friend’s memories. Just think what a terrible waste of my time it would be if you dropped dead from overexertion after I went to all the trouble of saving you!” She laughed cheerfully.

Naegi just waited for her to finish, trying to keep his breathing steady. He didn’t know what was coming, but he was sure he’d need all the strength he could muster for it.

“We’ll keep the rules simple — I mean, complicated games are just boring, right?” Junko beamed at him, clasping her hands with a single sharp clap. “So all you have to do to win is guess how long it will take your prince charming to murder someone now that you’re out of the picture!”

Chapter End Notes

I'm not sure if that's an appropriate story milestone point for chapter 300 or not. Either way, I'd like to take a moment to thank everyone who's stuck with this story up to this point. I really appreciate it!
Chapter 301

“That’s wrong.”

The words tore themselves from Naegi’s throat, draining his limited supply of energy without a conscious decision on his own part. But he didn’t need to think, not about something as simple as this. Every part of his existence screamed out in protest of Junko’s absurd declaration — of course he had to refute it.

“Oh? It’s wrong?” Junko tilted her head, pigtails swishing. “Mm… no, I don’t think so. That really is the game we’re going to play! But don’t worry — I’ll make sure it’s lots of fun!”

Naegi didn’t even try to parse the sentence to figure out what new mind game she was trying to play with him now. He glared up at her, summoning all the breath he had left to give the words the weight they deserved. “Byakuya… won’t… murder… anyone.”

“Oh, really? So that’s your guess?” She gave him a bright smile. “Wow, someone likes risky bets… but I wouldn’t expect any less from my very favorite luckster! Okay, then I’ll put you down for —”

“No.” He wasn’t going to let her twist the conversation around again… not this time. Not about Byakuya. “I’m not… playing games… about him.”

“Is that so?” Junko raised her eyebrows, the gesture eerily reminiscent of Byakuya’s usual expressions. “I guess all those memories didn’t matter so much to you after all, then.”

Naegi blinked, the apparent change of topic taking him off guard. He’d been prepared for her to argue, complain, threaten, do whatever she could do force him to participate… but…

“Sounds to me like you’re turning your back on an easy win.” She shrugged. “I mean, you ought to know your own boyfriend best, right? So it should be a piece of cake for you to beat me. It’s like I’m giving you those memories back!”

Naegi might not be the best at seeing through people, but that manipulation was too blatant to miss. “You’re… trying to trick me.”

“Oh, no, you spotted it?” Junko’s jaw dropped in theatrical shock. “Oh, well, I guess that cat’s out of the bag, huh?” She giggled. “But you know, that shouldn’t matter, right? Because if you’re so sure you’re right, then nothing I can do would make a difference. There’s no way you could lose… if you’re right about him.”

She did have a point, much as Naegi hated to admit it. He bit his lip, trying not to dwell too much on the memories of other friends he’d believed would never murder anyone. He’d been wrong before… and Byakuya had been the one to hammer that point home in the aftermath of the second trial. People cared about different things than he did… they valued different principles and fought for other causes. He couldn’t know for sure what someone else would do.

Byakuya did have it in him to kill, Naegi couldn’t deny that. He’d had to learn the mindset as part of his training to become the Togami heir… and later, after the Tragedy, it had been put to the test. But… being willing to kill in self defense was different from what Junko had implied. She’d said Byakuya would kill one of the other girls just because Naegi wasn’t with him any longer… like Naegi had been the only thing holding him back from condemning the others to die. And that wasn’t true.
Yes, Naegi might have been the impetus, the last drop to tip the balance of the scales — but Byakuya had been the one to make the decision. He’d chosen to open his eyes to the truth of the situation… the fact that the mastermind was the real enemy to defeat. And now that he’d acknowledged it, how could he back down and return to playing the game as Monokuma presented it? That would be no better than giving up and accepting defeat… and the Byakuya that he knew would never do such a thing. Even if he’d lost his memories, would that really change his personality so much as well?

Of course not. It couldn’t. Everyone who had been trapped in the killing game was the same person, with or without their memories. That was why Junko had been able to manipulate them so easily. It was why they’d still reforged friendships here, enough to hurt when marred by death or betrayal. And it was why he and Byakuya had found one another again.

Junko could erase their memories, but she couldn’t take away their souls. He had to remember that… and he had to believe that the man he loved would never let the mastermind beat him.

“Soooo? What do you think, sweetie?” Junko’s words slithered into his thoughts, poison spilling out to contaminate every memory that she touched. “Don’t you want to play with me? Or do I need to come up with a game that would be even more fun?”

Naegi didn’t doubt for a second that she’d do so if he refused… and that she’d be sure to make any replacement game even worse than this one. If it were just his own life at stake that would be one thing… but he didn’t want to risk turning her imagination back on his friends. He had to play… and in a game like this one, there was only one choice he could bring himself to make.

“He won’t… kill anyone,” Naegi repeated, wishing that he could at least sound confident even if he didn’t feel it. “I’m… sure of it.”

“Fantastic!” A brilliant smile broke over Junko’s face, so full of delight that it was hard to remember it couldn’t possibly be genuine. “And you’re even gonna stick to the high-risk stakes come what may? This game is just gonna be the best! Because you think your one true love couldn’t possibly kill anyone — and I think he’s not even gonna make it a full day before he snaps!”

A day? She thought he’d kill one of their friends… within a single day? Naegi’s eyes shot back up to the monitors, where Byakuya hadn’t moved from where he’d sunk to the ground by the bed. He didn’t look like he was plotting murder… he didn’t look like he had any intention of moving at all. Naegi’s heart ached at the blatant misery in every line of the huddled body, and he would have given anything to gather the other young man in his arms even for a moment. He looked so sad… But sadness by itself wouldn’t make him kill. Junko had to know that. Was she just trying to get to Naegi with her guess… or did she know something that he didn’t?

He bit his lip, looking back at her — and this time he was only half surprised to find that her entire attitude had shifted again. A pair of glasses perched on the tip of her nose, and she peered down at him with the patronizing stare of someone who knew she was smarter than anyone else in the room.

“That’s right, a single day,” she said, as though answering the question he hadn’t asked aloud. “Twenty-four hours from now, to be precise. Byakuya Togami will murder someone before tomorrow’s nighttime announcement — I’m certain of it.” She smiled, sharp and cold. “And of course, you’re certain he won’t. Technically you said he would never kill someone — but as you ought to know, it’s impossible to prove a negative. Thus, we’ll use a time limit. If he kills someone before the deadline, then I win — but if not, you do.”
It seemed simple enough. Naegi swallowed back the lingering guilt about betting on his boyfriend’s emotions and his friends’ lives… and nodded.

Junko’s smile didn’t make him feel any better about agreeing. “Then let the games begin!”
When Togami had realized he had the key to Naegi’s dorm room, he’d thought that it would help him find some peace if he could go back to a place that had belonged to the boy he loved. Naegi had lived in this room, however temporarily. They’d spent the night together here. It should have been a place that held what few good memories he’d made with Naegi.

Except that Monokuma had ruined any chance of peace before he could even try to find it. Togami couldn’t even bring himself to open his eyes and look at the room again, not after the mastermind’s robot had sullied it with his vicious mockery. The cruel suggestion that Naegi could have survived still lanced through his heart, an open wound that he didn’t know how to heal.

Naegi would have known. Even in the worst situations they’d faced, he’d always found a way to make it all seem a little less daunting. When he insisted there had to be a way to resist the mastermind if they just worked together… when he called the other students his friends in spite of every reason to see them as enemies… yes, he’d sounded ridiculous and naive and infuriating… but the world had been softer and gentler for it. He would have known how to find a way out of this darkness.

But he was dead. He’d condemned himself to a gruesome, painful death so that he could protect the others, the kindest person in existence until his final breath. He’d died… and all the light he’d brought into Togami’s world had disappeared with him.

How could it hurt so much to lose something that he’d barely had? He’d only just had time to fall in love before the boy who’d captured his heart had been torn away forever. Their time together had been so short… but shouldn’t that mean that their lives hadn’t yet been fully entangled? The wounds to his soul stretched through every piece of himself that Naegi had touched, so much that it was hard to believe it hadn’t been the work of years. How could Naegi have become so necessary to him in a matter of days?

It didn’t matter how. Whether it made sense or not, that was what had happened. He’d opened his heart to Naegi, left himself weakened and vulnerable… and he hadn’t protected the person who’d held so much power over him. He hadn’t been able to keep Naegi safe.

No… the darkness around him pulsed with a surge of violent guilt as he realized that it was so very much worse than that. It wasn’t just that he hadn’t kept Naegi safe… he’d contributed to the reason Naegi had put himself in harm’s way. The fact that he hadn’t intended to do so was meaningless next to the results of his actions. If he’d grasped the truth of what was happening in that trial… if he’d had full use of his faculties instead of allowing himself to be deafened and too tired to think straight… if he’d been just a little quicker, a little stronger, a little smarter… then maybe it all could have ended differently. Maybe Naegi wouldn’t have had to try to protect him instead of the other way around.

Because that was what Naegi had done. Even injured and too weak to stand, even at the end of his strength, he’d made a decision to protect the others from the mastermind in the only way he could. It was the only explanation of everything that had happened that made sense. When Ogami had told him about Naegi’s last words to the mastermind, his blatantly false admission of guilt, it had been impossible to believe that they could have come from the same boy who had the strength to push through the trials to uncover the most painful truths. But the words hadn’t been a surrender… they’d been a purer act of defiance than Togami could have imagined.

There was almost a kind of beauty in that rebellion… a flash of light against the dark cruelty of the
world. How many people would have had the strength to make that choice, knowing it would result in one of the mastermind’s hideously painful executions? One in a million… or even less than that?

Whatever the numbers, there was one fact Togami knew for certain — and that was that he couldn’t have done it. The thought didn’t quite fit in his head, all strange angles and uncomfortable edges… but he couldn’t deny the truth of it. He’d realized as much during the trial itself, when Kirigiri had accused him of lying to protect Naegi. He’d known at the time that he wouldn’t have done any such thing — he wouldn’t have condemned himself to die even if it had ensured that Naegi would win the game and live.

And at the same moment that he’d had that thought, Naegi had been facing the same decision… and he’d made the opposite choice.

The knowledge crawled beneath his skin, full of a filth more repulsive than any physical dirt. His fingers curled into claws, desperate to tear away at the feelings that encased him, to rip through the outer shell and rid himself of everything that hurt. Even though he knew doing it wouldn’t help, he couldn’t rid himself of the urge to tear until he bled.

It took long minutes of grappling with the unfamiliar feeling before he could recognize it for what it was… a depthless chasm of self-loathing, hatred piled on hatred for the person he’d discovered himself to be. His old self-confidence, his belief in his own perfection, everything he’d thought about himself had been revealed as nothing more than lies. When he’d been put under real pressure, he’d shown his true nature… showed that he was no better than the failures he’d despised.

He’d failed in his initial plan to win the game… and then he’d failed in his attempt to beat the mastermind. He’d failed to keep Naegi safe, and he’d failed to uncover the truth during that final trial. Nothing he’d done since entering this godforsaken school had gone as he’d intended… and he’d decided long ago what he thought of people who were incapable of succeeding.

He was pathetic.

The weight of it settled around his shoulders, too heavy for him to raise his head. He couldn’t bear the thought of moving, of walking through the world without the mantle of undoubted success that he’d worn for so long. He didn’t know how to face a world where he would have to live with the consequences of these horrible weeks.

He would have welcomed the blank oblivion of sleep, the mercy of a few hours in which he didn’t have to be the person he knew he was… but even that much had become impossible for him. He drifted in and out of a fog, his awareness never fully fading to more than a fitful doze. Whenever he came close to the brink of losing consciousness… Naegi’s face would appear before his eyes. He reached for the boy, tried to hold him close, tried to speak the words he’d never gotten to say… but the dreams crumbled to dust every time.

Stay with me … he wanted to plead, wanted to beg, wanted to do whatever it took… but there was no point. There was no one left to ask… nothing left to ask for… nothing he wanted.

No… wait. That wasn’t quite true. There was still one thing left that he wanted… one way in which his failures hadn’t yet been set in stone. There was still one more thing he could fight for.

Revenge.

The mastermind had killed Naegi for a crime he hadn’t committed… killed him to spare the true culprit from the fate she’d deserved. The headmaster of Hope’s Peak Academy, Jin Kirigiri, had
wanted the backstabbing snake among the students to survive that trial, wanted it badly enough to cheat at his own game… and so Togami was going to kill Kyoko Kirigiri no matter what it cost him.
Chapter 303

How long had this decision been rising in him? When was the first moment that he had wanted Kirigiri dead? He didn’t know, not for certain… but it had begun long before she’d set the final trial in motion. Had it been the morning that he and Naegi had that terrible argument about her, when she’d turned up walking at Naegi’s side just a few hours later? Had it been earlier, when she’d used Naegi’s soft heart to force them into that pointlessly cruel separation? Or maybe even before that, back in the moment when he’d found Naegi weak and injured from the mastermind’s attack, and he’d whispered that Kirigiri had been the one to send him into that danger.

There were too many moments to count, too much blame piled at her feet to parse through any specific sins. She’d been relentless in her attacks on him, on Naegi, on the fragile bond the two boys had tried to build… with all that between them, of course it had come to this. If only he’d accepted the reality of it sooner, then maybe… maybe…

No. He didn’t dare let himself sink into such regret-laden what-ifs. There was only one path left open to him, and he couldn’t let idle fantasies distract him. He couldn’t fail again.

But it wouldn’t be easy. The mastermind had intervened on Kirigiri’s behalf once already — he had to assume they would do so again if he left them an opening. They had guns mounted throughout the school, bombs built into however many Monokuma robots they’d made, and who knew what other nasty tricks. And with the security cameras watching every move anywhere in the school, it would be next to impossible to keep his plans secret. Even if they didn’t tell Kirigiri about it, the mastermind would know.

Which meant that all the half-formed plans that he’d considered in those early days before Naegi were worthless. What good would it do to hide his actions from the other students? The only reason to do that would be if he wanted to take on the survivors in a class trial and win the killing game… but the idea of playing by the mastermind’s rules yet again made sour bile burn in the back of his throat. Naegi had been so horribly right when he’d said that the other students weren’t the real enemies. The mastermind was the only enemy here… and if he played their game, they would be the only winner.

How had Naegi seen it all so clearly, right from the start? Togami could remember feeling scorn at what he’d thought was the other boy’s naivete, rolling his eyes and smirking to himself every time Naegi refused to accept the killing game’s parameters. It had seemed so obvious that their only choice was to play the game as the mastermind had presented it… but Naegi never had. He’d fought back against the idea of the game from the first moment… to the last. Playing the game now, after everything Naegi had wanted, would be as good as spitting on his memory.

Of course, Naegi probably wouldn’t have wanted Kirigiri to die, either.

The knowledge slithered deep into Togami’s soul, sheathing his heart with a grimy coat of darkness. Naegi had believed in Kirigiri until the end, trusting her too much to vote against her. Even now, sitting in Naegi’s dorm room with murder running through his head, Togami could feel the weight of Naegi’s reproachful eyes on him. He wouldn’t understand.

No. He couldn’t understand… because he was gone. He couldn’t see anything that happened now, couldn’t feel anything about what happened. Even if Togami’s skin crawled with the guilt of disappointing the boy he loved, it was nothing but a cruel illusion conjured by his own mind. Here in this place, surrounded by objects Naegi had touched, breathing air that he’d breathed… it was almost possible to convince himself that some part of Naegi still remained to care for the friends
he’d left behind.

Friends… like the girl who’d helped the mastermind orchestrate his murder. Naegi had died believing that Kirigiri was his friend.

Togami couldn’t stand it another second. The impossible pressure of Naegi’s eyes on him, the thought of everything he might have wanted, the what-ifs and the maybes and the might-have-beens, it was all too much to bear. He’d come to this room for some measure of sanctuary… but there was no peace to be found here.

Somehow he found the strength to raise his head… to drag himself to his feet… to stumble unseeingly towards the door. He had to leave this room. If he didn’t… if he stayed here, in a place where he could almost feel Naegi’s kindhearted wishes… what might he decide to do?

Stepping out into the hallway didn’t offer any relief. Naegi’s presence felt further off than it had when he’d felt the boy’s sadness at his choices… but there was no happiness in that. Some dark, twisted piece of himself ached to turn around, to lock himself back in the room, to drown himself in the lie of Naegi’s existence until reality faded to nothing. There would be an escape of sorts in doing that, a kind of freedom from this nightmare…

But it would leave the mastermind to claim victory unopposed.

He couldn’t let that happen, not if he wanted to retain any semblance of the person he was.

The person he’d been. The person who’d let Naegi die.

The opposing thoughts spun round and round through his mind until his head ached with dizzy confusion. He would have given so much to be able to be certain about anything… certain in the way he’d been before Hope’s Peak, before Naegi, before failing in every way that mattered.

He felt his feet begin to shuffle forward, carrying him down the hall and away from Naegi’s room in some instinctive attempt at self-defense. It wouldn’t help… not when Naegi would be just as absent anywhere else in the school… but when one place was no different from another, what did it matter where he went? He didn’t bother to stop the movement, letting his feet carry him where they would through the dark and silent halls.

“Think he’s going to look for a weapon?”

Junko’s bright words crackled through Naegi with all the force of a sudden electric shock. No simple request for his attention could have torn his gaze away from Byakuya’s empty eyes — but the cavalier insinuation of murderous intent had him glaring at the girl before he could think the better of it.

“Oh? What’s this?” She tilted her head, tapping one finger against her cheek like she was confused by his expression. “Are you upset our game might end so soon?”

Naegi gritted his teeth and did his best to ignore her, turning his attention back to the monitors. He couldn’t let himself listen to her — no matter what Junko tried to imply, there were plenty of
perfectly innocent reasons for Byakuya to leave the dorms in the middle of the night. Probably he was just hungry, since the confrontation with Kyoko and Jill had stopped him from finding any dinner before the cafeteria closed.

But when Byakuya went past the hall to the storage room without so much as a pause, it seemed clear that no matter how hungry he had to be, food wasn’t on his mind.

“I wonder what kind of plan he’s gonna go for?” Junko mused, her knife-edged words easily piercing through Naegi’s best attempts to block them out. “Make it look like an accident? Frame one of the others? Ooh, maybe he’ll fake a suicide, that’s always a classic!”

How could she sound so cheerful, so innocently excited, when they were talking about people’s lives? Not just anyone, but two of the last people left that he cared for most in the world… and she was talking to him about it like they were nothing more than actors playing out scripted roles in a movie. Like none of it mattered… like caring about it was ridiculous. Was that what despair had done to her?

“Aw, look at that… guess I was wrong. He’s not looking for a weapon after all.”

Naegi blinked, thrown off-balance for a moment before he realized what Junko meant. Byakuya had made his way up to the second floor, and relief flooded through him when he realized his boyfriend had to be heading for the library. That was good… compared to the many other awful possibilities, it had to be good. Byakuya liked libraries, he found them peaceful… maybe he’d find what he needed there, even if he hadn’t in the dorms.

Although considering the state of the library when he’d last seen it, that room might not be very calming just now. Naegi’s gaze flickered towards the screen showing the library interior — and ice gripped him, draining the blood from his face.

“Looks like he’s going to kill her with his bare hands!” Junko burst into hysterical laughter as Byakuya opened the library door to find Kyoko kneeling in the center of the destruction.
Chapter 304

Togami hadn’t consciously meant to head for the library… but when he’d seen the doors looming in front of him, it had made a kind of sense. With his head too full of unfamiliar thoughts and his heart too sore for peace, his only hope of refuge lay in books. He’d always found libraries calming, a sanctuary of sorts where he could gather himself to face the threats of the world around him… and for all the terrible memories marring the Hope’s Peak library, there had been good moments there as well. Maybe if he could lose himself in written words, just for a few minutes, it would give him the chance to regain some semblance of control.

But when he opened the door and saw the girl he hated most, that hope turned to dust in his heart.

She had the nerve to kneel right in the middle of the floor, right where Naegi had fallen, her dark gloved fingers skittering across the ground like spider legs. She’d been peering down at something, squinting at the ground from just inches away — but the creak of the door broke her concentration. She looked up with a start as he entered, and Togami found himself meeting her widening silver eyes.

Why was she here? Why was she pawing at the ground where a body had fallen, as if they’d been called to another one of the mastermind’s investigations? There had been a murder, yes, but there was no mystery here for her to uncover. She knew the answers, knew the truth, knew so much more than she ever shared with anyone — and now she wanted to play detective with all the suffering of Naegi’s final hours?

He didn’t even realize he’d lunged forward until she sprang to her feet to meet him, wary mask descending on her face once more.

Togami stopped short, recognizing the stance of a fighter prepared to defend herself. Her talent might not have been a physical one, but she’d obviously had training at some point. For all he knew, she was another member of Fenrir, just like Ikusaba had apparently been — and if so, he was in no shape to tangle with her one-on-one. He forced his fingers to unclench from the fists they’d formed, and he could see her eyes dart down to track the motions.

The tension didn’t leave her posture, but a touch of caution disappeared from Kirigiri’s eyes when she saw his hands relax. Or at least… that was how it appeared. But he knew just how skilled she was at hiding her thoughts. Why would she let glimpses of them cross her face now?

Togami supposed that she had to be playing some kind of twisted game, that there was some manipulation in her actions that he could unravel if he tried to analyze them… but even the idea of the effort it would take made his stomach twist. He didn’t have it in him to play games with her, not now. The machinations that once came to him as easily as breathing had become more than he could bear. All he could think now, as he stared at the girl in front of him, was that she had no right to be alive. Not when Naegi was dead.

He didn’t want to play games with her any longer. He just wanted her gone.

But… his eyes flickered up at the cameras, then at her defensive stance. He couldn’t achieve it… not when she was prepared, not with the mastermind at her back. He couldn’t rid his world of her couldn’t match the layers of deception tangled through her words… what could he do?

What could Naegi have done?
That thought hurt… not the dull ache of not knowing, but a sharp sting of knowing all too well. Naegi would do what he’d always done, and reacted to the girl who’d all but killed him with kindness and honesty. Togami knew that he didn’t have kindness in him… hadn’t had it even when Naegi had been here at his side… but that still left another path that he could see.

“You have no right to be here.”

There was almost no venom in the words… they didn’t need it, not when they had the all the force of the blunt, unvarnished truth. She quirked an eyebrow up like she was waiting for him to elaborate, to fall into the same pattern of accusation and hate that he’d taken so many times before — but he wouldn’t give her the satisfaction. He’d told her the truth, rather than letting her dance around it with lies and subterfuge. Let her figure out how to cope with it.

It took her a moment, but eventually she must have realized that the ball was in her court. She gave a one-shouldered shrug and crossed her arms. “I suppose it’s fortunate that the decision isn’t yours to make. And considering that you’re here as well, I doubt you intend to reinstate Celeste’s rule about nighttime.”

Togami’s lip curled up in an expression that was more snarl than his usual superior sneer. “I’m not talking about the rules. After everything that happened to him here, you don’t get to mess around in this room!”

“So I’m not allowed to go anywhere that Naegi has been? That will rather severely limit my movements.” Kirigiri reached up to tug at her braid before remembering it had been a casualty of Jill’s assault earlier that evening. She settled for trying to tuck the lopsided remaining strands behind one ear. “In any case, that would defeat the purpose.”

In spite of himself, Togami’s eyebrows snapped together at her words. “What are you talking about?”

“Curious?” A hint of a smile twisted one corner of her mouth. “Well, you should know that this is hardly the time. So if you’ll excuse me…” She brushed past him, and before he could decide whether to block her path, she was out the door. “I think I need a bath before the night ends,” she said over her shoulder as she disappeared down the hall.

Togami frowned after her. He knew she of all people wouldn’t have forgotten that the water was off at night… so any reference to baths had to mean the bathhouse. And now that he thought about it… she’d tried to suggest that they talk in the bathhouse earlier as well, when the four remaining students had met in the cafeteria. Why would the mastermind’s pet want to talk in a place where the mastermind couldn’t eavesdrop?

Why did she ever do anything? Togami shook his head sharply, trying to dismiss her from his thoughts. He had no intention of following her, so it didn’t matter what she’d wanted. She wouldn’t get it. Instead of worrying over her nonsense, he turned back to the library.

But whatever urge for peace had called him here, there was no chance that he would find it. No matter where he looked in the library, all he could see was the spot where Naegi had fallen, where Kirigiri had been. What could she have wanted there? After everything she’d done, she could hardly do anything worse to Naegi.

Could she?

Togami closed his eyes for a moment, then gathered enough courage to stride over and kneel down in the same place he’d found Naegi unconscious and bloody. It was exactly where Kirigiri had
been… but even so, he couldn’t see what she might have been examining. Yes, there were traces of blood left on the ground where Jill hadn’t finished cleaning, but what did that signify? Even if she hadn’t been around when Naegi had been injured, it wasn’t as though Jill’s attack had been a secret. Anyone who’d looked at Naegi could have seen the results. She hardly needed to poke around the library to see that much.

He glanced around the library again, trying to see if there was anything else she might have been after… but it could have been anything. Who knew what would draw her attention? He could see too much from here, too many reminders of everything that had happened. The door to the archives… the destroyed bookshelves… the scattered cleaning supplies Jill had left behind when she’d been attacked and imprisoned… the gleam of scissors she’d left behind…

*The gleam of scissors.*

Togami froze, eyes locked on the silver blades tucked so innocently among the cleaning supplies. Even from a distance he could see the evidence of scouring on the sharp edges, scratches where Jill must have tried to scrub away the dried blood. Had she left them to dry after cleaning them, or had they been abandoned as too damaged for further use? He couldn’t tell… but either way, it was clear that she hadn’t come back to the library in search of them today.

He stood and crossed the room, seizing the scissors and tucking them into the waistband of his sweatpants. Once he was sure they were fully concealed from sight, a dark smile tugged at the corners of his lips, and he turned to head for the library door. Maybe he had a reason to join Kirigiri in the bathhouse after all.
For a moment, Naegi had almost believed it would be all right. Byakuya had looked so fierce when he’d first found Kyoko in the library — but then he’d stopped, getting a grip on himself and restraining whatever impulse had made him lunge at her. He hadn’t attacked, and neither had she. They’d talked. Sure, it hadn’t been the friendly rapport they’d once shared, but it also hadn’t been the poisonous malice of their earlier fight in the cafeteria. Kyoko had been more open than Naegi had seen her since the game had begun, even going so far as to extend an olive branch in the form of further discussion. It could have meant so much.

And then Byakuya had picked up the scissors.

Nausea coiled through Naegi’s stomach as he watched Byakuya hide the gleaming silver blades. He knew all too well just how sharp those scissors were — the relentless pain twisting up his left arm wouldn’t let him forget it for long. Sharp enough to slice through human flesh like butter… sharp enough to kill. Why had Byakuya taken scissors made to be weapons?

There was only one answer, no matter how many times the question echoed in Naegi’s mind. Byakuya was going to accept the olive branch Kyoko had offered… and use it as an opportunity to kill her.

Or at least he’d thought about it. But thinking wasn’t doing. Taking the scissors wasn’t the same as using them, no matter how cruelly Byakuya had smiled when he’d hidden them away. He might have had horrible thoughts, but that didn’t mean he would act on them. He could still change his mind — and he would, Naegi just had to trust that he would. Byakuya could still resist the pull towards darkness, turn aside, choose to be the person that Naegi knew he still was —

“So you think he’s gonna try to frame Little Miss Mass Murderer?”

Junko’s words hit Naegi like a slap to the face, reminding him of all the fears he’d nearly managed to convince himself were groundless. She didn’t believe that Byakuya would change his mind, that was for sure.

Naegi looked over at her, lounging back with one leg draped over the armrest of her chair. She seemed completely at ease, like the screens around them were showing her scenes from a movie she knew by heart. She’d even managed to scrounge up snacks from somewhere, twirling a stick of pocky between two fingers like a long cigarette.

She grinned when she noticed him watching. “Want some? I’d toss you the box, but it’s not like you’re gonna be able to think fast like that.” She leaned forward, flicking the tip of her pocky stick in his direction. “But hey, if you want a bite of mine, I’d just love to help out!”

Naegi couldn’t stop the grimace of disgust that crossed his face at the thought of sharing food with her. Junko laughed, leaning back in her chair. “That’s fine — more for me! And it’s probably better if you aren’t distracted, anyway. I wouldn’t want you to miss a minute of your darling’s big moment!”

Naegi glanced back at the monitors, where Byakuya hurried from screen to screen as he followed Kyoko downstairs. Yes, there was determination in his eyes — but that could still mean anything. Junko didn’t know for sure what would happen yet, no matter how certain she acted.

“Still telling yourself I’m wrong?” Junko asked, her words sounding almost sympathetic. “Well,
you’ll see soon, sweetie. You’ll know just how it feels when the people you love turn out to be so terribly disappointing.”

Naegi tried to ignore her, keeping his eyes locked on the monitors… but he couldn’t shake the feeling that instead of watching the scenes of the rest of the school, Junko was watching him.

Togami was almost shocked to make it all the way to the bathhouse without being stopped by the mastermind. After all, they couldn’t possibly have missed the moment when he’d taken Jill’s scissors, not when the cameras had every inch of the library under surveillance. They had to know he’d armed himself.

But that was all he’d done so far. And it would take a very clever plan indeed to deflect suspicion from himself if he, Jill, and Ogami ended up in a trial to find Kirigiri’s killer. The mastermind could be banking on the fact that he’d need far more than a weapon to pull off such a feat.

Well, if they wanted to believe that he was still playing by their rules, he was more than happy to take advantage of their misconceptions. Togami strode determinedly for the bathhouse entrance, running over possible strategies in his head. He’d need to be careful, that much was certain If she got a hint of his intentions before he acted, this chance would be lost. He’d have to wait until she was distracted…

But when Togami stepped through the bathhouse door, the vague plans disappeared from his mind. He stared around the changing room, almost unable to believe that it was the same place where they’d spoken to Alter Ego and conferred away from the mastermind’s gaze.

A forest of fluttering scraps of paper filled the room, pinned to every available surface and even dangling from the ceiling, covered with multicolored scribbles of unintelligible writing. Long stretches of string zigzagged haphazardly from point to point, and he could hardly see a way to enter the room without getting tangled in one or another of them.

And right in the middle of the chaos was Kirigiri, arms crossed and a faint smile on her lips. “So you decided to show up after all.”

Togami stared at her in disbelief. “What the hell is all of this?”

That wiped the smile off her face as she glanced around the room. “Ah. It must look rather confusing to you.”

“When is this what you’ve been doing all day?” Togami demanded. “Turning the one room where the mastermind can’t see us into a mess?”

“It isn’t a mess,” she said calmly, which was a baldfaced lie if Togami had ever heard one. “These are my notes about everything that’s happened to us since we woke up here.”

“Notes?” Togami’s eyebrows shot up, and he reached out to grab the nearest piece of paper. He squinted down at it, but of course the writing seemed to be in some sort of code. In the center, the letters $CF — AE$ were written in blue, while below that she’d added a smaller $3d??$ in green.

It made no sense — until suddenly it did. Togami looked up and smirked at Kirigiri. “Chihiro Fujisaki created Alter Ego in approximately three days.”
She gave him a single sharp nod. “Making a fully functional AI is an incredibly impressive accomplishment, even for the Ultimate Programmer. The fact that he was able to do it so quickly, when he didn’t believe that AI technology had advanced enough for Monokuma to be self-operational…” She shrugged. “It’s another unanswered question.”

Togami glanced back at the paper in his hand, strings connecting it to the rest of the web. He had the sudden urge to yank on it, to send the entire complex structure crashing down — but he couldn’t quite bring himself to do so, not when he didn’t know what it would mean. He released the paper gently instead, letting it swing back to its place in the tangle. “So what? Why waste your time writing down questions?”

“Because I needed to know where I went wrong.” Kirigiri closed her eyes for a moment — but before Togami could even decide whether this was the opportunity he needed, she opened them again. “I don’t think that I normally make a physical map of my thoughts and conclusions — it’s dangerous to leave so much evidence sitting around for anyone to find. But when I realized that one of my major conclusions was incorrect… I knew that I needed a clearer method of determining what I can trust.”

Togami frowned, staring at the detective through the tangle of strings and paper between them. He knew better than to believe a word that came out of her mouth — but he couldn’t see why she’d go to all the effort of covering the bathhouse with notes just so she could lie to him. He had to be missing something… but he couldn’t see what. “So why tell me about it?”

“Oh? After all the questions you’ve asked me, you’re complaining about getting answers?” Kirigiri shook her head. “I can’t act on my own any longer. Perhaps I never should have tried to do it in the first place… but then, I didn’t have much choice. The truth is that when I woke up here in Hope’s Peak three weeks ago… I didn’t have any memories of my past at all.”
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Togami stared at Kirigiri, trying to make sense of what she’d just said to him. “No memories — you’re claiming to have amnesia?”

“That’s right.” Kirigiri met his eyes without flinching, her impassive mask locked in place. “It’s not as bad now, of course — a few things have come back to me as I’ve searched the school for answers. But when I first woke up, my mind was a complete blank. The only thing I knew for certain was my name, Kyoko Kirigiri.”

“That is the most ridiculous story I’ve ever heard.” Togami glared across the room at her. “You can’t possibly expect me to believe that.”

“Which would be why I haven’t said anything about it until now,” Kirigiri said calmly. “I’m well aware of how unbelievable it sounds, and I know that no one here has any reason to trust my claims.”

Naegi would have — the certainty roared through Togami’s mind with all the fury of an inferno. He could see the naive, trusting boy nodding along with every poisonous word, sympathizing with her manufactured plight — and it was all he could do to keep his hands from reaching for the scissors hidden at his waist.

To distract himself from thoughts that would ruin any chance he had of succeeding, Togami reached for one of the hundred questions roiling through his mind. “Did you try to feed him this pack of lies?”

“Him — you mean Naegi?” Kirigiri shook her head. “I never intended to confide in anyone about my situation, not if I had any other options.” She must have been able to see the suspicion in his eyes even from across the room, because she let a small sigh escape her. “Don’t get angry about what I didn’t say to Naegi — the lies that I did tell him are more than bad enough.”

Togami froze. He knew that Kirigiri had lied to Naegi about something, he’d never doubted it for a second — but he hadn’t expected her to admit it. She’d always covered up her lies until now, cloaking herself in the safety of plausible deniability… why would she change her strategy now?

“I know you don’t believe me,” she went on, not giving him enough time to decide how to react. “That’s fine. It’s better than trusting me too much. The mastermind can predict my movements too well for that.”

“Are you choosing to be incoherent, or is it coming to you naturally?” Togami said sharply when she trailed off into silence. He hadn’t come to the bathhouse to hear what she had to say — but the disjointed half-explanation grated painfully against the raw edges of his mind. “If you’re going to talk to me, make sense.”

“Then you’re willing to listen?” Kirigiri smiled, and it burned to know that he’d done something to make her pleased. “Good. Then you’ll need to come closer. There’s no point in having this conversation away from the cameras if we have to shout across the room.”

She gestured to his right, and following the motion, Togami could see a narrow gap winding through the mess of string and paper. It was a path of sorts, leading into the center of the maze where Kirigiri was waiting. He almost wanted to turn and walk away, just to wipe that revolting smile off her face. What right did she have to smile when Naegi would never smile again?
But the hard line of Jill’s scissors cutting into his side reminded Togami about why he’d come here in the first place. So what if Kirigiri was happy? Let her be — soon she wouldn’t be able to smile about anything else again. Strengthening his resolve, Togami gritted his teeth and entered the tangled web.

The path wasn’t much of one, forcing him to edge past branching knots or duck beneath low-hanging snarls. Every unexpected brush of paper against his skin made him want to rip the whole thing away and ruin whatever Kirigiri meant for it to do… but Togami knew that annoying her wouldn’t accomplish anything. He continued without a word, letting the record of her thoughts wrap its way around him until he reached the girl herself.

Without the draping strings and notes obstructing his vision, Togami could see her more clearly than he’d ever wanted… and he couldn’t help but notice that the iron mask of control that she used so often had begun to crack. The dark circles lurking beneath her eyes and the lines around her mouth reminded him too much of the trial, when he and Naegi both had worn the same marks of exhaustion on their own faces. Was it possible to fake physical signs of fatigue? And even if it was, why would she bother faking it while she stayed hidden away here? But… it couldn’t be genuine either… because what reason would the mastermind’s agent have to lose sleep?

She had to notice his scrutiny, but she didn’t comment. She just nodded once for some reason that presumably made sense in her own mind if not to the rest of the world, and dropped down to sit cross-legged on the floor. After a moment’s hesitation, Togami did the same, making sure that he stayed just out of arm’s reach from her.

“You told me to make sense,” Kirigiri said, before he even had to prompt her to begin, “but that’s a more difficult request than you might expect. I’ve been trying to make sense of everything I know since the moment I woke up.”

“With your memories mysteriously gone.” Togami didn’t bother to try keeping the derision from his voice — she might as well know he wouldn’t be an easy mark for her lies.

Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to faze her. “That’s right. I didn’t even know that we were meant to be students at Hope’s Peak Academy until I ran into Enoshima outside the classroom where I woke up. And even after I understood the situation, I still had no way of knowing how much of what I’d been told was true. I couldn’t trust anything or anyone.”

“And what, you think that makes you special?” Harsh laughter tore its way free of his throat. “Every single one of us was in the same position.”

“Maybe… but I didn’t know that for certain.” Her eyes fell away from his, and she reached up to twist her fingers through one of the remaining locks of long hair left where her braid had been. “The only path I could see available to me was to search for information and solve as many of the mysteries in this school as I could.”

“Very appropriate for the Ultimate Detective.” Togami tried to smirk, but tension kept his mouth from twisting.

“Yes… appropriate and predictable. Whoever is behind this must have known that I’d start investigating.” She sighed. “They’ve been one step ahead of me the entire time. Even when I thought I was making progress, they always had a new way to stop me.”

“It’s almost as though they had some way to watch every move you made.”

“I’m not the one who’s been known to forget about the cameras.”
The sudden reminder of his time with Naegi, broadcast to both the world and the other students, struck him like a slap across the face, knocking away the retort he might have made. All he could do was stare at her, mouth open to speak words that he no longer knew.

“That was… uncalled for.” Kirigiri grimaced. “I’m sorry. I know it’s know excuse, but… it isn’t easy for me to speak so openly.”

Togami didn’t trust himself to reply… not when the only answer he wanted to give would come in the form of silver blades. He forced his mouth closed with an audible click and dropped his gaze to the ground between the two of them. If he couldn’t see her face, he might be able to bear her words more easily.

“Well… regardless of whether it was accurate or not, I suspected that the mastermind knew more than they could have learned through cameras alone,” Kirigiri went on after a moment’s pause. “And I know you thought the same. Like you, I’d considered the possibility that the mastermind had planted a spy in our group almost from the start… but a spy wasn’t the only potential danger. There was a chance, however slim, that the mastermind had infiltrated our group themselves.”

“I thought of that as well,” Togami snapped, unwilling to let her think she’d outsmarted him in any way. “I simply dismissed it as a possibility, since it would have been a highly inefficient method of observing us.”

“Yes, that’s true,” Kirigiri agreed. “I did say it seemed unlikely. But I couldn’t ignore the possibility that the mastermind might value the ability to influence our actions directly over the knowledge gained from the cameras.”

“So everyone was a potential enemy and you trusted no one,” Togami summarized impatiently. “Fine. Get to the point.”

“No, that’s not quite it,” she said. “Trusting no one would have been ideal — but the killing game made it impossible. As soon as the first murder occurred, I realized that the class trials would present a significant drain on my time and attention, making it even more difficult to get anywhere with my own investigations. Ignoring them wasn’t an option, since failing to identify the true culprit would mean death — so I had to make sure there was someone else who could get us safely through the trials.”

Togami saw what she meant instantly — and it made his fingers curl into angry fists. “Naegi — you’re talking about Naegi.”

“That’s right. I thought that out of everyone here, it would be safest to rely on him.” Kirigiri took a deep breath. “Until it wasn’t.”
As Togami considered the meaning of Kirigiri’s words, a dark scowl spread across his face. So something had made it unsafe for her to use Naegi as a pawn? He was fairly sure he knew what she meant — and he didn’t like it at all. “If you expect me to feel guilty that my efforts to protect Naegi from your manipulations made your life inconvenient, you’re destined for disappointment.”

But Kirigiri shook her head. “That isn’t quite what I meant. Your interference was certainly an annoyance, but on its own it wasn’t a real obstacle to my objective. No, the real problem was that with the two of you acting as a united front, the nature of our imprisonment here changed.”

A frown creased Togami’s face as he tried to follow her logic. “It’s not as though we were the first people to feel some sort of affection for one another. Ogami and Asahina paired off from the day we arrived, not to mention whatever bizarre bonding ritual Ishimaru and Owada had.”

“Affection isn’t enough, that’s true,” Kirigiri agreed calmly. “But trust is a different story. The killing game is constructed in such a way as to pit all of us against one another, making trust the most dangerous risk anyone could take. It should have been impossible to have real trust in anyone in this situation — but it looked like the two of you did. By the time Celeste’s trial ended, the rest of us could see that you and Naegi had complete trust in one another.”

Togami wouldn’t have put it in those words — but Naegi’s voice echoed through his head, an inescapable reminder of the first night the two of them had spent together.

*I know you didn’t really want to kill me… because I trust you not to.*

You trust me too, or you wouldn’t be here.

Naegi had been right. Even in those first few days, when Togami had still struggled to deny what he felt… the trust had been there. Even though he’d rarely trusted anyone else in his life, even though it was a terrifying risk, even though it made no sense… he’d trusted Naegi. And he’d known that Naegi trusted him in return.

Not that it had done them any good. They’d been humiliated by Monokuma, targeted by Celeste, and doubted by the other surviving students. It was just like he’d always believed — trust was nothing but a point of vulnerability, a potential wound waiting to cripple them.

Except… that wasn’t how Kirigiri had said it. The way she’d said the words… it had sounded like she thought that the trust between Togami and Naegi was more threatening to the other students than to the boys themselves. It was the same sort of rubbish that the other students had been spouting when they’d forced that ludicrous separation… and it didn’t make any more sense now than it had at the time.

Togami narrowed his eyes at Kirigiri as he considered it, trying to figure out what she meant by such a ridiculous statement. “So what if we trusted each other? All it meant was that we both had our hands tied when it came to the killing game. I don’t see how that affects anyone else.”

“Then you aren’t thinking about it hard enough.” Her words turned needle-sharp — which in turn brought the unsettling realization that until this moment, the usual edge to her words had been absent. “You’ve always been quick enough to see potential threats in everyone around you — are you incapable of turning that thinking around on yourself?”

The challenge to his pride was such an obvious ploy that he could hardly even call it manipulation
— but he let it work anyway. Left to himself, the clinging fog of grief dragged him down into a mire of misery — but that was dangerous, with Kirigiri here in front of him. If he was going to talk to her, let alone attempt to enact any kind of vengeance, then he needed his mind at its sharpest. He let her question sting his neurons into action, sparking fresh refusal to let any accusation that he might be incapable stand unanswered.

So then… would he have seen it as a threat, if it had been another pair in his and Naegi’s place? What if Ogami hadn’t spent those first days in the mastermind’s pocket, but had been one of them from the start? If she and Asahina could have relied on one another the way that he and Naegi had… if they’d been able to trust one another freely without the seed of doubt the mastermind had planted between them… what would their relationship have looked like? And what would he have thought?

He wouldn’t have trusted them. It was almost too obvious to consider — of course he wouldn’t have trusted a pair who’d claimed to forge such a strong connection in the middle of a killing game. Even now, even with the consequences of it etched through his broken heart, there was still a part of his mind that couldn’t quite believe it had really occurred. Without the undeniable proof he’d experienced, he wouldn’t have hesitated to call such people liars.

The only question would be what lie was being told. Who was the relationship meant to fool — the other students, or one of the two themselves? After all, if someone was planning a murder, what better victim could they choose than a person who trusted them unconditionally? And if they played their role as grieving survivor well enough to convince the other students, it would be an easy path to win the ensuing trial.

But that was where the whole scheme fell apart — the relationship had to be believed for it to work. If anyone had even a shred of doubt about the sincerity of the trust, then the survivor would be the first suspect when their partner turned up dead. And much as Togami had found it irritating, the other students had initially had nothing but doubts about the sincerity of his affections for Naegi. Kirigiri could pretend she’d seen their relationship as a threat, but that very suspicion made it impossible for the trust to be used in the killing game.

But what if that wasn’t what she meant?

The killing game wasn’t the real threat of this imprisonment. How many times had Naegi tried to make him understand that? It didn’t matter what the other students did during the game — it was all noise, insignificant filler meant to obscure the fact that the mastermind had always been the real enemy. Why was it so easy for him to forget that? Why did he always see every other danger before the one that mattered?

No… no, he couldn’t think like that, not with her watching him. He had to focus, or he’d be lost. After all, she couldn’t have meant the threat of the mastermind — not when she was on the mastermind’s side herself.

Although her claims seemed to be founded on the premise that she wasn’t on the mastermind’s side and never had been. Even if he knew that had to be nonsense… it might just be related to the point she was trying to make. She’d insisted that he think about the threats that he might have seen if he’d been watching a relationship from the outside… and that would have made the mastermind an enemy rather than an ally.

Would he have thought differently about a pair who trusted one another, if he’d been focused on the mastermind instead of the game? Would it have made a difference? It couldn’t have, not really… not when trust among the students would have been an even more serious threat to the mastermind than to the ones playing the game. If anything, he would have expected the
mastermind to take more serious action than humiliating assemblies and mocking mind games. He hadn’t really thought about it before, but he supposed that the mastermind could have done so much worse if they’d wanted.

So why hadn’t they?

An answer popped into his head, but it was so absurd that laughter choked its way into his throat. It trembled against his lips with all the force of hysteria, and he knew, he knew that if he let it start it would never end. The only way to stop it was to say the words, to get them out of his head and heart.

“Are you suggesting that you thought we were working for the mastermind?”

But as soon as he said it, he knew it wasn’t right. The words didn’t fit into the space she’d left, didn’t make a mark on her iron-cold face. The words themselves were wrong… but the idea wasn’t. He could see what it would take to make them right.

“You thought that I was working for the mastermind.”
“You thought that I was working for the mastermind.”

Just saying the words made Togami’s skin crawl. The idea of working for anyone was unpleasant enough on its own, but when he thought about putting himself in thrall to the mastermind — the person who’d brought him here, the one behind every horrible event that had torn his world apart during the past few weeks, the one who’d murdered Naegi — he could feel the revulsion shaking through his entire body. And not only had Kirigiri had the nerve to suggest it, she’d dragged him through the train of thought that made such an outrageous conclusion look logical.

“Of course I suspected it.” Kirigiri met the glare he threw at her without so much as a flinch. “After the fourth floor opened, anyone who thought about the situation would have seen the possibility.”

Anyone except him — she didn’t have to add the phrase for Togami to hear it in her words. How dare she imply that he hadn’t put any thought into their situation? He’d done nothing but think ever since the third trial had ended, and —

Wait. That wasn’t what she’d said… not quite. The trials drew his memory as the most obvious events to divide up the days spent in this monotonous prison… but she’d actually referred to the moment the fourth floor had opened.

After the fourth floor had opened… that was the day after the trial had ended. A single night wouldn’t normally be enough to make much difference… but that particular night was a different story. That was the night Kirigiri had manipulated Naegi into visiting the hidden room… the night Togami had first realized how much of a threat she could be to the boy who’d won his heart. That had been the moment he’d understood Naegi needed to be protected…

And according to Kirigiri, it was the moment she’d seen their relationship as a danger.

If he believed her story, anyway. She was a liar, he had to keep reminding himself of that crucial fact. He’d almost let her story draw him in, almost let himself forget the one thing he had to believe… she was the mastermind’s agent who’d forced Naegi to die for her crimes.

But that didn’t mean everything she’d said had to be false. The best lies were built on a foundation of truth… and it made too much sense to see that moment as a turning point. They’d all chosen their allegiances after that night… and kind, trusting Naegi had been caught in the middle of it all. He’d tried so hard to balance everyone — but the moment he’d shown a hint of loyalty to someone other than Kirigiri, she’d turned on him. Naegi had been so hurt by her refusal to hear him out… and she’d used those feelings of guilt to do even worse the next day.

“And I suppose you think this explains why you forced me away from him,” Togami sneered, pouring as much venom as he could into the words in the hopes of masking his grief. “You weren’t being cruel and petty, you just wanted to protect innocent little Naegi from the mastermind’s big bad spy!”

“Call it whatever you want.” She shrugged like it didn’t matter to her either way, and try as he might, Togami couldn’t tell whether or not it was an act. “I just knew that I had to investigate your relationship with Naegi if I was going to solve any of the mysteries facing me.” She hesitated for a
moment, one finger tapping a rapid beat against her knee. “I... I did tell myself that this investigation would benefit Naegi as well as myself... that it would provide the impartial evaluation he wasn’t capable of doing for himself... but my primary goal wasn’t so altruistic. If it had been only his own safety in question... I doubt I would have intervened.”

No, of course not. She wouldn’t have lifted a finger to help Naegi... even though Naegi would have done it for her. Togami had to bite down on the inside of his cheek to stop the words from boiling past his lips... but even so, he couldn’t stop thinking them. Naegi would have done anything in his power to help a friend if he’d thought for a moment they might be in danger, regardless of the killing game occurring around them. He was the only person who —

No... that wasn’t right, was it? Naegi hadn’t been the only one who’d tried to protect a friend in the middle of the killing game. Hadn’t Asahina done the same thing just a few days before? She’d fought to protect Ogami, even if she hadn’t been as clever or capable as Naegi. They’d both fought for someone else... and they’d both been murdered for it.

That was what the mastermind had done from the start, wasn’t it? They’d created a game where thinking about yourself and your own life was the only guaranteed path to survival. Their every move had only reinforced the danger of trusting anyone else... and no matter what excuses Kirigiri might invent now, she couldn’t deny that her actions had fed directly into that goal. How could she expect him to believe anything she said now, when so much of what she’d done had aided the mastermind’s agenda?

“In any case, I knew I didn’t have much time to act on my decision,” Kirigiri went on after a moment of silence. “The situation with Ogami was clearly coming to a head, and I wanted to find an answer before we were forced into another trial.”

“Except Fukawa acted before you could, and you’ve been suspicious of me ever since,” Togami filled in impatiently. “And since you couldn’t find an answer, everything you’ve done has been to figure out if I’m —”

“No, that’s not it.” Kirigiri cut him off flatly. “I did find an answer — not incontrovertible evidence, but enough to satisfy myself that you were unlikely to be part of the mastermind’s team after all.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her, trying to figure out where she was going with these claims. Up until now, he’d been certain about her motive for making these claims — she knew he suspected her true identity and wanted to give him a plausible explanation for why it wasn’t true. If she could convince him there was another reason that she’d been acting so suspiciously, he wouldn’t have grounds to continue insisting she was a double agent — and what better reason could there be than to claim she’d thought he was the suspicious one? But now she was undermining her own strategy... and he couldn’t see why.

“So what exactly was this evidence?” he demanded. “And how did you get hold of it? I don’t recall giving you anything of the sort.”

“It isn’t anything physical. Call it an absence of proof.” She sighed. “A spy would feed information to the mastermind... so I gave you a hint about my investigation to determine whether the mastermind would act on it.”

“A hint?” Togami quickly sorted through his memories of the time he’d been separated from Naegi until a possibility leapt out at him. “Ah — you mean the morning that you dragged me to the third floor and wrote some nonsense about the headmaster?”
“It was a sign that I had more information than I should have,” Kirigiri corrected him. “And it was in direct contradiction to the data that Alter Ego uncovered. You were the only one I told, and at the time there shouldn’t have been anyone else you could confide in… so I waited to see if the mastermind found out.”

Togami stared at her, trying to fit the pieces together in his head. It wasn’t a bad plan — if he’d been trying to unmask a hidden spy, he might have tried a similar ploy. “So that was enough to convince you I couldn’t possibly be a spy?”

“Among other things,” Kirigiri said. “Your behavior, for one — it was a little too unbelievable that the person who declared he would win the killing game in the first moments that we learned about it would make such a dramatic about-face to the person who protected Naegi when he was injured and defenseless. And…” Her fingers drifted upward to tangle in the broken strands of hair where her braid had been. “And no matter how I tried, I couldn’t find any hint of falsehood in your feelings towards him. My ability to read people isn’t infallible, but it is good… and everything I saw said that you genuinely cared for Naegi.”

Togami didn’t want to hear that from her, not after everything she’d done. “Then if you were so convinced, why did you keep coming after us?”

“Because you weren’t the only one I told a secret to during that separation.” Her already-quiet voice dropped even lower, until Togami had to lean forward to catch the words. “Naegi and I helped Alter Ego try to break into the school network through the hidden room… and Alter Ego ended up destroyed.”

Togami blinked at the apparent non-sequitur. “Yes, because the mastermind obviously noticed the attempt. What does that have to do with anything?”

“It made me wonder.” Kirigiri dropped her eyes to the ground between them, staring at it like it held the answers she’d been searching for. “I didn’t want to think about it… I didn’t want to believe it could be true… but I had to consider the possibility.”

A terrible sense of dread pricked across the back of his neck. “What are you talking about?”

“The possibility that Naegi was the one working with the mastermind.” Kirigiri’s emotionless mask twisted into something darker, a nightmarish rictus of remembered terror. “I wanted to be wrong. I wanted it to be nothing more than a figment of my imagination. But I didn’t know… and I had to be sure.” She took a breath, and Togami could hear her shaking as she exhaled. “I gave him a test, the same kind that I gave you. I told him a pack of lies about meeting Mukuro Ikusaba, knowing that the mastermind would have no choice but to act on that information. And after I told him… Ikusaba turned up dead.”

It felt as though her words existed in some other reality, where their logic couldn’t touch him. From some far-off distance, Togami heard a voice that sounded strangely like his own ask, “You mean you seriously thought that Naegi was working for the mastermind?”

“It was one possibility.” Kirigiri’s words were no more than a whisper. “But the other one, the one I wanted to disprove… was that Naegi was the mastermind himself.”

Chapter End Notes
Scheduling note: Since next week is Easter, I won't be able to get a chapter posted. Sorry! Next chapter will be up on Sunday, April 8. Happy Easter to those who celebrate it, and happy spring to those who don't!
Kirigiri had thought… that Naegi could be the mastermind? Even after hearing her say the words, Togami couldn’t comprehend what she meant. How could anyone who’d spent more than a few seconds with Naegi seriously consider the possibility that he could be the one behind this nightmare? Suspecting Togami himself was bad enough — but at least he’d begun the killing game by behaving in a way that would draw such speculation. But Naegi had been kind and honest and friendly, right from the start. He’d been good, in ways that Togami hadn’t even known a person could be. Who could look at a boy like Naegi and see the mastermind?

There was an answer lurking somewhere in the darkest parts of his mind, but he knew, he knew that it was an answer that he didn’t want to see. She was lying, that was all he had to remember. No matter what other dizzying thoughts muddied his head, they didn’t matter. He didn’t have to think about her words, because they were nothing more than an attempt to erase her crimes. She wanted to hide what she’d done by blackening the name of an innocent boy, a boy who’d died because of her.

She was talking again, watching him through narrowed eyes, but her words were too far away to hear. He didn’t want to hear them, not when they were only going to pour another dose of lies and slander into his ear. He just wanted her to stop talking… and there was only one way to be sure she’d stop forever.

The hard edge of Jill’s scissors pressed into his side, the only steady thing in a world that spun wildly off-balance all around him. The weapon was certainty given form, dependable and unyielding as no living thing could be. However dangerous they might be, the simple metal blades couldn’t twist themselves into a new and unexpected threat. He knew how to wield them to meet his own ends… and if he ever wanted to silence the screams echoing in his head, that was exactly what he had to do.

Her words were flying at him faster now, hurtling against his only functioning ear with the force of physical attacks… but no, no, he refused to accept anything that came from her. He shook his head to tell her as much, but it felt as though he were forcing his way against a powerful current with every slow, labored motion. It dragged at his body, a weight that sent trembling shudders through his limbs as he struggled to bear it.

It was too much, all of it, the words and the screaming and the weight… but he couldn’t let it end yet. He couldn’t let her win… not now, not like this. He could see her stirring from where she sat across from him, no matter how the dark splotches blurring his vision tried to obscure her. Whatever she was trying to do, whatever twisted new plan she wanted to put in motion, he had to stop her. If he could just make her stop… then somehow, somehow that would make the world easier to live in.

She leaned forward and reached towards him — and he couldn’t let her finish the motion. As a trio of wavering gloved hands reached through the air, he leapt to his feet —

Or he meant to. But in the moment when he tried to shove himself upward, several days’ worth of exhaustion, grief, and lack of food sent the world tilting madly around him. Darkness wrapped him in its clutches, and he lost consciousness before he even had a chance to decide whether he’d intended to reach for the scissors.
Naegi stared up at the monitor showing the bathhouse door, waiting for some flicker of motion to hint at signs of life within. When Byakuya and Kyoko had disappeared through that door, he’d promised himself that he wouldn’t look away until he saw one of them open it again… but he hadn’t expected them to stay hidden away for quite so long. He was sure that nearly an hour must have passed, if not longer… and yet the door remained stubbornly closed.

He wanted to believe that they’d genuinely decided to join forces, that they were staying away from the cameras so that they could plan a strategy to beat Junko’s game once and for all. He could almost convince himself of it… but every time he thought that he had, the image of Byakuya seizing those scissors rose from the back of his mind again.

“Man, how long is this whole ‘murdering Kirigiri’ thing gonna take?”

Junko’s words trailed off in a frustrated groan, and she flopped back in her swivel chair with enough force to send it spinning into the center of the room. It ended up facing the opposite direction, but she tilted the seat backwards until Naegi could see her upside-down eyes.

“I mean, seriously,” she went on, as if it were a perfectly ordinary conversation, “I know I’m the one who said I’d give him a whole day, but it’s not like I thought he’d last long once he had her alone. Sure, he talks big, but I figured he’d be the kind of guy who’d stick it right in first chance he got!”

Naegi knew she was just trying to make him react with such a creepy description, and he tried his best to keep a grimace of revulsion off his face… but her gleeful giggles told him he hadn’t succeeded.

“Aww, guess that was pretty tactless of me, huh, sweetie?” she said between giggles. “I mean, who’d want to think too hard about their boytoy giving it up for someone else? Well, not unless you’re into that kinda thing!” She waggled her eyebrows, face contorting through cartoonish expressions that looked all the more surreal from upside down.

Aside from the topic, it could have been any chat between friends from their days at Hope’s Peak… and the poisonous thought curdled through his stomach until he feared he might start retching again. Why did she have to keep acting like nothing had changed when they both knew everything was different?

“Stop.” He forced the word out, desperate to say it even if she wouldn’t listen. “Just… stop.”

“Huh? Stop what?” She tilted her head this way and that, pigtails spilling over the edge of the chair to brush against the floor. “Do you mean that you just can’t stand to see my adorable face from such a weird angle? Wow, I had no idea you were so into aesthetics!” She rolled over to lie on her stomach, propping her chin on her hands as she grinned down at him. “Does that mean I’ve done some rubbing off?”

That was an even more horrifying thought that the first one, woven round with too many thorns to let him think about it without pain. The classmate who had been his friend had certainly influenced him… but how much of that had come after she’d lost herself in despair? Would he ever be able to find an answer? Did he even want to know what he’d uncover if he could?

“Seriously though, what do you think is taking him so freaking long?” Junko glanced up at the monitor showing the bathhouse door again, making a face at it when it remained stubbornly blank. “Ooh, think he’s chopping the body up so he can hide the evidence? That’d sure take a while with
just those dinky little scissors to use!” She tapped a finger against her lips. “Maybe I should’ve made axes and chainsaws a little more readily available…”

Naegi wished he could cover his ears, make some kind of noise, do anything to stop himself from having to hear Junko’s words. He didn’t want to know the thought processes the mastermind had put into creating this terrible game.

“But if I’d done that, then everyone could’ve used them from the start — and where’s the fun in finding your friends’ dead bodies if you can’t even recognize them?” Junko heaved a put-upon sigh. “Nope, it just wouldn’t have worked out at all to arrange the game that way. I guess your poor bloodthirsty darling will just have to make do with what he’s got on hand. At least he’s got plenty of time till morning to get her sliced into nice bite-sized chunks!”

The words scorched an image across the inside of Naegi’s head, one too horrifying to bear… and when it made him shudder, Junko only laughed again. “What’s the matter now, sweetie? Don’t tell me that you’re gonna be a sore loser about it!”

He glared back, refusing to let her claim that she’d already won. “I haven’t lost… yet. We still… don’t know… what happened.”

“You think so?” Junko started to grin, then paused and leaned even further forward to stare hard at his face. “Oh my — you really do think so.” She clucked her tongue sympathetically. “I don’t know where you get all this blind faith, I really don’t. I mean, I lived through the same time with all our classmates that you did, and I didn’t see a single thing you could have remembered that would make you think this way.”

Naegi blinked, startled at the claim. Even if despair had consumed her now… how could she say that? Now that his memories were back, he could recall plenty of reasons to believe in his friends. It might be hard to keep them in mind when faced with so much horror and despair… but that didn’t mean they didn’t exist.

“Hmm? You don’t agree?” Junko tilted her head quizzically. “You think there’s something in our memories that can give you strength?”

There was only one answer to a question like that. “Of course.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, sure there is. Fine, then, if you’re so convinced — prove it.” She flicked one red-tipped finger in his direction. “Tell me about the memories that give you hope.”
Naegi hardly knew how to answer Junko’s question. She’d challenged him to find some scrap of hope in his memories of the past like she’d expected it to be an impossible task — but that wasn’t true at all. Yes, he’d remembered the horror of the Tragedy, but he’d remembered so much more as well.

Even in the midst of the worst events, as the sixteen of them learned how much they’d lost… they’d still been able to find strength in their connections to one another. They’d seen their homes destroyed, their families broken, their lives in ruin… but they hadn’t had to endure it alone. They’d still had a place in the world, people who cared about them, a chance to find a brighter future.

Junko might have erased their memories, but she couldn’t change the fact that it had happened. The strength they’d found had existed… and they could all reach it again if they could only get the chance. He had to keep believing that… because if he forgot, there would be no one left to remember.

Except… that shouldn’t be true. Naegi bit his lip, not quite brave enough to meet Junko’s eyes as she watched him think. She’d said herself that she shared the same memories that he’d recovered… but it hadn’t been enough to pull her free from her despair. She should have had the same reason to hope that he did, but she’d put her friends through this nightmare anyway.

But that didn’t mean it was gone… did it? Just because she’d lost her way, it didn’t mean she could never find it again. If he could believe that there was strength for himself in those memories… shouldn’t he believe that Junko could find strength in them as well?

“We… were all friends,” Naegi said at last, after the silence had stretched too long between them. “Even when… everything was worst… all of us stayed friends.”

“Hmmm…” Junko tapped her finger against her temple. “You know, you might have a point. We were friends, weren’t we?” She paused, and a sharp smile twisted one corner of her mouth upward. “Past tense. Or did you forget that all their memories went bye-bye?”

“That… doesn’t matter,” Naegi insisted. He hadn’t been willing to meet her eyes before… but now he did, lifting his gaze to hers with a determination unbroken by the amusement he found there. “We’re… still friends. We’ll… always… be friends.”

“Oh?” She tilted her head back and forth — then graced him with a smile that looked terrifyingly genuine. “It’s so sweet that you think so! And if you’re that convinced — well, how can I argue?”

Naegi blinked. Did that mean… she was agreeing with him? Surely it couldn’t be that simple…

“Then if you insist, I guess we’re still friends!” Junko beamed at him for a brief moment longer, before the smile dropped away as if it had never existed. “But you know… friends kill each other all the time.”

The leaden tone of her voice sent chills down Naegi’s spine. Hearing her speak like that, it sounded like nothing in the world could ever be cheerful again. He hated hearing anyone talk that way, even someone who’d done all the horrible things that Junko had. No one should have to believe that the world had no possibilities left to offer.
“They don’t… not really,” he said, reaching for all the conviction he could muster in his weakened state. “Not friends who… put each other first.”

“And you think this lot would do that?” Junko’s head twitched like she would have shaken it, but didn’t care enough to complete the gesture. “No way. They wouldn’t. No one would really value another person that much. There’s nothing you could have remembered about anyone that would say otherwise.”

The flat, uncompromising words slammed into his chest, knocking the air from his lungs. She remembered the same things he did… and she still couldn’t see any evidence of people caring for one another? Not even among their own friends? The words could have been a direct attack on all the memories he held most dear. There had to be something he could say to fend it off… something that would counter her thoughts…

And there was. There was. All he had to do was think about the friends he’d made in that one shining year at Hope’s Peak, and the answer was easy.

“You’re wrong,” he said, relief rushing through him as he recognized the proof he could use to break her words. “I do… remember.”

“Huh?” For the briefest of moments, her eyes widened — but then she nodded to herself, slumping back down as the heavy chains of despair fell back around her shoulders. “Oh… yeah, I see. Sure, you remember back when everyone was living out that picture-perfect school life. It’s easy to pretend to care about the people around you when the world is full of sunshine and daisy chains. But everything changes out in the real world. You can’t tell say I’m wrong about that. Once we all had to leave Hope’s Peak, all bets were off.”

“But you are wrong!” He didn’t even have to think this time — the words and memories all came flowing together more easily than he could have imagined. “Don’t you… remember?”

So many memories flashed through his mind, the glittering jewels of hope that he’d forgotten. Each one was a fragile fragment of light embedded deep within his heart… and all he wanted was to show them all to Junko so that she could understand what he believed.

“The Tragedy… didn’t destroy our connections,” Naegi went on, visions of his friends playing out vibrant and alive before his eyes. “We still… cared about each other. When the first reports… were coming in… we all waited together for the news. Celeste read every update about… the terrible things happening in Hifumi’s hometown… when he was too scared to look.”

“Well… okay, fine. That’s one point.” A brief frown creased Junko’s face for a moment before she shrugged. “You can make up one example of anything. It doesn’t prove I’m wrong.”

“But you know you are.” Naegi took advantage of the flash of uncertainty she’d shown to press his advantage. “It kept going… even when the Tragedy didn’t stop. When Sayaka ran away… after seeing what happened to her bandmates… Leon went through a whole battle zone… just to bring her back.”

“You remembered that, too?” Junko’s breath hissed sharply between her teeth. “No… no, it still doesn’t change anything. They were all strong. They were brave. It isn’t worth much for people to do something easy, when they barely have to struggle.”

Naegi didn’t think that was true… but he didn’t have to argue with her, not when he had another example on the tip of his tongue. “Chihiro struggled. He was so scared… of seeing all the blood… and bodies. But when Mondo learned about his gang… Chihiro went with him… so that he
wouldn’t have to see it alone.”

Junko froze for a long, silent moment, her eyes locked on the invisible specter of lost memories playing out in the empty void between them. “He… did?” She swallowed hard. “He did. They all did.” Her gaze rose to Naegi’s. “You’re right — each of them really did care about each other. All of those friendships… really were genuine.”

She was beginning to falter, Naegi could see it. She was starting to understand that despair wasn’t everything, that there could still be hope in the world. The memories that gave him strength would give the same to her, a ray of light that couldn’t be doused by any darkness. She would see it and she would —

She would lean back, all the layers of emotion evaporating from her face like a smokescreen blown by the wind. “And you know how all those genuine friendships ended?” Her eyes stayed locked on his, dragging him into the emptiness beyond. “Every single one of them ended with murder.”

Chapter End Notes

Scheduling note: Sorry to do this again so soon, but I won't be able to finish a new chapter for next week. Work is requiring all my free time through next weekend, so I won't have a chance to write. Next chapter will be up on 4/29 -- see you then!
Chapter 311

Murder.

The word rang through Naegi’s mind over and over, the echoes multiplying with every iteration until it drowned out any sounds from outside his own head. He hated the familiarity of it, the way he already knew the feel of the word in his mouth even without speaking it aloud. Why did he have to know such a horrible idea so well?

Because Junko was right. No matter how strongly he believed in the connections his friends had shared with one another in the past… he still had to recognize what had happened to them in the time since their memories had been lost. He’d thought a few moments ago that the undeniable truth of the past was a hole in her armor… but such a weakness went both ways. She couldn’t erase the past… but he couldn’t erase the present, either.

All the people he’d named really had been close friends. They had cared for each other deeply.

And they’d killed each other anyway.

Leon’s admiration for Sayaka, both as a girl and as a performer who’d excelled in a field he appreciated, had been obvious from the start, during both of their “first” meetings. During that first year together, it had been the foundation for a friendship more genuine than either had expected… but here, in the killing game, it had become the bait that lured Leon into Sayaka’s intended trap.

A shared love of fictional worlds had drawn Celeste and Hifumi together, even if their tastes had almost never overlapped. When they’d been classmates, Celeste’s apparently sadistic treatment of Hifumi had been nothing more than an extension of that fiction for their own amusement, masking real affection for one another. But this time, the affection had never had a chance to develop, and Celeste’s manipulation of Hifumi had been exactly as cruel as it seemed.

And Chihiro and Mondo… those two had liked and respected one another both times they’d met. Each boy had seen something in the other than they struggled to be. It had been so similar… but the endings had been so tragically different.

In a way, it almost seemed like Naegi had been right. The bonds between his friends hadn’t disappeared. Even with their memories gone, enough of the foundations had remained for the killing game to twist it into darkness. And if that was the only way their friendships could have made it through the amnesia… then Naegi could almost wish that their past had been wiped away entirely. It was a terrible thought… but simple loss would have been much better than seeing something beautiful become so corrupted.

“It’s a real shame, you know?” Junko said, with as little interest as if she were remarking on a gray and dismal sky. “All those people who said they cared about each other… but none of them cared enough to decide not to kill. I was kinda hoping there’d be at least one pair who could manage it, you know? It’s not like I want to be right about everything. But that’s just how it goes. Even among sixteen friends who promised to be loyal forever… no one could find even one example of someone who meant it.”

No friends at all… not even one example? Every part of Naegi’s being revolted against the thought, with a scream lodged too deep in his chest for the sound to reach his voice. It couldn’t be true. He would not believe it.
There had to be something… just one pair that he and Junko had somehow overlooked, one shining example of a connection that hadn’t been destroyed. He cast his mind back through the days of the killing game, forcing himself to think about horror after dark horror in his search for a single glimmer of light. Surely… surely not every pair had ended in tragedy.

Taka and Mondo had found a way to reforge the close relationship their amnesia had ruined. Remembering the morning he’d walked into the cafeteria to find them talking like brothers was almost enough to bring a smile back to Naegi’s face… but not quite. He couldn’t bring himself to smile for them, no matter how much he wished he could. Even if the two of them had begun to regain what they’d lost, it had barely lasted a handful of days before Chihiro’s death and Mondo’s execution.

But… they hadn’t been the only ones. Of course they hadn’t. How could he think otherwise when Hina and Sakura had clicked as quickly as ever in their second meeting? They’d truly cared for one another, with a bond that stretched across the empty gulf of their lost memories. No one could argue that their relationship hadn’t been true and real, not after the fierce defense each had mounted in the other’s defense. Sakura’s connection to Hina had given her enough strength to defy the mastermind and abandon her role as a spy. And Hina’s affection for Sakura had —

It had gotten her killed.

Naegi could still see her lying motionless in her own blood at the end of the fourth trial, murdered because she’d risked everything for the chance to apologize to her beloved friend. Yes, their relationship had been strong enough to endure beyond their lost memories… they’d found their way back to the closeness they’d shared before… and it had only dragged them both further into darkness. Hina had died… and so had the last spark of light in Sakura’s eyes.

“It’s impossible.”

Junko’s soft, empty voice spread through the room, coating it everything in a thin veil of gray. Even though her words were quiet, Naegi could hear them as clearly as if she murmured directly into his ears.

“There’s no chance for any kind of friendship to survive.”

Was she really right about it all? Were all the friends he cared about so much destined to end broken by despair? He didn’t want to believe it… but without a way to counter her words, he didn’t know how to stop them from seeping into his heart. The longer he listened, the harder it was to think of anything but the logical chain of words she was wrapping around him.

But even so… even with her words in his head… Naegi’s eyes flickered away from Junko, back to the monitors around them… and back to the unchanging image of the bathhouse door. The door where he’d last seen Kyoko and Byakuya disappear… the door that hadn’t opened yet.

“There’s nowhere left for us to look for hope —”

“No.”

It took every ounce of strength Naegi had to force that one word into the flow of Junko’s whispers — but it stopped them all as sharply as a dam. She stared at him, lips still parted mid-sentence. He didn’t know if she was simply startled, or if she was really listening to him… but he couldn’t let this chance slip away.

“There is… one example;” he said, clinging to the realization with every scrap of hope remaining
in him. “There’s still… one pair left. Byakuya and I… still care about each other. And even if it’s bad now… nothing is over yet.”

The only indication she’d heard him was a faint upward flick of one eyebrow. “I’m pretty sure death is about as over as it gets.”

“But I’m not dead,” Naegi countered. “And neither is he.”

“Kirisu might be.”

“We don’t know that!” Naegi glared at her, some measure of energy flowing back to him as he focused on the thought of Byakuya. “And until we do, you can’t say that there aren’t any people who care about each other.”

Junko smiled, but the expression was even more hollow than her empty stare. “I guess we’ll see.”
There were days when Togami didn’t know how he would have survived life in the this hollowed-out corpse of a school if he didn’t have Naegi at his side. Someone he could love… someone who loved him in return… that was one of the last fragments of brightness that he’d managed to cling to through the death and darkness they’d endured. And when the suffocating walls closed too tightly around him or when nightmarish visions of the world outside kept him from sleep… on those days, he couldn’t fight the thought that Naegi was all he had left.

He didn’t think that way every day… not even most days. But it came on him just often enough that the fear never entirely left him. He could feel it in the way his eyes flew to the other boy whenever he entered a room, the nervous energy twitching through his veins whenever one of them had no choice but to step out of reach, the breathless pressure weighing on his chest when he didn’t know exactly where in the school Naegi was.

And that was why, no matter how determinedly he stared down at the book in his hands, Togami couldn’t shake the gnawing awareness that his treasured boyfriend wasn’t in the library with him as he tried to read in the middle of the night. No, Naegi was back in their room, mercifully asleep for once, and Togami hadn’t wanted to wake the other boy with his own insomnia. At least one of them should get some rest.

But he hadn’t taken into account the sheer impossibility of concentrating on any task when Naegi’s absence consumed so much of his mind. Being apart from Naegi in the silent hours between midnight and morning was somehow more difficult than during the day, even though there was no logical reason for it to be different.

He sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose where his glasses pressed too heavily. He’d thought that perhaps the quiet library would help calm his mind enough to rest a little, but it seemed to be having the opposite effect. The longer he sat alone in the silence, the more his thoughts spiraled into paths he didn’t want them to take.

There was really only one option. He stood, tucking the book under one arm as he headed for the library door. If the quiet room was dragging his mind down dark paths, he would just have to head back to places where he could find other fellow insomniacs. Night or not, it was rare for many of the students to sleep at the same time. All he had to do was head back towards the dormitories, and it would be easy enough to find half a dozen people as awake as he was.

Or so he’d thought, anyway… but as he walked through the empty halls, the other students he’d expected to see never materialized. Even though he passed the locker rooms, the pool, and the gym, he didn’t hear any indication that they were in use. The AV room was dark and silent, every monitor inside blank. And when he made his way back into the dormitories to see that even the cafeteria was empty and still, alarm began to prickle along the back of his neck.

The school hadn’t been like this when he’d gone upstairs. Quiet, yes, in deference to the lucky few who could manage to sleep… but even so, there had still been sounds and motion in the halls. One room or another might not have been occupied in that particular moment, but the building as a whole had life infused through it. But now… he could have been walking through a tomb.

Could something have happened in the short hour he’d been gone? It seemed unlikely that anyone could have gotten past all the layers of the school’s defenses without setting off dozens of blaring alarms… but he’d seen far more apparently impossible events come to pass. And if that were the case…
Before the thought could reach the full horror of its conclusion, a hand caught his arm in a tight grip. Togami spun, poised to strike at his assailant — and came face to face with a grim Kirigiri.

“Something’s wrong,” she whispered, voice barely audible even in the quiet hallway.

The dread in his heart grew even colder, blooming into a full rush of fear. “Someone got inside?”

Her lips tightened. “Something like that. Have you seen anyone else?”

“No since I went upstairs.” The vast expanse of empty space pressed in around the two of them, a claustrophobic reminder of all the people who weren’t present.

“That’s two of us, then.” She shook her head. “Not enough, if we’re the only ones.”

She kept talking, plans and messages and keys, but he could barely hear her words over the terror pounding through his blood. The only ones … if they were the only ones… “I left him alone… I should never have left Makoto alone!”

Makoto?

The name felt strange on his tongue, both unfamiliar and well-known at the same time … like a foreign language he’d forgotten how to speak.

Makoto…?

Why had that name come so easily to his lips?

No … that wasn’t right. Why did he think it was strange to use his boyfriend’s given name? What else would he call the boy he loved?

He would never get the chance to find out.

The scene fractured around that realization, splintering the school into a thousand blade-edged fragments. There was no one left to answer to that name, no one to care what he was called. The world around him had frozen in the instant before he’d bolted back toward the dorm rooms… but even if it had continued, there was no one left to find.

No one left …

Makoto.

Naegi.

The name didn’t matter… not when it was nothing more than the twisted byproduct of a nightmare… but that truth would never disappear. There was no one left to care about.

Makoto Naegi was dead.

The knowledge sank down into his soul, with a weight that had been absent in the twisted alternate dreamscape his mind had created moments ago. He could still feel the clammy remnants fear coursing through his veins, pounding in his heart… the same fear that had gripped him when the trial vote had shown Naegi’s face as its result. It didn’t seem fair that he’d had to endure that terror in sleep as well as in reality. Would he be forced to relive the terrible realization of Naegi’s loss every time he woke?

There was no peace to be found… not in sleep, not awake… not anywhere. It didn’t matter where
he was or what he did… he couldn’t change anything.

He might have stayed there on the floor forever, eyes closed against a world that hurt in ways he’d never known it could… but a voice pierced through the fog of his mind to jolt him back to awareness.

“Finally awake again, I see.”

Togami’s eyes slammed open to see Kirigiri staring at him from across the bathhouse, every bit as cold and grim as she’d been in his dream.
Chapter 313

With the bizarre world of his dream still lingering around him, it took a moment for Togami’s mind to comprehend the situation. For the briefest moment, he’d almost felt relieved to see Kirigiri sitting near him, in a disorienting echo of his reaction in the dream… as though the idea that she’d been watching as he slept was reassuring rather than terrifying.

But it only took an instant for the world to realign properly for him to recognize Kirigiri for the threat she was. Tension whipped through his body, preparing to defend himself regardless of the way his muscles ached in protest. He didn’t dare focus on the pain right now, not when she had the chance to strike however she wished while he was weakened. How could he have been stupid enough to leave himself so vulnerable by falling asleep —

No… wait. He hadn’t fallen asleep… not exactly. Hazy memories of the moments before he’d lost consciousness came creeping back through his memory, and Togami didn’t like what he was beginning to recall. He’d fainted… while trying to confront Kirigiri…? That couldn’t be right… could it?

“I hope you’re not planning to do anything stupid — we don’t have time for you to collapse again.”

Apparently that was exactly what had happened. The slimy tinge of mortification twisted through his confusion, made all the worse by the hint of heat rising in his face. It would almost have been easier to cope if he’d heard mockery in Kirigiri’s voice or seen scorn in her expression… but examine her as he might, he couldn’t detect a trace of amusement at his expense.

Well, that didn’t mean she didn’t feel it — she’d just chosen to hide the reaction, that was all. And in doing so, she’d lost her opportunity to take advantage of his vulnerability. Togami pressed his palms flat on the floor to try to lever himself up into a sitting position —

And sharp white spots crowded across his vision as the room tilted wildly back and forth. Nausea writhed through his stomach, and he collapsed flat on his back in a desperate attempt to contain it.

“Moving that fast won’t accomplish anything,” Kirigiri said, with what Togami felt was an inappropriate level of calmness for the situation. “Stay still until you’re steadier, and then try sitting up slowly.”

Following her instructions was the last thing Togami wanted to do — but he didn’t seem to have any other options at the moment. His head seemed off-kilter from the rest of his body, as though another sharp movement could send them wobbling madly in opposite directions. Her suggestions of a slow, careful attempt at sitting was the only way likely to end in anything other than another humiliation. He forced himself to stay flat on the ground, waiting impatiently for the roiling in his head to abate.

She watched him a moment longer, eyes narrowed as she took in the wreck of his appearance. “When was the last time you ate anything?”

The answer to that one was easy. The last time he’d eaten anything was while Naegi was still alive. He’d had no intention of answering… but apparently, Kirigiri didn’t need to hear the words. She sighed. “Starving yourself won’t help, you know. And… he wouldn’t want you to suffer.”

A haze of fury pulsed across his vision, turning the world sharp and red for an instant. If he could have moved, he would have tried to throttle her for those words. How dare she refer to Naegi like
that? What right did she have to speak as if she understood him in any way?

But the worst part… the very worst part was that he knew she was right. Naegi wouldn’t want him to be unhappy or in pain.

And knowing that only made it all the more impossible to be anything else, now that Naegi wasn’t with him.

“Here — you should try to eat this, once you’re able to sit up.”

Without getting up or moving any closer to him, Kirigiri placed a packet of crackers and a bottle of some unnaturally blue energy drink in the space between them… and Togami couldn’t help but notice that she’d chosen items that appeared to have unbroken seals. Not that it necessarily meant she hadn’t tampered with them anyway… but he had to admit that if she’d wanted to harm him, she’d had plenty of opportunities while he’d been unconscious. And as much as he hated the thought of eating something she’d given him… the prospect of collapsing a second time was worse.

Slowly, braced to stop at the slightest hint of another bout of dizziness, he began to push himself upright once more. The snail’s pace of the movements made him grit his teeth in frustration, especially laden with the awareness that Kirigiri was watching every agonizingly slow second of it… but he did his best to block her piercing gaze from his mind.

Once he could finally sit without the room spinning around him, he glanced back down at the food she’d offered. He meant to question it, to consider the threats, to think it over — but his body overrode his conscious thoughts. His hand stretched out to seize the crackers before he could decide against it, tearing the packet open as fast as his clumsy, bandaged fingers could manage.

The crackers were gone in moments, though he could hardly recall the taste or texture of them. He glanced back up at Kirigiri as he discarded the wrapper, eyes narrowed as he searched for any signs of mockery… but no, he didn’t see a single one. If anything, some of the tension seemed to leave her shoulders when she saw him take the bottled drink as well. At least she was going to keep her ridicule to herself, whatever she might be thinking about him. Togami supposed he should be grateful for small mercies.

Not that any mercy lasted long. When she saw him take a cautious sip of the blue drink, she apparently took it as her cue to begin a new conversation. Togami bit back the frustrated groan at the end of his brief respite, doing his best to brace himself for whatever malice she intended to fling at him now that he was unable to storm away.

“I think… that I may owe you an apology.”

Togami froze. Whatever he’d expected her to say… that hadn’t been it. Only when the sharp aftertaste of the energy drink began to sting across his tongue did he manage to finish swallowing his mouthful of liquid. But even though his body could move, his mind couldn’t quite shake free of the shocked paralysis of Kirigiri’s words. Why would she have said such a thing?

There were different possible reasons… he knew there had to be. Once he would have known what they were without any effort, sorting through different scenarios by long-practiced reflex. But now… it was as though he couldn’t remember how it felt to make those logical leaps. No matter how much he thought that he wanted to tear into Kirigiri’s statement and parse out every possible hidden meaning… he couldn’t find the way to do it. All he could do was listen to the words as she spoke them, instead of filtering them through his own interpretations.
“I shouldn’t have told you all my theories so bluntly,” she went on, her gaze sliding off to one side rather than meet his own. “I should have found a better way to explain it… since now I know that none of it was true. You do need to understand what happened… but there were other ways to say it. You deserved better from me… and so did Naegi.”

She paused, as though she expected some kind of response. But whatever answer she might be waiting for, he didn’t have it. He didn’t have any answers.

After a moment that stretched too long for comfort, she sighed. “Well… there’s one more thing that I need to tell you. I don’t know if this is the right time or the right way… but I know that if I don’t say it, the mastermind will.” She took a deep breath, one hand clenching in her lap. “I told you already that I believed Naegi was the mastermind… but that’s not the entire extent of what happened. After Ikusaba turned up dead, using the fake murder plan I’d concocted… I thought that this trial was the mastermind’s attempt to get rid of me. And so… I fought back.”
Chapter 314

Togami could feel the weight of Kirigiri’s words as they sank through the air of the bathhouse. Those words meant something to him, something terrible… or at least, they should have. But even though he could recognize the import of what she’d said… he didn’t know how to translate her words into meaning.

Or maybe he didn’t want to know. Knowing would force him into reactions and responses, another cycle of nightmares and pain. And he’d had all the pain that he could bear.

But the world never asked what anyone could bear. Nightmares never ended… they just continued until there was no one left to break. And no matter how much he ached for a moment of peace… Kirigiri wouldn’t stop her words from stabbing into the broken remnants of his heart.

“If I’d had more time to think, I might have seen the truth of the mastermind’s trap,” she went on, voice soft… as though volume could somehow lessen the sting. “But as soon as I came back from investigating the locked dorms, it began to close around me, fitting too well with what I thought I knew. I meant to reexamine the letter in the library that discussed the closing of Hope’s Peak… but instead, I found you, following the device that led you to Ikusaba’s body. The situation looked too suspicious to ignore, and so I decided to follow you in turn.”

So she’d followed him… and he hadn’t noticed? Togami knew there had been a time when he would have denied it furiously, outraged at the suggestion that he might have failed to spot her… but he couldn’t find even the starting spark of that anger in him now. So what if she’d followed him? It was as likely to be true as anything else… and it wasn’t as though such a minor misstep would make much different either way against the graver failures that already besmirched his name.

“I recognized the set-up as soon as you opened the classroom door,” she went on, fixing her eyes on him as she spoke, “and I left to retrieve the neutralizing agent that I’d taken as part of my fake plan. I’d left it in a locker here in the bathhouse, thinking that it would be safer to separate the different pieces of the plan. By the time I was able to retrieve it and return to the fifth floor, you’d already left the classroom.”

Meaning that he must have failed to see her once again… but it was hardly surprising that he hadn’t been at his best mere minutes after escaping the poisoned air. Standing upright had been an almost insurmountable challenge, let alone spotting a sneaky detective determined to stay unseen. It made sense… but that didn’t ease any of regrets twisting through his chest.

“Since I knew what to expect from the set-up, it wasn’t too difficult to switch out the poison for the neutralizing agent,” she continued, lines of tension creeping down her jaw as she spoke. “And between the neutralization and the natural dissipation of the poison, it only took around fifteen minutes for the room to be safe enough to enter for a short period of time. I went inside and found the body… and I thought I understood what was happening.”

But she hadn’t understood. She’d said that already, and the memory echoed back through Togami’s mind in spite of his unwillingness to think about it. She’d been wrong about something, wrong enough to force her to speak so openly… wrong enough to change her mind. He could have seen what she meant by it, if he’d tried to work it out… but he didn’t want to know.

So of course that meant that she didn’t give him a choice.
“I thought that I had been betrayed. When I realized that the corpse had to belong to Ikusaba, I couldn’t think of any other possibility. The suspicions I’d set out to test all seemed to be confirmed… and the mastermind had turned my own test against me. All Naegi would have to do was repeat the story I’d told him, and no one would believe that I’d had nothing to do with the murder. I’d be punished for a crime the mastermind had committed.”

She took a deep breath, bracing one hand against the floor as though she needed the physical support. The shadow of her fingers trembled as it stretched across the floor, and Togami watched the movement without letting himself think about what it might mean.

“I couldn’t let it happen. Seeing the closed-off part of the second floor brought some of my memories back to me, and I knew I’d come to this school for a reason. I — I couldn’t let the mastermind kill me before I’d accomplished it, with all their mysteries still unsolved. And so, in the few minutes I had before someone else came back to the scene… I did one thing that a true detective should never do. I altered the crime scene.”

On anyone else, the expression on Kirigiri’s face would have been called guilt… but on her, Togami supposed it had to have some other meaning.

Or maybe it didn’t. Maybe she did regret what she’d done, if only because it went against her principles as a detective. What did it matter how she felt about it now, after everything was over? It wasn’t as though she could take it back.

“I wanted to draw attention to the real killer,” she went on, apparently oblivious to the pointlessness of her explanations. “I wanted to make sure the mastermind had to be a part of the trial. If I could force the discussion to address the question of the mastermind’s identity rather than the killer, I thought I might have a chance. So I made the only change I could think of — I removed the knife from the corpse’s chest and stabbed it back through a note that declared Ikusaba a traitor.”

The note that had been pinned to Ikusaba’s body…? The one that had cause so many questions about the culprit’s relationship to the victim…? Kirigiri had been the one to plant it… after she’d found the girl already dead?

It had to be a lie, some new way of twisting the truth of what she’d done. After all, even if tampering with a murder investigation was unethical, it was still better than being the killer herself. This had to be an attempt to hide from her guilt, because if it wasn’t… if she was telling the truth…

Then everything he’d done since finding the body had been for nothing.

All the time he’d spent on the investigation flashed before his eyes, every moment that he and Naegi had fought so desperately to find answers… and as painful as the memories had already been, now the bitterness of wasted time made them immeasurably worse. They hadn’t been working to uncover the truth — they’d just been chasing a different lie. They might as well have slept away the time until the trial, for all they’d accomplished.

Maybe it wouldn’t have made a difference. Maybe the mastermind’s trap would still have taken Naegi even without Kirigiri’s interference. But even if that was true… there was no way to know. She had interfered… and Naegi had died.

“I was so caught up in the idea of making the mastermind betray themselves that I couldn’t see how I was playing right into their hands.” Kirigiri’s words seemed to cross a vast distance to reach him, sounding so small that they had to come from far away. “From the start, this game has depended on playing us against one another and making sure no one could trust the others. When I
began to target Naegi… even though my intent wasn’t to win the game by murdering him… the moment I made that choice, I’d already lost my battle against the mastermind. Even when I thought I was challenging them directly —"

She shook her head sharply. “That doesn’t matter. You know how the mastermind manipulated me now… and how I was stupid enough to let them do it. And…” She paused to meet his eyes, locking their gazes until he couldn’t have looked away if he’d tried. “And you know that the mastermind really did set this up so that they could circumvent the rules. They cheated.”

That was certainly true. Naegi had been innocent, that much should have been obvious to anyone with a functioning brain… and yet the vote had landed on him. By all rights, every student left in the game should have died for that error… but that hadn’t happened. Only Naegi had been killed, as if he’d really been the blackened. Maybe Naegi’s claim that he was guilty in those final moments had given the mastermind an idea, or maybe they’d meant to end the trial this way all along… but either way the result was the same. When the mastermind had sent Naegi to die… they’d broken their own rules.

“And that gives us leverage.” A spark flashed behind Kirigiri’s eyes, filled with determination that Togami hadn’t seen in her before. “This is the first real mistake they’ve made. We can use it against them — but only if we work together. They’ll use it against us if they can, we’ve both seen how good they are at that. So we can’t give them the chance. We have to approach them as a united front if we want this to work.”

So… this was what she’d been after. He’d known there would be something. This hadn’t been the goal he’d expected, though… and it didn’t fit with what he thought he knew of her. “Why?”

She blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Why bother trying anything? What does it matter if it works?” Togami shook his head slowly, more from confusion than anything else. “Why do you care?”

“Oh… I see.” Kirigiri sighed, one hand curling upward to tangle in the hair where her braid had been. “I want to find out who did this to us… but it’s more than finding answers. I want to stop the mastermind’s game… and get every innocent person out alive. Naegi believed that it was possible… and he trusted me to do it. So… I have to. If there’s any chance at all, I’ll do it.”

She looked like a different person now, saying those words with determination burning in her eyes. Was this a new side of her that had only just come into being… or was it just that he’d never seen it in her before? Maybe this was the Kirigiri that Naegi had seen… the girl he’d trusted so completely for no reason that Togami had understood.

“Tell me… do you believe me?” She spoke as though it was just another question… but with that look on her face, anyone could see that she didn’t feel that way. The answer would matter to her.

And it would matter to him, too. Did he believe her? When he’d entered the bathhouse, he’d sworn not to believe a word she said, intending to listen only long enough to find the opportunity to use Jill’s scissors. But even so, even knowing that this could all be an elaborate ruse to justify her actions… he couldn’t stop the feeling that her story sounded plausible. If events really had played out the way she’d described, with her lost memories and the timing and the tests… too many pieces would start fitting together.

He didn’t want to believe her. He didn’t want to live in a world where this was true. Even now, his body rebelled against it as a curt, cruel refusal leapt to his tongue, poised to dash whatever hopes she’d pinned on him.
But he couldn’t say it. If this new determination that he could see in her now really had been born of Naegi’s sweet, innocent, stupid trust in her… then he couldn’t bring himself to shatter it with a lie.

“All right, fine.” He grimaced, every word crawling reluctantly from his lips. “I believe you.”

The small, relieved smile that darted across Kirigiri’s face might well have been the first genuine one he’d seen from her. “Then you’ll help me?”

Togami didn’t return the smile, and it faded from her face as quickly as it had appeared. “I would rather die.”
Chapter 315

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Togami could see Kirigiri’s eyes widen as he spoke the words, her shock plain enough if you knew how to read her expressions. He wasn’t sure when he’d learned to see the meaning in the faint changes of her face… but he couldn’t deny that the knowledge was there in his head, whispering that she hadn’t expected him to say such a thing.

And she wasn’t the only one. While he’d never meant to agree to her request for help, he hadn’t realized the form his refusal would take until the words had already left his lips.

*I would rather die.*

It wasn’t simple hyperbole, not in a place like this. Every moment they stayed in the mastermind’s power, trapped in their nightmarish killing game, the likelihood of death grew exponentially. The only way out was to win the game on the mastermind’s terms, or to fight the mastermind directly.

And both options were equally impossible.

He knew now that winning the game wouldn’t be any kind of true victory at all… it would only give the mastermind what they’d wanted all along. There was no way he could let that happen… not when Naegi had fought so hard to stop it. Not when the mastermind had killed him for it.

But he couldn’t fight the mastermind either, not the way Kirigiri had proposed. If he really did believe her story, if she was telling the truth about what had happened… then this plan of hers was nothing more than the same pattern she’d always used every time she’d worked with Naegi. She’d kept her eyes fixed on her investigation, using the kind boy who’d called her a friend as nothing more than a tool to help her achieve her goals. She’d flung him into the path of danger time after time… and now that he was gone, she wanted to do the same thing to the memory of his death.

Togami wouldn’t be part of that. He *wouldn’t*. He’d done far too much to hurt Naegi already, even if he’d never meant to do it. Naegi deserved so much better from two people he’d trusted. There had been a time, not even so long ago, when that wouldn’t have meant anything to Togami… when he would have agreed to use Naegi’s murder without hesitation. But he’d changed — or rather, knowing Naegi had changed him. Going back to who he’d been would be as good as denying that his relationship with Naegi had been meaningless.

“So you intend to do nothing?”

There must have been some measure of warmth in Kirigiri’s tone before this moment, even if it hadn’t seemed like it… because these words seemed to freeze the air around them. Her icy glare could have stabbed straight through him, as though she thought she had some kind of right to be angry… as though she’d actually expected him to agree to help her.

“You’re going to let this chance slip away — why? Because you hate me too much to work together, even if it means staying in this empty school for the rest of our lives?” She stopped short, eyes narrowing sharply. “Or are you so desperate to kill me that you don’t want the killing game to end?”

Togami froze. Had that simply been an eerily accurate guess, a mere shot in the dark to see how he’d react? Or had she somehow figured out the real reason he’d followed her to the bathhouse in
the first place?

“Don’t tell me you thought you were hiding it.” She smirked, damn her. He hated that expression so much that his fingers curled with the urge to claw it off her face. He could almost envision using Jill’s scissors to —

Jill’s scissors — which weren’t at his waist any longer.

“Lose something?” She said it as if it were a question — but both of them already knew the answer.

Togami glared at her. “You searched me?”

He hardly even needed to ask. Of course she’d searched his unconscious body, he should have realized as much from the moment he woke up. She was too smart to let such a perfect opportunity pass her by. And it wouldn’t be hard at all to find the scissors if she’d searched through all his possessions —

If she’d searched —

His hands flew to the pocket where he’d tucked away the only photo of Naegi that he had. Paper crinkled under his fingertips, yes, but that wasn’t enough, that could still be anything. He slid it out gently, careful not to rip or crease the edges, and held his breath as he peered down at the image.

Naegi smiled back up at him, bright enough that Togami’s chest ached at the sight.

“What are you doing?”

The sharp spike of focus in Kirigiri’s tone sent chills prickling across the back of Togami’s neck. His instinct was to snatch the photo close and keep it safe, hidden from the prying curiosity in her eyes — but no, no, he couldn’t handle it so recklessly, not when it was the only picture he would ever have. He cut off the motion before it could begin, forcing his hands to remain slow and careful as they cradled his treasure.

And that gave Kirigiri enough time to lean forward and catch a glimpse of the image. A startled frown flickered across her face. “Is that a picture of Naegi? And… Maizono?”

Togami cradled the picture to his chest so that she couldn’t see Naegi’s face any longer, wishing there were some way to tear the memory of it out of her head. Had she really not looked at it when she’d searched him? If he’d known that, he would never have brought it into the open. What right did she have to see Naegi looking so happy, when he’d been the one to endure Monokuma’s rantings to earn it?

“Did you get that from Monokuma?” Apparently Kirigiri couldn’t take a hint. “How did he get hold of a photo of those two together?”

“That’s none of your business,” Togami told her flatly. “This photo is mine.”

“I’m not going to steal it,” Kirigiri snapped.

“You stole my scissors.”

“You mean Jill’s scissors?” Kirigiri raised a scornful eyebrow. “I searched you for weapons, but that’s all — I didn’t touch anything else.” Her mouth thinned into a bitter line. “I’d hoped that we might be able to come to some kind of truce.”
“Not if you’re set on confronting the mastermind like this.” Togami eyed her a moment longer, but she didn’t seem like she planned to snatch his precious photo away at the first opportunity. With great caution, he slid it safely back into his pocket, securely within the cover of his handbook where it wouldn’t be damaged.

“Really? Now you’re trying to tell me that’s the problem?” Kirigiri sounded like she was reaching the end of her patience. “You would have been happy to work with me if only I’d suggested a different strategy?”

“I doubt I’d have been happy about it,” Togami said slowly, a frown creasing his face. It almost sounded as if she hadn’t understood what he’d meant to say… as if she’d heard it as a blanket rejection. “I’m certain I would have hated every second of working together — just as you know that you would have. But I could still have done it, if I’d had a good reason.” He shook his head. “Although it hardly matters, since our hypothetical partnership would never have survived the revelation that you searched me while I was unconscious.”

She disregarded that last statement with an irritated flick of her fingers. “Then what exactly are you telling me? Do you disagree with the plan I proposed? If you have a better idea, I’d like to hear it.”

“I don’t.” Togami didn’t particularly enjoy admitting it, but her plan wasn’t bad. No… more than that, it was probably the best chance they’d have to fight the mastermind. But that didn’t change the fact that he couldn’t go along with it.

“Then — what?” She glared at him. “Do you enjoy being difficult? Because the only other reason I can think of is that you —” She stopped short, staring at him blankly as all emotion fell away from her face. “You don’t want to leave.”

Though the flat words carried none of her usual sharp edged tones, they still cut deep into Togami’s heart. He would never have said it — he’d hardly even dared to think it so directly. But she wasn’t the Ultimate Detective for nothing, and he’d given away too many clues for her to miss. And now she’d thrown her deduction back in his face, too obvious for him to avoid.

He didn’t want to leave.

Or more precisely, he didn’t want to live in the world he would encounter outside the school walls. It was a strange feeling, after the weeks of yearning for freedom… but it settled in the pit of his stomach with all the weight of unavoidable certainty. He knew that leaving this school would not end well for him.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” Kirigiri stared at him like she was seeing a stranger. “You… you actually want to stay here. Even if it means giving up your life outside.”

“What life?” The words shot out of Togami’s mouth before he could stop them. “Do you think my place in the Togami Corporation will still be waiting there for me after what I’ve done here? After the whole world saw me fail to —” He stopped, clenching his teeth together until his jaw ached from the pressure.

“The world saw you?” Her eyebrows snapped together. “Do you mean you’ve seen evidence we’re being observed by more than just the mastermind?”

“Oh, a hell of a lot more than that.” A bitter laugh bubbled up from the coldness in his chest. “Every single person, every place on the planet — this broadcast reached them all. And that means that even if I leave, there’s nowhere I can go to leave this nightmare behind. It will haunt me for the rest of my life.” He could see the future now, stretching out in an endless span of bleak and
empty days. “If my family knows everything I’ve done here, if they believe it’s the truth… they’ll do everything in their power to be rid of me. The only way I would be able to keep my position as heir would be… if I could convince them nothing was what it appeared.”

“You mean claiming that your relationship with Naegi was an act?” Kirigiri asked, gaze piercing through him. “I can see how that would be difficult, but —”

“No,” Togami cut her off. “It would be easy.”

He already knew the words he’d have to say, the attitude he’d have to adopt to make it convincing. It would only take one lie, one simple little lie to make it all work… just say that he’d only been pretending to fall for Naegi as a ploy to make the others trust him. If he said that, every other action he’d taken could stand not as a failure, but as a victory. He could claim he’d had the whole world fooled… and it would take was mocking the connection that he and Naegi had shared.

“It would be too easy,” he whispered again, more to himself than to the girl sitting across from him. “And if I leave here… I know that I would do it. If it came down to a choice between telling that lie and losing everything I lived my life to win… I’d do it. And I don’t want to make that choice.”

“So you’re going to stop the rest of us from leaving because you don’t have the inner strength to cope with a tough choice?” Anger flashed behind her eyes, and Togami couldn’t be sure whether she’d meant for him to see it or not.

“I never said I’d stop you.” He glared at her one more time, then began pushing himself slowly to his feet.

“No, I suppose not.” Her eyes widened. “You said you’d rather—”

He didn’t wait to hear her repeat his own words back at him. He knew what he’d said… and what he’d meant. He ignored the patter of questions she threw at him, turning back towards the pathway out of the bathhouse and back to the rest of the school.

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule note:** No chapter next week, due to real life obligations. And just as a warning, there will probably be at least one other week in June I'll have to miss as well... I'll let you know when. Next chapter will be posted on Sunday, June 10. See you then!
Sleep nearly claimed Naegi too many times to count as he and Junko kept watch over the walls of monitors. He thought he might have dropped into a light doze once or twice, but the murky depths of unconsciousness blurred together with the hazy silence of the data room until it took all his focus to tell the difference. All he knew was that the bathhouse door that held his attention both awake and in dreams didn’t change.

Until it did.

The faint tap of approaching footsteps echoed out from one of the monitors, so quiet that it would have been impossible to catch if there had been any other sounds in the room. Naegi’s breath turned to lead in his lungs, weighing down his chest until no motion was possible. He stared up at the screen showing the bathhouse entrance, searching for some hint that everything really was going to be okay. But there was nothing to see, nothing but the closed bathhouse door —

And then the door swung open, and Byakuya stepped out into the hall.

The sight flooded through Naegi like pure, clean water. It was Byakuya, and he was safe and whole, he was fine, he was —

“Wow, looks like he did a pretty good job cleaning up the blood,” Junko said, swinging her feet around so that she was actually sitting in her chair correctly as she peered up at the screen. She shook her head with a dramatic sigh. “Rats — if only I’d realized that the bathhouse could provide an easy loophole to the limitations on using water at nighttime, this could all have been prevented! Oh well, too bad.” She tapped one long nail against her lips. “Do you think we’ll need to get some kind of blood testing equipment so the girls have half a chance at the trial?”

Naegi did his best to ignore her, even though Junko’s voice had a way of worming past any attempts to tune it out. She didn’t know what she was talking about, not really. There was no proof about anything that had or hadn’t happened while Byakuya and Kyoko had been out of range of the cameras. Junko just wanted to scare him into envisioning a series of horrible possibilities, to make him doubt Byakuya and what he might have done.

But he wouldn’t let himself think that way. He wouldn’t. Not unless there was proof.

And there wouldn’t be. Naegi studied Byakuya carefully as the young man paused outside of the bathhouse door, eyes darting between the dorm rooms on his left and the gate leading to the rest of the school on his right. He didn’t look happy, of course, and the tired lines of grief etched into his face stabbed through Naegi’s heart… but at the same time, he was almost grateful to see that misery.

If Byakuya really had taken steps to commit a murder… then grief wouldn’t be the first thing on his mind any longer. His eyes would flash with calculations about how best to survive the upcoming trial, cold confidence radiating off him with every cleverly planned move. He would have looked like a fighter, ready to take on the world and win. But instead… he just looked lost, unable to make the simple choice between two paths.

Naegi bit his lip as he stared up at the hesitation written across his boyfriend’s face. Byakuya had
never acted like this, even when the world around them had been at its darkest. Even when the only choice was about which variety of horror to face, he’d moved forward. But now… it was like he’d forgotten how to do it.

He just needed someone to help him remember. Naegi would have given anything for the energy to stand and leave this room, to run to the side of the man he loved, to show him the way back to the person he used to be. It couldn’t take much, not really. Just a presence at his side, a hand on his shoulder, and —

A hand landed on Byakuya’s shoulder.

A gloved hand.

Naegi’s eyes widened in almost incredulous joy as Kyoko stepped out of the bathhouse door, one hand firmly caught around Byakuya’s arm. She was okay, every bit as well and whole as when she’d disappeared from view. She was alive.

And that meant Junko had been wrong. Even in the aftermath of Naegi’s execution, even with misery bearing down on him from every direction, Byakuya still hadn’t been driven to the point of murdering a girl who’d been his friend. Yes, he’d thought about it… he’d even gone so far as to bring a weapon into their secluded meeting… but that didn’t matter in the end. He hadn’t taken the final step, the one that could never be taken back — and the knowledge broke across Naegi’s face in a brilliant smile.

He turned towards Junko, fully expecting to see the same joy spreading to touch her as she came face to face with proof that the world wasn’t as dark and terrible as she’d believed. She had to see the hope in this moment, had to understand that there were other choices in the world than despair, had to —

Laugh.

Junko was staring up at the screen like she’d forgotten anything else was in the room, a crooked grin splitting her face wide as a wild flood of laughter gushed free. Naegi could hear all the cackling madness of Monokuma at his worst — and more than that, he could hear a spiral into dark depths that the bear’s robotic voice had never touched. He knew that laugh… not from the time they’d been friends, either as classmates or as refugees from despair… but from those last blurred moments when she’d turned on them all. It echoed through his mind as well as in his ears, the two sounds blending together in a crashing cascade of terrors.

But… what was she laughing at now? Was it just another symptom of the despair that had infected her, spilling out in a form that made no sense to anyone else… or was there something he was missing?

“Wait — not yet.”

Naegi had to strain his ears to catch Kyoko’s quiet words, barely audible through the flood of Junko’s manic laughter. He thought there might have been some undercurrent of tension there, threading through her voice with an unusual anxiety… but her tones were hard to read even when he could hear her clearly.

But understanding Byakuya came to him as easily as reading a poem, especially when he shook Kyoko’s hand from his arm with his iciest glare. “Don’t touch me.”

Kyoko had never been fazed by those glares, not in either of the times they’d all met one another…
but now she seemed to find it worrying in some way. Her eyebrows snapped together as she crossed her arms, rather than reaching out to grab him again. “We weren’t done here.”

Silence flooded the room, even louder than the laughter had been. Naegi risked a glance in Junko’s direction — but after seeing the maddened brightness to her eyes as she stared up at the screens, he wished her hadn’t.

“Is that so?”

Naegi looked back up at the monitors just in time to see Byakuya raise an eyebrow, a ghostly reminder of one of his haughty expressions. “So walking out of the room wasn’t enough of a clue for you to detect that I disagree?”

Kyoko didn’t even react to the jab. “I didn’t understand what you meant before. But now that I do — there’s more we need to discuss.” One finger tapped an uneven beat against her opposite arm as she stared at him. “I don’t think you should go off alone.”

Naegi wasn’t quite sure what she meant by that… but Byakuya must have. He drew himself up a painful attempt at dignity, unaware that it only underscored his obvious fragility. “What I do is none of your concern. I told you that I wouldn’t stop you from doing what you want — now I expect the same from you.”

“No.” She didn’t even hesitate to snap out the contradiction. “I can’t do that — not when it’s obvious you won’t be all right.”

Naegi blinked. Did that mean… that she was worried about Byakuya? Well, anyone who could see him now would be worried, of course… but she was actually going to act on her concern? A small tendril of warmth curled through his chest at the thought that Kyoko might be working to restore the friendship she and Byakuya had once shared.

But Byakuya’s mouth curled into a trembling sneer that mocked her efforts. “So what — you expect me to believe you care? That how I feel matters to you?”

“We should continue this discussion inside,” she said flatly, eyes darting up until she was staring directly out of the screen. For a brief, disorienting moment, Naegi could almost believe she was looking at him, before realizing she’d meant to indicate the camera.

But even though he must have seen the gesture far more clearly than Naegi could, Byakuya barely seemed to register that she’d tried to interrupt him. “If you’re so concerned about me, then why did you tell me anything in the first place?”

“This isn’t the time!” She tried to step forward and grab his arm again.

He knocked her hand away with far more force than necessary. “If you’re so determined to help, then why did you tell me all about how you manipulated Naegi to his death?”

Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: No chapter next week again, sorry! I'm trying to move this month, and it's taking up most of my time. Next chapter will be up on June 24. See you then!
Naegi stared up at the monitor showing Byakuya and Kyoko, his boyfriend’s words ringing so loudly in his head that they drowned out all other sounds. He hadn’t expected the bitter accusation that Byakuya had flung at her — not those words, at least. After the dozens of dreadful crimes Byakuya had laid at Kyoko’s feet, almost nothing else he could say would have come as a shock. Even hearing that he considered Kyoko herself responsible for the results of the last trial was more a disappointment to Naegi than a surprise… or it would have been. But that hadn’t been what Byakuya had said.

Why did you tell me all about how you manipulated Naegi to his death?

The two accusations weren’t the same. When it came to the parts that mattered, they weren’t even close. Yes, during the last trial Byakuya had convinced himself that Kyoko had used Naegi to further some sort of evil agenda… but that wasn’t the point. That wasn’t what he’d said.

Why did you tell me?

He’d spoken as if they’d discussed his paranoid theories more seriously when they’d been out of reach of the cameras… as if she’d confirmed them. And Kyoko hadn’t argued.

No, she just looked back at him with all the unflinching steel of her best poker face… the one that she used to conceal the turmoil of emotions too intense to let them have free rein. The one that she shouldn’t have needed in a conversation with her friend. “You needed to know. If I hadn’t said anything, Monokuma would have.”

It wasn’t an explicit confirmation — but it might as well have been. Kyoko had told Byakuya that her manipulations had led to Naegi’s death. She was wrong, of course she was wrong — no matter what she might have done, the only one to blame was the girl watching the monitors with him. But even so… that meant Kyoko believed she was at fault. True or not, she blamed herself for what had happened.

“What does it matter who told me?” Byakuya shook his head slightly, as though it were too heavy for a more expansive gesture. “What does any of it matter anymore? Why can’t you stop? That’s all I want now — for everything to stop.”

Naegi could only catch a brief glimpse of the look in his boyfriend’s eyes before he turned to head away — but that was more than he’d ever wanted to see. He’d never, never wanted to see someone he loved with those eyes — eyes that had lost all hope that there could be any good left in the world.

“Don’t.” Kyoko stepped directly into his path. “I am not letting you walk off by yourself when you’re obviously planning to do something stupid.”

“And there it is.” Byakuya’s shoulders trembled with a breathless laugh. “You’re afraid I’m going to try my hand at the killing game before you can get on with your own plans. Well, don’t worry — I already told you that I don’t plan to win.”

It should have been a relief to hear… but the words twisted through Naegi’s stomach with sour nausea. Winning had always been a part of Byakuya’s worldview, even if his understanding of true
victory had shifted over time. If he could dismiss the idea of winning the game so easily, rather than claiming he would defeat the mastermind or prove he was better than his opponents… then something was much wronger than Naegi had realized.

“I’m not worried about the game,” Kyoko said sharply, looking rather impatient with his reaction. “I’m concerned for your wellbeing.”

“Oh? Is that so?” Byakuya laughed again, the sound more whisper than vocalization. “Why — because we’re friends now?”

Even though Naegi knew that she wouldn’t say yes, he couldn’t help the hope that rose in his throat during her brief pause before answering — only to feel it shatter to pieces when she shook her head.

“We needn’t swear a vow of everlasting friendship for me to worry about you,” she said instead. “Anything that one player in the game does will have an impact on the others — moreso than ever now that there are so few of us left. You aren’t in this alone.”

“You’re going to say that? Now? After how many times you prioritized your precious investigation over everything else in this school?” Byakuya gave a single sharp shake of his head, mouth twisted into an ugly sneer. “Don’t be stupid. We’re not friends, and we don’t care about each other. Neither of us cares about a single person left in this school, and you’re deluding yourself if you think otherwise.”

Icy tendrils of horror cut through Naegi’s chest at the words, sheathing his heart in bitter cold. That couldn’t be true. It couldn’t be true. Byakuya was just exaggerating because of grief and stress and exhaustion. That had to be all that was driving his words. He couldn’t really believe that he had no one left to care about… not really.

Kyoko must have thought the same, her eyes widening as though the words had been a direct threat. “That kind of thinking won’t help anything.”

“You mean it won’t help you,” Byakuya said flatly. “Which should hardly be a shock — I already told you I wouldn’t.”

“That isn’t the problem —”

“I don’t care!” The shout echoed through the empty hallway, sound blasting from speakers across the wall in an overwhelming wave. “Whatever problem you think you’re trying to fix, it’s yours — because none of mine have any solutions left. Find whatever victory you’re looking for on your own — that’s what you’ve been after from the start. At least someone should make it out of this mess with something they wanted.”

He stepped around Kyoko to trudge on down the hall that led out of the dorms and back to the rest of the school. She turned to watch him go — but this time, she didn’t stop him again, no matter how much Naegi wished for her to try. Seeing Byakuya’s dark mood and empty eyes, a nameless terror began to curl through the back of his mind, dread that he didn’t know how to identify. All he knew was that he didn’t want to see what Byakuya would do while in the remorseless grip of what could only be called despair.

But what could Kyoko do to stop him that she hadn’t just tried? Reason and logic were her best weapons… but Byakuya had barely heard them, fighting the words without allowing their meaning to reach him.
And of course, by the time Naegi reached that conclusion, Kyoko was already a step ahead. She’d turned in the opposite direction that Byakuya had gone, striding briskly back to the long hall of empty dorm rooms. She gave Jill’s doorbell several sharp presses, and then went on to do the same to Sakura’s without waiting to see if she’d gotten a response. She didn’t even pause before repeating the cycle between the two doors again, this time jamming the doorbell even harder to break through all but the deepest of sleep.

That wasn’t necessary, though. Naegi wasn’t sure he ought to be looking at security feeds of girls’ rooms without their permission… but even without looking directly at either screen, he could see that both Jill’s room and Sakura’s had light and movement where there had previously been only darkness.

But that was all the time he could stand before his eyes flew back to the other screens, zeroing in on the solitary figure wandering through the dark and empty halls of the abandoned school. Where was Byakuya going? Was he simply letting his feet carry him away from Kyoko and their fight, or did he have some destination in mind? With so much darkness swirling through his head, where would he want to go?

Naegi didn’t know the answer, but he was sure that it couldn’t be good. He looked back to the dormitory screens, hoping that somehow Kyoko had managed to conjure up a plan that could help this awful situation. There was nothing left that he could do but watch… so he had to believe in her.

Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: I think normal posting schedule will tentatively resume now. New chapter next Sunday, July 1. See you then!
Watching Kyoko head back and forth down the hall to jam her finger against both Jill’s doorbell and Sakura’s, Naegi could see that this repetitive motion was the closest thing the collected young woman would allow herself to nervously pacing the halls. She was worried, worried about Byakuya, and seeing her fears made Naegi’s own cold dread creep even closer to his heart.

Since he still didn’t quite dare look directly at the screens showing either of the girls’ locked dorm rooms, it came as a shock when Sakura’s door flew open at last. “What’s wrong?” she demanded, snapping to alertness when she saw Kyoko alone in the hall.

Before answering, Kyoko spun back to Jill’s door and pressed the bell in a fierce, relentless ring that grated like sandpaper on Naegi’s nerves even filtered through speakers. A blur of motion shot across one of the screens in the corner of Naegi’s eye, just before Jill tore the door open with a furious snarl. “What the hell do you want?”

That was right — Jill had been angry at Kyoko about something, hadn’t she? When they’d last been in the same room, the genocider had pinned the other girl to the ground and tried to make use of her scissors. With the evidence still visible in Kyoko’s lopsided haircut, Naegi couldn’t believe it had slipped his mind. No matter how worried he’d been about Byakuya afterward, that was no excuse for forgetting that one of his friends had attacked another.

But Kyoko couldn’t have forgotten it — and she’d gone to summon Jill anyway. She didn’t even look ruffled by the burning red eyes glaring directly in front of her face, stepping back from the door only to make sure both of the other girls were encompassed in her field of vision. “I need both of your help,” she said, meeting first one gaze, then the other.

“Don’t care.” Jill spun back into her room and slammed the door —

Or tried to. But Kyoko was faster, one booted foot shooting between the door and frame quicker than a snake. “Togami needs your help, too.”

Those were the magic words. Jill’s glare didn’t lessen in the slightest, but she did stop trying to bludgeon Kyoko’s foot with the door.

“Have you seen him, then?” Sakura asked, the lines in her face deepening in a frown of concern. “I’d been under the impression that he’d returned to Naegi’s room to rest for the night.”

“He left again, and we ended up talking for quite some time,” Kyoko explained, moving briskly along before they had a chance to interrupt with questions. “But when he left, he was not in a state of mind in which he ought to be left alone. He made it quite clear that my presence was not helpful, so —”

She didn’t even get a chance to finish the request before Jill was off and running, braids flying back in a long horizontal stream as she disappeared out of the dorms.

Kyoko turned to watch her go, a hint of a frown crossing her face for a moment. “Well, I suppose that’s one problem dealt with.”

“Should I go in search of him as well?” Sakura asked, muscles tensing as if she planned to break into a sprint the moment Kyoko said the word.

But Kyoko shook her head. “Unfortunately, Togami isn’t the only issue in need of immediate
attention. We’ll have to assume that Jill can handle him, because I need your help with something else.”

That got Sakura’s attention, all the blood draining from her face as she stared at Kyoko. “Something else? Not — not another murder?”

“No, not that I’ve discovered,” Kyoko said, dispelling that idea immediately.

“Then what else could be so urgent?” Sakura asked, baffled.

“Yeah, what else is there to worry about if no one’s turned up dead?”

The cheery voice hit Naegi like a blast of winter wind, chilling him to his bones. He tore his gaze from the wall of monitors to look around the data center — only to see that the chair where Junko had been sitting now spun in a lazy circle on its own, no occupant in sight.

And sure enough, when he looked back up at the screens, Monokuma stood between Kyoko and Sakura wearing his innocently inquisitive smile.

“I mean, shouldn’t solving aaaaallll of those fun mysteries be the Ultimate Detective’s top priority?” Junko’s voice echoed out from the control room, overlapping with Monokuma’s modified voice in a doubly terrifying onslaught. “If you’re not gonna try to untangle everything, then what are you even doing here, huh? Huh? Huh?”

Sakura dropped into a defensive stance, prepared to spring into action at a moment’s notice — but Kyoko just rolled her eyes. “I wondered when you were going to decide to interrupt. I’m surprised you waited this long.”

“I was waiting for an invitation.” Junko’s voice quivered with sorrow, almost as if she really was close to tears. “It hurts when you never want to include me in your super-secret nighttime rendezvous, you know.”

The sadness had to be an act, of course… but even after everything she’d done, even knowing she almost certainly didn’t mean a bit of it, Naegi couldn’t help feeling the same urge to offer comfort that came on him when he saw one of his friends in distress.

“Yes, I’m sure you were devastated.” Disbelief practically dripped from Kyoko’s tone. “But I would have called you shortly in any case. I want to talk to you.”

“Ehh? You mean I’m finally invited to sit at the cool kids’ table? Or are you just here to take my lunch money and run?” Monokuma laughed gleefully — but this time, Junko didn’t laugh along with him. She fell silent, apparently causing the sound through her controls rather than by voice… and as disconcerting as it had been to hear the two voices at once, it was somehow even creepier to hear Monokuma laughing alone.

But Kyoko didn’t even blink, cocking one eyebrow as she waited for Monokuma to finish his cackling as if it were no more than white noise. She wasn’t talking to the robot in front of her, not really… by refusing to engage with Monokuma’s antics, she was making it clear that she would talk only to the mastermind behind the bear.

And it seemed like Junko was willing to let her. Monokuma’s laughter faded, but she didn’t rush to fill the silence with another flood of nonsense. It wasn’t much of an invitation — but Kyoko seized the opportunity without hesitation.

“I want to ask you how it feels to know you’ve lost at your own game.”
Naegi only had an instant to blink in bewilderment before Junko’s short, sharp laugh rang out. “Oh? I’ve lost? Hmm… sounds to me like you’ve gotten yourself all mixed up. You’re the ones who are playing a game here, not me!”

“But that’s not quite true, is it?” Kyoko countered. “We might be the players, but this entire game has been yours from beginning to end. You wrote every rule in it — including the one that says that the blackened will be executed only if he or she is identified during a class trial.” She narrowed her steely eyes. “And you broke that rule when you executed Makoto Naegi for a murder that you committed.”

“Oh, really? Is that what you think?” Monokuma tilted his head inquisitively. “That’s a pretty big accusation to throw around when you haven’t got any proof to back it up!”

Kyoko crossed her arms with a small smile. “Oh, I’m happy to try to prove it — in fact, that’s exactly what I want to do. I want to redo the trial for Mukuro Ikusaba to prove once and for all that you cheated at your own game.”

“I see… so what you’re really saying is that you want to aim low!” Monokuma’s sharp teeth gleamed as he grinned too wide. “What kind of detective only wants to solve one mystery, huh? I say that if you’re gonna try your hand at one, you might as well go for broke! I’ll give you your trial, all right — but you aren’t just gonna be solving the last murder. No, you’re going up against every single mystery left in this school. If you can solve each and every one — then I’ll accept your victory! But if you can’t…”

“You’ll execute all of us.” Kyoko nodded once, as though she’d expected as much. “We’ll do it.”

“Oh? Do you speak for everyone now?” Monokuma asked, looking over to the side where Sakura had been watching in silence.

Sakura’s eyes narrowed at the obvious challenge. “That’s right. If this is our final opportunity to battle you, we will not retreat. We will not allow you to drive us further into your despair.”

“Really?” Monokuma’s brightest laugh rang through the room. “I wonder if that’s what all of you will think once you learn the truth you’ve been fighting for!”

Naegi froze, the words echoing round in his head. Kyoko had agreed to uncover the mysteries of the school… the mysteries that all centered around the memories none of them knew they’d lost. The memories of despair, of the Tragedy, of the ruined world outside the shelter doors… memories that had been terrible enough to live through the first time, when they’d all at least had one another for support. But now… what would it do to them to learn that horrible truth now, after seeing so many friends die in pursuit of a world that no longer existed?

What would it do to Byakuya to learn that he had no one left beyond the school walls?

“I’m looking forward to it,” Kyoko said, smirking with a confidence that couldn’t possibly last. “I wonder what it will look like when the cause of all our despair falls into despair themselves.”

She was determined now, Naegi could see it in her eyes. She would solve the mysteries and uncover the horrible truth… and she would only make everything worse.
Chapter 319

Chapter Notes

**Trigger warning:** As of this chapter, I've added trigger warning tags to this fic for discussion of self-harm. If that's something you would prefer to avoid, you should steer clear of the next two chapters.

Togami hardly knew where he intended to go as he stormed out of the dormitory hall — all he knew was that he had to get as far away from Kirigiri as he could. Nowhere within the claustrophobic walls of the school could possibly be far enough, he knew that… but even so, once his feet began moving he didn’t know how to stop them. He let them carry him on and on, up staircase after staircase, as though he might be able to leave the whole world behind if he could only move fast enough.

But of course that wasn’t true. All that happened was that he found himself with no stairs left to climb. The last few sparks of adrenaline fizzed through his veins, then faded away to leave only cold, empty exhaustion in their wake. He shouldn’t have climbed so high for no reason, all the way to the fifth floor —

The fifth floor…

His head jerked to one side, and suddenly he was staring down the hallway leading to that nightmarish classroom where Ikusaba’s corpse had started it all. Why had he come back here to face that scene again? Hadn’t he seen enough yesterday, when he’d failed so miserably to uncover any helpful answers? Didn’t he know there was nothing left to find?

He spun away from the hallway, turning away and groping blindly for the first door he could reach. He didn’t care which one it was — anything would be better if it would lead him away from that sight.

He let himself fall through the doorway, landing hard on his knees in the middle of a garden path. Greenery hid the walls of the prison, and the false sky arching overhead created the illusion of a world beyond the school. He knew it was nothing but a lie, of course, he hadn’t lost himself so completely as to forget that fact… but the lie was better than any of the realities that waited for him outside.

Every moment trapped in this school drove frozen daggers through his chest, bitter with the knowledge that he was still stuck in the middle of the game that had murdered Naegi. Memories of the other boy’s bright smile and kind eyes lingered in every corner, inescapable and unbearable. The thought of staying here another second made his fingers curl into painful fists, in spite of the protesting aches from his injured hands. Staying in the mastermind’s clutches was very nearly the most horrific fate he could imagine…

The only worse option would be leaving.

Returning to the world outside, letting his old life reclaim him… mouthing his way through the lies he’d have to tell about Naegi, feeling the grime of betrayal sink into his veins as he turned himself into a monster that Naegi would have hated… Togami could see every hideous moment of that life
stretching out ahead of him, and he hated it all.

It didn’t matter whether he stayed in this nightmare or left to find a new one… there wouldn’t be any difference in the end. He had no goal left to fight for, no future to strive towards… no hope that he could ever pick up the broken pieces of his life again. Even if Kirigiri succeeded in her plan to defeat the mastermind, it would be too late for him. He’d already lost in every way that mattered.

Even now, even as the thoughts ran through his mind, he knew he was only making it worse. The longer he lay here crumpled and miserable on the ground, with no nearby students to justify the obvious show of grief, the less believable it would be that his feelings had been a lie. He would have to do more and more to convince his family that the weakness had been false… and doubts would linger on in their minds no matter what he did. He would never be free of the consequences of these weeks trapped in the mastermind’s game.

How had he brought this hell on himself? There must have been a point when he could have avoided it, if only he’d been a little smarter… but try as he might, he couldn’t pinpoint the moment. The only thing that might have saved him was if he’d never fallen in love with Naegi in the first place… but that thought was even more unbearable than any of the others.

He might have stayed there on the ground for hours, consumed by the nightmares screaming in his head… but warning twinges from his knees began making themselves known. The way he’d fallen wasn’t exactly a comfortable position… very far from it, in fact. The longer he stayed like this, the more aware he became of the pain shooting up through his legs. It hurt… and it was only getting worse.

He ought to move so that the pain would stop, he knew that… but even as he thought it, a perverse part of his mind whispered that maybe he shouldn’t bother. With his life in broken ruins around him, why not embrace the destruction wholeheartedly? Maybe it would even make the emotional pain easier to handle if he could distract himself with mere physical injuries.

He knew that thought should horrify him. Once, not so very long ago, it would have. But now… there was a kind of twisted, knife-sharp comfort in the idea of letting pain wash his world away. If he’d really believed such a thing could work, he would have leapt at the chance without hesitation.

But it wouldn’t work. Not really. Even if it gave him a few brief seconds of respite, what difference would that make in the end? He would still resurface eventually back into the same terrible situation he was in now. There wasn’t much point in stopping the pain… but there wasn’t a point to letting it continue, either.

Slowly, hands trembling like an old man’s, Togami braced himself against the floor and levered himself back up to his feet. As he stood, he looked around the garden again, taking in the stretch of plants surrounding him. The bright leaves and cheerful flowers looked obscenely out of place in this school, as though they’d been plucked from some other world where murder was an unknown impossibility. They might even have been pretty, if he’d encountered them elsewhere.

Would Naegi have thought they were pretty?

Probably he would. He’d had an uncanny gift for finding bright spots in the darkest of situations. He would have been able to see the beauty here in spite of the horrors around them.

A jagged blade of regret stabbed through Togami’s chest as he thought of those hours he’d squandered during his stupid fight with Naegi, when they’d each explored this floor alone. What would it have been like to walk through this garden with the boy he loved at his side? To act like a
real couple for a few minutes, to forget about anything else in the world but each other? Would it have been like the date in the park that Naegi had imagined for them?

As those questions ran through his mind, Togami began walking around the perimeter of the room in a slow, swaying loop. What would it be like if Naegi were here with him? How would the other boy move, when would he smile or frown? Would he speak, or even laugh? The questions hurt more than any physical pain could match… but even so, he clung to each stab through his broken heart as fervently as if it were Naegi himself. This pain was the closest he could get to feeling some shred of Naegi’s presence, and he couldn’t bear to let it go.

The only sound in the garden came from his feet crunching along the gravel path, past the chicken coop, out of reach of the monstrous central plant. Other than that, it was silent… too silent, in a way that a real garden wouldn’t be. No buzzing insects, no chirping birds… even the chickens stayed uncannily quiet unless actively disturbed. He’d found quiet places peaceful once, when he’d lived another life… but now it was just another reminder that no matter what fantasies he conjured up from his pain-fueled imaginations, in reality he was alone. He would never be free of that truth.

He stumbled onward, completing the circuit as he reached the tool shed, off to one side. As if on autopilot, his feet carried him forward further, to the shed’s shadowed interior. There was nowhere left to go from there, though, and the walls put an end to his mindless movement forward.

He glanced around the shed, but there wasn’t anything more of interest here now than there had been when he’d first investigated it. Gardening tools, that was all… just to hammer home the cruel illusion that this was really meant to be a place for tending plants. But of course that wasn’t true, not really. It was all too obvious that the gardening implements here had been chosen for their functionality as potential murder weapons. The pickaxe would cleave in a skull easily enough, even in the hands of someone with limited strength. The gardening shears gleamed sharp enough to slice through human flesh as easily as greenery. And —

The garden shears… Togami’s eyes focused on them, staring at the bright long blades as if they were the only real objects left in the world. They were sharp enough to cut… oh, yes, they certainly were. The mastermind had seen to that.

He could see the shaking reflection of a boy in the blades, dirty and disheveled and broken… and he reached out to close his hand around it. The blades pressed sharp and bright into his hands as he carried them out of the shed… but now he welcomed the pain. It bloomed through his heart with the promise that there was a way to escape this nightmare, after all… a way to escape this wreck of a shattered life. All it would take was a little more pain… and at least it would all finally end.
Togami stumbled across the garden, grimacing as the too-bright beams of the false sun lanced through eyes that had grown accustomed to the shed’s dim shadows. Even the lighting in this room had been crafted to match the outdoors… which was yet more evidence of the mastermind’s painstaking attention to detail. Nothing ever escaped their notice, did it? That might almost have been admirable… if they hadn’t wasted the talent on a task so pointless as decorating a killing ground. What did it matter how believable the garden appeared, when the only people who would see it were the ones who’d been brought here to die?

It seemed to take him an eternity to reach the small wooden bench, and he sank down onto it as though it marked the end of a long, hard journey. In a way, perhaps it did. He looked down at the gardening shears in his hands, tracing one finger along the knife-sharp edge. Some far-off whisper of sensation might have been pain, but it was so insignificant as to be unrecognizable in comparison to all the rest of what he’d endured.

A thin line of red crossed his fingertip, bright enough to be a brand on his pale skin. Before Hope’s Peak, he’d worked hard to avoid damaging his perfect skin with scars… but it had clearly been wasted effort. The cuts on his hands from trying to claw through the mirrors would certainly scar, and he still hadn’t regained any hearing in his left ear. And those were only the start… the injuries he’d sustained since being imprisoned here had been too numerous to count, leaving indelible marks on his body to remind him of the many ways he’d failed.

He touched the blade again, more firmly than before, and was rewarded when a full bead of trembling red bloomed against his fingers. It dripped down onto the silver blades, tiny blotches that masked at least a little bit of the boy reflected back at him.

But not enough. He could still see empty blue eyes staring up at him, the eyes of the person who had so stupidly destroyed everything worthwhile he’d had… who hadn’t even known he was a failure until it was too late to make any difference. Eyes like those had no right to look out at the world.

More red fell onto them, washing them from his sight… but still, still it wasn’t enough. There had to be more, more red, more pain, until it was finally enough to carry him away from the world he hated. Maybe if it carried him far enough… he might even be able to see Naegi one more time. He didn’t dare hope for such an undeserved gift… but even so, the thought of it made him smile.

And then a wave of force slammed into his back, knocking him roughly forward off the bench and sending the shears flying from his grip. He groped out towards them — but a hand shot out to pin his wrist to the ground.

“Sorry to break it to you, darling,” Genocide Jill’s voice rang out from above him, “but red is not your color.”

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When Naegi saw Byakuya take hold of the gardening shears, he’d feared that the empty-eyed young man had decided to try to go after Kyoko again. Jill’s scissors had apparently failed him, so he’d gone in search of a new weapon. At the time, it had seemed like that was the worst case
scenario.

And then Byakuya sat down on the bench and brought his own hand against the blades.

“No,” Naegi breathed, eyes wide with horror at the sight of his boyfriend spilling his own blood. “No! Stop — Byakuya, please, you have to stop!”

But the young man on the screen couldn’t hear the desperate words. He touched the blade again, and this time the wound was worse. What was he thinking? Surely this couldn’t be what it looked like — not really, not Byakuya of all people, not the clever and determined man that Naegi knew so well. Not because of Naegi.

A shadow fell across Naegi’s vision, and he realized that Junko had dropped down to sit on the floor beside him. She leaned back against the wall, chin propped on one hand as she peered curiously up at the screen.

“Do something!” Naegi pleaded, reaching out for the only possibility of help that he could see. “Please — you can’t let him do this, you have to stop him! Please!”

Junko blinked, tilting her head so she was looking down at him instead of the monitors. “Huh? You want to stop him — right when he’s about to win our little bet for me?” She clucked her tongue disapprovingly. “I never took you for a cheater.”

“Who cares about your stupid bet?” Tears burned Naegi’s eyes as they forced their way out, blurring his vision and catching in his throat. “He’s — he’s hurting himself! If he keeps this up then he’ll — he’ll —”

“Die?” Junko had no problem nonchalantly speaking the word Naegi couldn’t bring himself to utter.

“We can’t just sit here and watch!”

“Sure we can!” Junko leaned close, as if confiding a great secret. “It’s super easy!”

And she knew that because she’d done it before. Icy fingers curled tight around Naegi’s heart as he realized exactly what she meant. She’d sat here in this very room and watched as their friends killed one another, without even lifting a finger to stop them… and now she intended to do the same for Byakuya.

“Don’t,” he whispered, eyes darting back to the screen where Byakuya still held the blade to his bloody wrist. “Don’t do this, please.” He didn’t know if he meant the words for his boyfriend, or the girl beside him, or the whole world that had turned into a frozen blur around him — but it didn’t matter. He’d ask whoever it took, beg as much as they demanded, if only this nightmare stopped. “Don’t, please don’t do this. Don’t make me watch this. I’ll do anything, please!”

“Oh? Well, if that’s the offer on the table, what kind of friend would say no?”

Naegi hardly dared to hope it was possible — but when he tore his eyes away from the screens, he saw Junko pulling out a remote control and tapping away at the buttons. Maybe she’d finally had a change of heart — she’d realized she didn’t have to do any of this, she’d decided to make it all stop, and —

And the monitors showing the fifth floor of the school went dark.

“There we go!” Junko tucked the remote back into her pocket and beamed at Naegi. “Now you
don’t have to watch!”
As horrifying as it had been for Naegi to have to see Byakuya turn a blade on his own wrists, the sight of empty monitors was far worse. He scanned the whole row of screens that had been displaying the entire fifth floor just moments ago, but every one of them had gone dark. His eyes shot towards Junko in disbelief, searching for some hint that this was all a tasteless joke, that she hadn’t been serious, that she would turn the screens back on any second now — but her hand never even twitched back to the pocket where she’d stashed the remote.

“Turn it back on!” As soon as he realized she had no intention of fixing the displays of her own accord, the plea tore itself from Naegi’s throat. “Please, I have to know what he’s doing — I have to see if he’s okay! Please!”

“What? You’re changing your mind already?” Junko tilted her head from side to side, pigtails bouncing around her shoulders. “Tell you what, sweetie, I’ll give you a little free advice — flip-flopping is not an attractive quality in a guy.”

“This isn’t funny!” Naegi had no patience for whatever game she thought she was playing. “He could be — he might be —”

“Dead?” She shrugged. “Or he might not be.” A dark smile twisted across one corner of her mouth. “And if that’s the case, then isn’t it better not to know for as long as possible? Isn’t it better to keep that precious flame of hope alive just a little longer?”

What she was saying was wrong — Naegi knew it was wrong, felt the wrongness deep in the core of his soul — but he didn’t know how to say it. He didn’t have time to think it through, to come up with the words that would convince Junko to see his point of view. Byakuya was in trouble, he was hurt, and that thought overwhelmed any other, lesser fears.

He couldn’t let himself dwell on the worst possibility, not unless he knew for sure what had happened — but even knowing that, Naegi couldn’t stop his thoughts from careening down a dark spiral of awful scenarios. What if Byakuya hadn’t stopped? What if this really was the end — this moment, now, when Naegi had finally remembered what they’d been to one another? What if he never got the chance to see his boyfriend alive again?

“Let me see him — please, you have to let me see him!” Even though he knew that begging wouldn’t help, Naegi couldn’t stop the pleas tearing free from his throat. “Please, please, this can’t be the last time!”

“Hmm? Is that really what you want?” Junko twisted one long curl of hair round and round her finger in a never-ending corkscrew. “But once you know, that will be it. Everything will all be over, and you’ll never have anything to look forward to again.”

“I don’t care about that!” The words scraped his too-dry mouth, and Naegi realized somewhere in the back of his mind that he’d shouted. “It doesn’t matter! I just want to see him, please!”

“I know you do!” Junko beamed down at him. “You want something that you know you can’t have, and even though it’s impossible, you’ll just cling and cling and cling to any possibility of getting it.” She heaved a sigh, clasping her hands tight against her chest. “That’s what hope feels like, right there. And I’d never want to steal it from you — so I’ll just let you sit with it for as long as you like.”
Togami didn’t resist as Jill hauled him away from the bloodstained bench where she’d attacked him. She dragged him to sit with his back to a nearby tree, and he let her prop him with his back against the trunk so that he would stay upright no matter how little energy he expended. What did it matter if she wanted him in one place or another? It would all be the same in the end. Even the distant jolt of something like pain when she took hold of his injured wrist wasn’t enough to make him fight.

Only when she started to press the tattered hem of her skirt against the wound did he try to yank his arm away.

“Stop that.” Jill’s fingers snapped around the back of his hand, a deceptively light grip that held his wrist utterly immobile. He tried again to pull away, but he might as well have been straining against an iron cuff. Was she really so much stronger than him, or had he let himself grow so weak that he’d lost the ability to fight back?

The reason didn’t matter. Nothing could, not with the knife-edged shears far out of reach and the blood flow slowing as Jill applied pressure to his wrist. His mouth curled into a bitter sneer at the sight of his own blood staining the genocider’s hands.

“I never took you for a hypocrite.”

Was that his voice, rasping through the air like broken glass? He couldn’t recognize any part of himself in the sound… and yet he knew the words were the ones he’d had in his head.

Jill didn’t seem to think twice about it, though — assuming she was capable of giving serious thought to any subject other than murder. “Sticks and stones, darling,” she said, not even bothering to look up from his injury. “You’re gonna have to try a little harder than that if you wanna make me feel it.”

What did he care how she felt? He’d never thought of her as anything more than a nuisance and a stalker — and now, as she tore the ruined shreds of her skirt into a makeshift bandage, she was choosing to be even worse than that. “And here I thought you wanted to see me die. Did you decide it’s more fun to watch me suffer?”

“Suffering doesn’t suit you any better than red does.” Jill did what she could to tie the cloth around his arm in spite of its piecemeal state. “Sure, I fantasized about killing you — I mean, who wouldn’t?” For a moment, a trace of her usual grin flickered across her face — but then her eyes dropped back to his arm, and any hint of amusement vanished. “But not like this. You deserve a better death than this.”

“Then do it.”

Jill froze, eyebrows knitting together in a confused expression that eerily echoed Fukawa’s. “What?”

“You heard me.” Togami leaned forward, catching and holding her dark red eyes. “Do whatever you want — I won’t try to stop you.”

She stared at him for a long moment, and then one hand slowly moved to pull a pair of scissors from her side. Togami held his breath as she held the scissors out in front of her, frowning down at
the blades like she’d never seen them before. She clicked them open once… twice… and then looked back up at him.

“Sorry, baby… but I can’t.”

“You — what?” That was the last response he’d been expecting. “You mean because of the game?”

“Nah.” She gave a lazy one-armed shrug, twirling the scissors idly between the two of them. “Sure, losing one of those trials doesn’t sound like my idea of a good time — but it’s not like I’m some dilettante with a chainsaw! I’m willing to suffer for my art if that’s what it takes.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Jill’s hand shot back to her side, and the scissors vanished again. “I don’t want to kill you.”
Chapter 322

Togami couldn’t believe what Genocide Jill had just said to him. She’d spent the last few weeks creepily gushing over how exciting it would be to add him to her victim line-up, stalking him at every opportunity with no regard for his repeated insistence that the attention was neither appreciated nor reciprocated — and now that the idea had some merit, she just changed her mind?

“Aw, come on, darling, don’t look at me like that!” Jill huffed out a sigh. “Gotta say, it’s times like these I really miss having Gloomy around. Not like she was any better at the whole hard conversation shtick, but at least I didn’t have to deal with this kind of mess.”

Togami had no idea what she was talking about — but whatever it was, he doubted it could be anything good. “No one asked you to deal with me. In fact, I’d much prefer if you didn’t.”

For some reason, this brought a smile springing back across her face. “And there’s that fighting spirit! I knew my White Knight couldn’t really be gone!”

Togami’s eyes narrowed into the best glare he could muster under the circumstances. “I’m not anything of yours.”

“No right now you aren’t.” Jill agreed far too easily. “And if the guy in front of me now was all you had going on, you can bet I wouldn’t want you. There’s nothing adorable about killing someone who’s ready to die,” She bent sharply forward, eyes flashing. “If you’re gonna end it all, it has to be spectacular.”

Even the thought sent exhaustion weighing down the length of his spine, dragging his shoulders back into a heavy slump. Spectacular? He’d fought so hard to be that, in another world outside these walls… but that life was gone. It had ended the moment the mastermind had laid claim to him… he just hadn’t known it until too late.

And if Jill could still look at the wreck of what he’d become and see the potential for something spectacular, then she was even more of an idiot than he’d believed. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Jill laughed, a dark and quiet murmur that was nothing like her usual wild cackle. “I know a lot more about it than some, darling.” She looked down at the newly-bare skin of her legs, and the long tracks of half-healed cuts that trailed dark and red against her pale skin. “You’re not the only one who lost part of their soul.”

Togami usually did his best to look at the genocider’s body as little as possible — but he thought he would have noticed those marks if she’d had so many of them for long. After all the cold case reading he’d done in the past, it was easy enough to identify the purpose of the tally marks… but which of the deaths would she have added to her victim count? Not Hagakure, surely, since Jill hadn’t even known Fukawa had killed him until they’d proved it in the trial. But then… if it wasn’t him…

“I can still feel her in my head, you know,” Jill said, in a conversational tone that didn’t match the unsettling glint in her eyes. “Gloomy’s last little parting gift to the better half she left behind. Every minute of the day, she lets me know how much she hated our life.”

Because of course Fukawa couldn’t go without giving her alter ego one last reason to go even further off the rails. Togami grimaced, his past reading on neurology flashing through his mind.
He couldn’t begin to guess how Monokuma had erased Fukawa’s memories, but he supposed that it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that it could have caused something like what Jill described. In fact, considering that Monokuma had been involved, unfortunate side effects were all but guaranteed.

“For a while there, I was at the same place you’re in now.”

Staring up at her for the first few long, blank seconds, Togami couldn’t understand what she meant… but when her gaze dropped down to his bandaged wrist, the answer clicked. If he could believe what she was saying… that meant she’d thought about turning her scissors on herself.

“None of it’s the same, sure,” she went on, voice quieter than he’d ever heard her, “but it’s close enough. Neither of us has much of anything waiting for us if we get outside, not after everything that happened in here.”

“Then why?” Togami demanded, the words twisting into a plaintive gasp as they left his mouth. “If you claim to understand — then why did you stop me?”

“You have to ask?” Jill grinned, tongue slithering out of her mouth in some semblance of her usual expression. “Guess you weren’t listening when I said you deserve better. I’m not letting you go out like some washed-out shadow of my White Knight, so empty inside there’s no difference at all before and after you’re all sliced up!”

An instinctive protest against the insult leapt to Togami’s lips — but he forced himself to swallow it back unspoken. After all, didn’t he already know she was right? Hadn’t he thought every word himself before she’d ever spoken it? There was no reason he should care more about hearing the words from someone else, especially not his murderous stalker. Her opinion didn’t matter to him at all, not in the slightest, and he refused to let her force him to act as though it should.

“You,” he said distinctly, his glare as cold as he knew how to make it, “do not get to make my decisions for me.”

She laughed, throwing her head back as hilarity exploded out. “Sorry, darling, but I think the way I just stopped you says otherwise. I do get to decide — and I say you die as yourself or not at all.”

Togami stared at her, ice heavy and cold in the pit of his stomach as he realized just what she meant. Not only had he failed to win every battle he’d tried to fight in this hellhole of a school… he’d even failed in this final attempt at escaping the nightmare his life had become. The self-confidence that had once propelled him through life had been nothing more than ego and arrogance, and he couldn’t hope to regain any measure of it. No wonder Jill had no interest in killing him any longer.

“Come on, darling, it’s not like I’m doing this so I can watch you squirm — mental torture doesn’t do a thing for me!” Jill tossed her braids in disdain. “I mean, where’s the fun if you don’t even get to see the blood?”

Togami had a dark suspicion that this was Jill’s twisted idea of trying to comfort him. If so, he wished she would stop. Bad enough he’d ruined his own life — he didn’t need a serial killer pitying him for it.

“I know you’ll make it through this, baby,” Jill said, eyes fierce and sharp. “I’ll make you get through it. Anything I can manage, my White Knight can do ten times over. I’m gonna help you remember until there’s enough of you back to take down whoever’s running this show.”
Take down the mastermind? A laugh gurgled out of Togami’s throat at the thought. He’d been deluded enough to boast about it earlier in the game, yes… but he knew better now. “Nothing you can say will make that happen.”

“You will,” Jill insisted. “If you won’t do it for yourself, then what about Makoto Naegi?”

The name slammed into Togami’s chest with all the force of a sledgehammer. He wanted to scream, wanted to shake her, wanted to demand that she never even think about uttering those precious words again in his presence — but he couldn’t force his body to respond to any of the actions. All he could do was stare at the girl beside him, eyes wide with shock.

“He wanted to take down the mastermind,” Jill said, leaning forward. “He made that crystal clear all the time we’ve been stuck in here. That’s what he wanted — and that’s what he died for. The way a person dies matters — and it’s got to matter even more when it’s the person you love.”

_The person you love._

Naegi’s face flashed before Togami’s eyes — not as he’d been in those awful final moments, but Naegi at his best, all warmth and brightness and determination. Grief clawed at his heart, because she was right, she was _right_ — he _loved_ Naegi, loved him deeply and desperately, loved him in spite of all the reasons he shouldn’t. He loved Naegi so much…

And he’d never told Naegi how he felt. Naegi had _died_ not knowing.

“Never say that again.” Togami could barely hear his own words even as he spoke them.

Jill frowned. “Why he died, you mean? But —”

“Not that.” Togami clenched his right hand, dried blood from his left wrist cracking along his fingers as he forced them to move. “Don’t say how I felt about him — not ever again. He never got the chance to hear it, so no one else gets to say it either.”

“You never told him?” Jill asked, looking baffled. “In all this time?”

Togami glared at her. “Maybe you think a few days is enough to begin swearing everlasting devotion, but some of us require more time than that.”

“How much more time do you need?” Jill shook her head. “Two years sounds like more than enough time for three words, if you ask me.”

“What are you talking about now?” Togami stared at her in confusion. “What two years?”

“You know,” Jill said, as though it should be obvious. “The two years you and your sweetheart have known each other.”
Togami narrowed his eyes and glared at Jill, waiting for her to explode with laughter and admit to making a tasteless and cruel joke. Two years? God, what wouldn’t he give to have had two long years to spend with the boy he loved? Of course he would have found the words to tell Naegi the depth of his feelings if he’d had such swaths of time… and maybe, maybe it would even have been enough for Naegi to respond in kind.

And that thought hurt, more than blades sliding along his wrist, glass tearing through his hands, or explosions knocking him off his feet. He shied away from the thought of emotions Naegi would never get a chance to return. Anything was better than that, and so he forced himself to focus his attention back on Jill instead.

Jill… who against all expectations had not burst into wild laughter. Who was staring at him in confusion, as though he was the one who didn’t make sense.

Togami’s glare lost its icy edge as he realized that apparently, Jill was not trying to mock him. For some reason, she genuinely believed that he and Naegi had known one another for two entire years.

Well, he supposed that she had recently had her brain scrambled by whatever Monokuma had done during that execution. It was hardly surprising she’d gotten disoriented after that. “We haven’t been in here for two years,” he informed her wearily. “The killing game only started a few weeks ago, that’s all.”

But to his surprise, Jill nodded. “Sure, figured it had to be sometime around then,” she agreed easily. “Not like Gloomy let me out to play all that often, but I know I would’ve noticed something like this going on any further back.” She shrugged. “I was talking about the time before this whole game thing got up and running — all the time you had together at school and that.”

School…? The reference to such a mundane feature of his former life slapped him harshly across the face, the sheer unexpectedness of it driving stabs of pain deep into his skull. Why was she talking about part of a world so far removed from what their lives had become here? No matter how badly her mind might have been skewed, it still should have been painfully obvious that he and Naegi had been robbed of any chance to attend school together like a normal couple would have had.

“If you can’t be bothered to engage your brain before speaking, don’t waste your breath.” He’d meant for the words to bite — but somehow the edge never quite materialized, leaving his tone flat and empty. “Naegi and I didn’t even know each other before we were invited to attend Hope’s Peak, that should have been obvious.”

“Yes, darling, I kno-ow,” Jill said, rolling her eyes as she drew the words out in a childish sing-song. “That’s what I’m talking about, the year you were all at Hope’s Peak Academy together!”

Togami couldn’t shake the unsettling feeling that he and Jill were having two different conversations, and the disorientation of trying to follow two contradictory trains of thought only made his headache worse. “That never happened,” he said firmly, in the hopes that it would drag her back to reality.

But of course the genocider refused to go along with any attempt to make her act like a sane person. She put one hand on her hip as she stared at him, fingers tapping out a silent pattern against her side as if she were playing a piano. “You sure you’re feeling all right there, darling?”
“I’m not the one who’s hallucinating school attendance.”

He’d meant the words to be scathing, but they didn’t have their intended effect. Jill’s eyebrows shot up, and with a silver flash her scissors reappeared in her free hand, twirling rapidly between her fingers. She barely even seemed aware of them, in spite of the razor-sharp edges spinning perilously close to her skin — all her attention was focused on him in a red glare so intense he could feel it burning into his skin. He hadn’t the faintest idea what she was looking for… but her expression said loud and clear that she wasn’t happy with what she was finding.

After a long moment, she snapped the scissors closed with a sharp clatter. “Are you saying you don’t remember going to Hope’s Peak?”

A wave of pain hammered against the back of his eyes until bursts of red clouded his vision. Could she really have caused such a terrible headache just by making a few bizarre claims? Maybe this was a sign that he was getting sick. After everything else that had happened, he wouldn’t be surprised to learn his immune system had failed him, too.

Fresh pain shot through his jaw as he ground his teeth together, forcing the headache back long enough to glare at Jill. “How could I remember? I never got the chance to attend — the mastermind behind this game kidnapped us all the day we should have started!”

Her mouth twisted sharply, as though she’d started to grin but lost the will halfway through. “Talk about a waste of a good fantasy! I’m never gonna be able to dream about you going off the deep end again, you know — not with this kind of reality there to drag me down!”

So the serial killer with a split personality was going to act like he was the one who had lost his mind? Even after all the rest of what he’d endured in the last few days, that still sent indignation prickling along his nerves. How could she doubt his mind instead of her own, when she was the one who’d had her brain electrocuted when Monokuma had —

When Monokuma had erased her memories.

Togami froze, breath turning to lead in his heavy lungs. He hardly dared to think, not with that idea rising large and terrible out of the darkest reaches of his head. It couldn’t be true, not really, not something so life-altering as this. There would have been hints, clues, something that would have given the whole game away. Someone would have noticed, someone would have said —

Would have said that they’d lost their memories.

Like Kirigiri had said to him, when she’d confessed her secrets in the bathhouse not so long ago.

The world seemed to quake under Togami’s feet, leaving him too shaken to realize which way was up. He looked at Jill again — but this time he didn’t see a twisted murderer sitting there beside him. Now when he looked at her, he felt as though he could finally catch a glimpse of a pathway back to solid ground.

“Tell me what you remember.”

He’d never expected to be grateful for Genocide Jill’s rapid-fire babbling — but that was precisely the reaction that washed through him when she launched immediately into an explanation without giving him more than a split second to regret asking the question.

“Sure, darling, you know I’ll talk all day if you’re the one listening! Not that I’ve got the whole picture — a lot of the pieces were on Gloomy’s side of the dotted line — but I picked up enough to get the outlines.” She shrugged. “You spent a year at Hope’s Peak Academy before it closed
during the Biggest Most Awful Most Tragic Event in Human History.”
Togami wasn’t sure what he’d expected Jill to tell him about the two years of his life she apparently remembered better than he did — but he hadn’t been prepared for her response to line up so neatly with the clues about the outside world that had been scattered through the school. If he could believe what she was saying, then Hope’s Peak would have closed about a year ago — just as the letter they’d found when the library first opened had suggested.

Could she have imagined the story so that it fit with what they’d already learned? No… Fukawa had been the one with them when they’d discovered that information, and so the memories should have been wiped from Jill’s mind along with all other trace of her other self. However she’d come by these memories, they must have been made independently of the hints in this prison.

In that case… could it be true?

No, it was too early to judge that, not for certain. He narrowed his eyes at Jill, who apparently had already forgotten about her boast of talking all day. “Well? There has to be more to it than that!”

“Yeah, probably,” Jill said, twirling her scissors absently again. “But like I said, it’s not like I’m the one who lived through it — I only got the scraps that came up whenever Gloomy got a whiff of blood. And sure, for a while there it was happening pretty often — but for some reason no one ever wants to relax and chat with me when a room’s got blood dripping from the walls!”

As repulsive as that mental image was, Togami refused to let his expression twist into a grimace. Not that hiding his disgust would make any difference to his dignity — as if he had any of that left after everything he’d done on the mastermind’s godforsaken broadcast system — but at least it wouldn’t encourage her to continue in that vein.

“Tell me about the scraps, then,” he said, directing her towards a more useful topic than descriptions of gore. “What’s your earliest memory of your time at Hope’s Peak?”

He half expected her to launch into a disturbingly stalker-esque description of her first sight of him — but for once Jill actually took the question seriously, even going so far as to give it a few seconds of thought before answering. “Hate to break it to you, darling, but like a lot of first times it was pretty underwhelming. I woke up one morning all by my lonesome in a strange bed, no idea how I got there — pretty much par for the course!”

“And those were the dormitories?” he persisted, giving the extraneous details the lack of attention they deserved. “Meaning that you didn’t know beforehand that you’d be attending a boarding school?”

“Not like Gloomy and I could really sit down for a nice friendly chat about her plans.” Darkness rose behind Jill’s eyes for a moment, shadowing her face — but then it vanished like she’d wiped it away, her smile springing back brighter than ever. “But it didn’t exactly take Nancy Drew’s talent to find the orientation papers on her desk and put the pieces together.”

“Orientation… so they would have had a date on them?” Togami demanded, seizing on the important detail. “When was it?”

“I don’t know, probably sometime in the spring.” Jill shrugged. “Sorry, darling, but anniversaries
aren’t my style — hard to keep track of dates when you don’t see two mornings in a row!”

“The year, then,” Togami snapped impatiently. “Surely you must remember that much!”

“Sure — 2010,” Jill said. “Don’t exactly need a cheat sheet for that one.”

“2010…” Togami repeated slowly, trying to sort through what that could mean. If he’d been asked to name the year, that was the same one he himself would have given. “And you said that was two years ago?”

“Something like that!” In spite of her cheerful agreement, Jill’s intense stare never flickered away from his face. “The kick off for a year packed full of more high school shenanigans than a shoujo manga!”

A year that he didn’t even remember… a year when anything could have happened. What would he have done, if he’d found himself attending Hope’s Peak as planned instead of trapped in this awful game? How would he have acted? When he’d met all the students in his class for the first time… what would he have done?

His heart lurched, and for a moment his lungs couldn’t remember how to breathe. He had to force them to expand once more, to draw in just enough air to ask the question screaming through his head. “Naegi — did I know Naegi?”

That wasn’t what he wanted to ask, not really. Had he given Naegi a chance to prove how wonderful a person he was? Had he bothered to look deeper than the ordinary surface long enough to appreciate the extraordinary person hidden inside? But he didn’t have the strength to ask those terrible questions aloud. That poor attempt was the closest he could get.

But Jill seemed to catch his meaning anyway. “Be pretty hard not to know him, with the way you two were joined at the hip! Not that I ever caught a glimpse of you two getting snuggly — but it’s not like I need every little detail spelled out to get a read on that kind of situation!”

Relief slammed into him even more harshly than the fear had, and he had to close his eyes to bear the force of it. He’d still loved Naegi. Even if his mind had been twisted, even if he couldn’t trust the thoughts in his own head, he could still be assured that much had remained true.

Or at least, he could if he took Jill at her word about the years that he’d supposedly forgotten.

Not that he thought she was lying — no, he was sure she thought she was telling the complete truth. But considering that she was also an insane serial killer, that didn’t necessarily mean her “truth” mapped neatly onto reality. How far could he trust her word? He didn’t know. He couldn’t know, not as long as this was nothing more than a possibility. He needed some way to verify her words, to tell whether this was anything more than a string of coincidences — but how could he when he didn’t have anything —

Anything —

Without any conscious choice to move, Togami’s hand went to the pocket where he’d placed his e-handbook… and the precious photo of Naegi he’d placed inside. He’d assumed that the picture of a slightly younger Naegi and Maizono must have come from their time at the same middle school… but what if he’d misunderstood what he was seeing? What if it showed something else entirely?

“Describe the Hope’s Peak uniforms,” he demanded, not even daring to pull the handbook out from his pocket yet. Keep it hidden, keep it where she couldn’t possibly catch a glimpse, and that should make it impossible for her answer to match the one in the picture. Impossible, unless…
“Brown, brown, and more brown!” Jill said at once, grimacing. “It was a painful sight for an artistic soul like myself! At least they made the tie red, but that wasn’t enough to save those uniforms from being the least adorable way to wrap up all the cute boys and girls at that school!”

Brown with a red tie… Togami pulled the handbook from his pocket and flipped it open, revealing the photo tucked safely within its cover. “Do these outfits look familiar?”

Jill’s eyes popped wide open. “Huh? Makyutie and the soda pop song princess? Where’d you get your hands on this, baby?”

Togami barely even registered that she’d asked him a question — his mind was still stuck on what she’d said a moment before. “Her name — tell me the pop singer’s name.”

“Sayaka Maizono,” Jill replied. “And word on the street is that she’s one of the kids who got the ax during round one of this game.”

That knowledge would’ve been easy enough for Jill to pick up along the way — but even so, two girls had died before the first time Jill’s personality had manifested during the game. Even if she’d assumed the girl in the picture had to be one of the students from the game, there was no way she could have known if it was Sayaka Maizono or Junko Enoshima…

Except that she had known. She hadn’t even hesitated, like there was nothing wrong at all with her memory.

Like his memory was the one that was wrong.

“Why’ve you got a picture of little miss soda pop getting all clingy with your guy, anyway?” Jill asked. “Want me to get her out of the way?” She snapped her scissors shut for emphasis.

“No.” Togami snatched the photo back out of her reach, closing the handbook protectively around it again. He didn’t enjoy seeing Maizono in a picture with Naegi — but he also didn’t trust Jill’s scissors anywhere near it. “It’s the only one I have of Naegi, and I doubt Monokuma would let me have another.”

“Eh? Monokuma gave it to you?” Jill blinked. “What’d he do that for?”

“He —” Togami stopped short, the explanation of how he’d bargained for the photo freezing on his lips. If this really was a photo from the two years of memories he’d lost — the two years the mastermind had stolen from him — then why had he been allowed to have it?

If the mastermind had wanted to erase the previous two years, why were he and Jill being allowed to have this conversation uninterrupted?

Suddenly, the large, airy room of the garden seemed to loom too large around them, full of too many spots hidden by foliage. The humid air clung to his skin, sending tendrils of sweat slithering down the back of his neck like the physical manifestation of a shiver. Every rustle of leaves sent his nerves prickling, and with only one working ear he couldn’t pinpoint the location of any of the unsettling sounds.

“We need to go,” he said, trying to struggle to his feet. The effort sent his head spinning in a nauseating swirl, but he couldn’t let that stop him. The garden was the worst possible place to have this conversation. “We need to get out of here now.”

“If you insist, baby!” Jill caught him as he staggered upright, slinging one of his arms around her shoulders. “Most people keep the cuddling for the dessert course, but I don’t mind making it the
main entree!"

He ignored her chatter, concentrating instead on the herculean effort it took to place one heavy foot in front of the other, over and over. Had the door been so far away the first time he’d crossed the floor? It seemed to be miles away from the bench, an eternity of trembling steps punctuated with glances into the shadowed bushes.

Finally, they reached the door, and Jill apparently had the strength to haul it open without letting him drop to the ground. They stumbled out of the garden —

And came face to face with Kirigiri and Ogami as they crossed the hall returning from deeper into the fifth floor.

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule note:** No new chapter next week, due to a family wedding! Next chapter will be posted August 26 -- see you then!
Faced with Kirigiri so soon after their last argument, Togami would have walked away without acknowledging her — but he didn’t have that option. Jill stopped short at the sight of the other two girls in the hall, and Togami didn’t have the strength to keep moving forward unaided. He shot at impatient glance at Jill, but the vicious glare she was sending towards Kirigiri made any potential irritated commentary fall unspoken from his lips. While he’d never been foolish enough to forget that Jill was a coldblooded serial killer, he’d never seen her look the part more than she did in that moment.

“Well, look who came to check out her handiwork!” Jill’s sharp bark of laughter pierced the air. “Or are you here to add the finishing touch to your masterpiece?”

Togami frowned at the implication that Kirigiri had been responsible for his actions — but before he could object, Ogami stepped forward. Though she was looking at him, he couldn’t miss that she’d also put herself between the other two girls.

“I’m relieved to see you here,” Ogami said, the words almost painfully sincere. “I was concerned that — that something might have happened.” Her eyes flickered towards the makeshift bandage wrapped around his arm, before she hastily looked away.

But that was more than long enough for Togami to realize what she meant. She’d known what he’d meant to do. He hadn’t seen her since he’d fled from the cafeteria an eternity ago, but something in his behavior must have given her reason to suspect. Even so, it seemed impossible that she could have guessed —

But she might have learned another way.

His eyes shot to Kirigiri. She’d kept her poker face as cool and unruffled as ever, but she wasn’t quite fast enough to hide where she’d been looking. The last moments of her examination of the bloodstained evidence at his wrist told him everything he needed to know — she’d been the one to see right through him. He hadn’t even known his own intentions himself until he’d had the blades pressed to his skin, but somehow — somehow she’d known.

Of course she’d known. The ashen remnants of his hatred for her twisted in his gut, but even the realization of what she’d been trying to say to him outside the bathhouse couldn’t bring the hate back to its former blaze. Whatever fire had been in him had long since gone out, leaving only a great gaping emptiness within him as he recalled her words when she’d tried so hard to stop him from leaving the dorms.

I am not letting you walk off by yourself.

I’m not worried about the game — I’m concerned for your wellbeing.

You aren’t in this alone.

He’d barely registered her meaning when he’d first heard them… but now they echoed through his mind with a clarity that had seemed impossible before. She’d seen his state of mind more accurately than he could have… and she’d known that after he’d understood the full truth of what had happened to Naegi, he’d wanted to die.

Except… what he’d learned hadn’t been the full truth. Not if he believed Jill’s claims about two missing years. If she was right… if all this really was some sick charade of a past that no longer
existed… then he could have died without knowing any truth at all.

He should probably be grateful to Kirigiri for preventing such an outcome. Togami gave her another dubious glance… but before he could decide whether he did indeed feel relieved that she’d sent Jill after him, her eyes narrowed.

“Has Monokuma told you anything about our conversation?”

All thoughts of gratitude vanished as the other half of their argument came back to him. Kirigiri had intended to challenge the mastermind… using Naegi’s death as a weapon. “Don’t tell me you went through with it.”

“We don’t have the luxury of waiting,” Kirigiri said. Though her voice didn’t betray an ounce of remorse for her callous actions, her eyes did flicker momentarily towards the nearest camera. Of course she wouldn’t be able to hint at any weakness with the mastermind watching… but Togami found it surprisingly easy to think that the emotions might be there behind her mask.

“And since you’re prowling the school rather than hatching some new plot, I assume it went according to your plan.”

“That’s right,” she agreed. “The mastermind is going to take us on directly. We’ll be redoing the trial to solve Ikusaba’s murder — and every other mystery in the school, as well.” She watched him with guarded eyes for a moment, then added, “And the trial will include every surviving student. If we fail, all of us will be executed.”

If she’d said as much earlier, he would have been angry that she’d taken this deal on his behalf, ignoring his clear refusal to take part in her plan. But now that he had the answer to one of the mastermind’s mysteries… now that he knew enough to understand just what this school might be hiding…

*Ding dong, ding dong.*

Togami froze, eyes shooting toward the nearest television screen — but no, it was just the morning announcement that always played at seven. He watched the message through to the end, just to be certain the mastermind hadn’t decided to try anything sneaky, but it was the same recording they’d heard every other morning. Only when the screen flickered back to black did he let himself look away, a slight breath of relief escaping his lips.

He wasn’t the only one. As he turned back to the others, he could see the same dubious relief on their faces. “Well, at least we still have time remaining to continue our search,” Ogami said, though the twist of her mouth made it clear she didn’t find much comfort in the words.

“But not so much that we can afford to waste any of it,” Kirigiri said, very nearly managing to sound as brisk and unshaken as usual. “We have to succeed in this investigation if we have any hope of surviving this game.” She met Togami’s eyes, her gaze carefully not flickering anywhere near his bloodstained wrist, and the hand that usually reached for her missing braid curled into a fist at her side. “Will you be participating in our investigation?”

Togami had to admit that it was a fair question, however much he might despise the reason she’d asked. As far as she knew, he had no reason to fight for survival… and if survival were the only reward, he wasn’t sure he would have. But now that he knew one of the mastermind’s secrets… now everything had changed.

“Yes,” he said, meeting Kirigiri’s gaze without flinching. “I intend to investigate.”
She held his gaze for a long moment, long enough that Togami began to wonder what she thought she could see — and then with a single sharp nod, she broke the staring contest. “All right. If you intend to help, you should know what we’ve discovered so far.” She glanced at Ogami. “Show them what we found in the dojo locker.”

Ogami nodded, reaching into one of her pockets… and Togami knew before she even completed the gesture what she had hidden there. He wasn’t surprised at all when she pulled out a bottle of the same poison they’d sealed in a dojo locker, still sealed and intact as when they’d last seen it.
Chapter 326

Togami stared at the poison bottle sitting innocently in Ogami’s grip, so dwarfed by her large, strong hands that it only seemed a fraction of the size it had been when he’d last seen it. If this bottle really was the same one he, Kirigiri, and Naegi had done their best to seal away in the dojo locker — and with both Kirigiri and Ogami saying so, it must be — then that all but answered the identity of Ikusaba’s killer. Two of the three bottles of poison were accounted for… so the only one that could have been used in the murder was the final unopened bottle that the mastermind had confiscated during Fukawa’s trial.

The mastermind… or one of their agents.

But the thought sat unnaturally in his head, as awkward and uncomfortable as if he’d tried to force a pair of childhood gloves onto his hands. He looked around him, at the faces of the three girls who’d remained in this nightmare of a school even after Naegi had been taken… the girls who’d refused time and again to leave him alone… and he knew why those paranoid thoughts no longer fit.

“That evidence will certainly save time in the trial,” he said at last, his unaccountably dry throat making the words sound rougher than he’d intended. “We won’t have to waste time proving facts to the mastermind that the rest of us already know.”

One of Kirigiri’s eyebrows lifted a hair as she studied him. “Yes… I suppose it will.”

For an unnerving moment, Togami had the horrifying sense that she was about to smile — but fortunately, she thought the better of such a bizarre act. Her expression grew grim again as she resumed her intense focus. “But that isn’t the only important clue this bottle represents.”

It only took a moment of swift thought for Togami to catch up with her conclusions. “Why did the mastermind leave it for us to find?”

“They should have had any number of chances to remove it,” Kirigiri agreed, crossing her arms thoughtfully. “This is evidence that can only strengthen us and weaken them — exactly the kind they shouldn’t want us to find. Why was it still there?”

Togami could think of a few reasons — but to his surprise, Ogami spoke before he could voice any of them. “Removing it would have skewed the playing field. Once our final battle began, they couldn’t take it away and still claim any pretense of playing fair.”

Not that the game had been fair from the start… what was fair about manipulating them all into committing murder by stealing the memories that would have made such actions unthinkable? What if he’d won the killing game as he’d intended, and only learned the truth about the people he’d killed after escaping? He ground his teeth together to keep from screaming his rage at the thought. God, no wonder the mastermind had been using Monokuma to laugh at them all this time… they must have looked so stupid to anyone who knew the truth.

Had that been the point? Or had there even been a point to all of this?

With those questions ringing through his head loud enough to ache, it took him several seconds to realize that one of the girls must have asked him a question. The three of them had turned to look his way expectantly, but he hadn’t the faintest idea what they were waiting for.

“We were discussing how best to continue our investigation,” Kirigiri said, with only a trace of
impatience in her voice to hint at her true state of mind. “Though in normal circumstances I’d suggest we each work separately, in this situation it might be best to proceed as two pairs so we can mitigate any attempts at…” she only hesitated a moment, so briefly that Togami wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t been watching for it, “at manipulation.”

She didn’t need to explain any further than that. Togami nodded. “Fine. Who —”

“Come on, darling, no way I’m letting you go treasure hunting with any other sidekick!” Jill interrupted brightly.

For once, Togami found himself in agreement — with a trial hurtling towards them, it had become more urgent than ever to discuss Jill’s memories in greater detail. If they were going to fight the mastermind, he needed to understand their situation as clearly as possible.

No… wait. It wasn’t just about him, was it? His instincts all told him to work alone, to hoard secrets like treasures, to make sure that he knew more than everyone around him… but against that, he could hear a familiar voice whispering to him about teamwork, trust, and friendship.

Could they all have been friends, before they’d lost their memories?

“There’s something else we should discuss,” he heard himself say, before he’d even decided whether he wanted to do so.

“Oh?” One of Kirigiri’s eyebrows shot up in a sharp arc as she stared at him.

“Not just yet, though,” he added quickly. He had no idea why Monokuma hadn’t interrupted his conversation with Jill earlier, and he wasn’t inclined to count on it a second time. “It might be a better time once we’ve gone… downstairs.”

She blinked once — then nodded. “All right, then we’ll go down together, so we can be on each floor at the same time.”

Of course she’d only needed seconds to come up with a way to divert the mastermind’s suspicions away from the possibility of secret conversations. Togami couldn’t stop the brief stab of envy for how quick and clear her thoughts still were… but then it faded, overpowered by a sensation he couldn’t immediately recognize. The thought of Kirigiri’s capable intellect and deductive skills wasn’t a negative one… no, it was almost comforting. He couldn’t deny her abilities… and he was glad she was on his side.

No… it wasn’t that she’d suddenly joined his side. It was that now, after so much time at odds, they were finally on the same side.

“I need to take another look at the room where we found the body,” Kirigiri went on, with her usual lack of interest in his opinion of her. For some reason he didn’t entirely understand, it didn’t sting so much this time as it had in the past. “Ogami and I intended to do that next, in any case.”

Togami had seen more than enough of that ruined classroom to last him the rest of his life. “Then I’ll go back to the dojo,” he decided. “It’s best if we don’t give the mastermind any opportunity to claim that locker was tampered with.”

She nodded once more, then without further discussion she turned and headed off in the direction of classroom 5-C, Ogami hurrying behind. Togami looked after them for a moment, the two girls that at one point or other he’d believed to be traitors working for the mastermind… and he couldn’t muster the slightest qualm about letting them go off to investigate on their own.
He shook his head sharply, turning away from the corridor. There was no point in dwelling on anything so useless… not when he had more urgent goals that needed his attention. He headed for the dojo entrance, Jill a grinning specter at his side. He had truths to uncover.
Chapter 327

Naegi knew that crying wouldn’t help him now. All it could do was squander his limited strength, depleting the inner resources he so desperately needed with every breathless sob that rattled in his chest. He knew that… but he still couldn’t manage to stop. Even after his dry, aching eyes had long since refused to produce any further tears, even when the sobs caught rough and painful in his throat, he couldn’t stop.

Because even with the television monitors dark and empty above him, all he could see playing over and over in endless repetition was the moment Byakuya took a pair of garden shears to his own arm.

Had the other man truly given up on any chance of escaping the killing game? Or worse… was it that he’d been so hurt by everything he’d endured that it had seemed like the blades were a better option? How could he have felt so driven into a corner?

How could Naegi not have known it was happening?

He should have known. He should have done something, found some way to stop it, made sure Byakuya knew he wasn’t quite as alone as he’d believed.

Except… it wouldn’t have been true, would it? Not when Naegi knew what had happened to the Togami family, the relatives and the heritage that had mattered so very much to the heir. Yes, Naegi himself was still alive… but how could that weigh against all the rest of what had given Byakuya’s life meaning? In many of the ways that would matter to him, Byakuya really was alone. Could Naegi really have done anything to convince him otherwise that wouldn’t have been a cruel lie?

He would never know. However Byakuya might have reacted, Naegi had missed his chance to find out — he’d missed everything. He hadn’t noticed any sign of what was really wrong, completely misreading the behavior of the one person in the world he should have known best. What good was it if he could find clues to throw around in those awful class trials — if he was just going to fail miserably when it counted?

“Aw, don’t make a face like that, sweetie!” A hand rested lightly on his shoulder, fingers patting a slow, soothing rhythm. “You can’t go blaming yourself for something that isn’t your fault!”

But it was his fault… or at least partly his. Naegi didn’t know what the final tipping point for Byakuya’s decision had been, but he knew where it had started — it began in the moment Naegi had chosen to let the execution take its course.

“Seriously? Come on, you should know that isn’t how it works.” She propped her head on one hand, his blurred vision multiplying the motion until there seemed to be an army of pigtailed girls beside him, looking back down at him with a sad kind of sympathy. “You don’t have to be responsible for what anyone else does. You aren’t supposed to fix every single problem for all your little friends. Their decisions are their fault.”

That… that sounded almost right, actually. There was a familiar kind of echo to the words, as though he himself had said something like that to one of his friends in the past. Not quite the same way, of course… there was something about those words that he wouldn’t have wanted to say… but it was very close.
Somewhere in the few corners of his mind not consumed by fear, that last thought didn’t sit quite as easily as it should have. But he barely had time to notice the sense of unease before Junko’s voice tore him away from his thoughts.

“It’s not like you even did anything wrong,” she went on, her hand resting on his shoulder with a pressure so gentle he could barely feel it. “Kinda the opposite, really — you did so much more right than I thought anyone could. You believed in your friends when it should have been impossible, and you fought to keep them safe when you had the whole world against you. You did everything you could to make sure they had a chance to get out of this alive. It’s not your fault they decided to give up on that chance instead of seeing it through.”

Give up…? But no, no, that couldn’t be right, could it? They couldn’t have given up on surviving just because they thought he was gone, could they? He didn’t want to believe it… but he couldn’t stop the memory of that blade against Byakuya’s wrist.

“It’s not like it’s their fault either, though.” Junko’s soft, soothing words sliced through the terrible images in Naegi’s head, shielding him from the full horror of it. “They can’t help not having the strength to stick it out for the long haul. People can’t do what they can’t do, and that’s just the end of it. You can’t expect anyone to be more than they are, in the end.”

Was that right…? Naegi wasn’t sure anymore. How could he be, after seeing the man he loved make choices so driven by despair? The knowledge that Byakuya had somehow ended up so very broken stabbed through Naegi’s heart more powerfully than any knife…

But it wasn’t Byakuya’s fault. It wasn’t. Even Junko agreed on that. Naegi would have fought her tooth and nail if she’d try to argue that it was… but she’d known better than to blame him.

“I know they all tried hard to be better than this,” she murmured, almost as if she knew the thoughts running through his head. “They wanted to be better… just like you thought they could be. But they couldn’t manage it in the end. They couldn’t be what you needed them to be. It isn’t their fault… and that’s what makes all of our friends such disappointments.”

Disappointments? That was a term Naegi wouldn’t have thought to associate with any of his friends… but maybe it was as good a name as any for the sick twist of grief and regret that tangled through his veins. Not what he would have called it… but not quite wrong, either.

“You’re not the only one who sees it that way, you know.” She leaned closer, as if confessing a secret. “All the people I love are the ones who disappointed me the most.”

Naegi tried to focus his blurry gaze on Junko’s face, expecting to see some deceptive expression of obviously false grief… but the lie he’d been prepared to avoid wasn’t there. All he found was an emptiness staring back at him through her uncharacteristically solemn eyes, multiplied into infinity by his wavering vision.

Then if he couldn’t see any deception… did that mean she wasn’t lying about it? But how could that be right? He knew she’d been lying to him all along, so surely she wouldn’t change her mind after all this time. She wouldn’t suddenly decide to be sincere with him now… would she?

“We both know how it feels to be so disappointed in the people we love.” She still faced him, head tilted downward with her hand resting on his shoulder… but her eyes seemed to look straight through him, off to some far away place that existed only in her own mind. “We’ve both been let down so badly. It isn’t fair that something like this should keep happening to us, over and over again.”
Naegi didn’t have to wonder for a moment whether he ought to agree with that statement. Of course none of this was fair, that much went without saying. But… but even if it wasn’t… why was she…

“And if it could just stop… just once, if the disappointment would stop… I wonder what I’d do.” A hint of a self-deprecating smile touched her lips. “If someone could really do that for me… they’d be the only real friend I’ve ever had.”

And in spite of himself, Naegi could feel a softening in his heart at the simple, honest words. She sounded so lonely when she said it… and surely no one in the world deserved to be so very alone as that. She shouldn’t be so sad when she was trying to comfort him, when she’d seen him in pain and done her best to ease it.

Wait… was that what was happening…? Naegi wasn’t sure, he couldn’t be sure. Not without a minute to think about what was going on around him…

“But whatever — it’s not like anything like that could really happen, right?” Junko’s voice snapped back to a parody of her old liveliness, brittle and too bright in a desperate attempt to mask the emptiness. “It’s not worth hoping for.”

And that wasn’t right — it wasn’t. Naegi wasn’t entirely sure what was happening around him now, but he knew he couldn’t let one of his friends keep thinking something so horrible and wrong. He opened his mouth to tell her so —

But before he could speak, another voice drowned him out.

“So much for the disappointment of the family.”

He knew that voice — he’d heard it over and over since waking up after the last trial. That was Junko’s voice — but it hadn’t come from the girl beside him. Naegi’s eyes shot up, toward the source of the voice —

And he could see images flickering to life on the monitors that moments ago had been black and cold. There was Junko on one of the screens, grinning up at a monitor of her own — a monitor where another girl fell to the ground with an avalanche of spears piercing through her. A girl whose curly pigtails and fashionable clothes didn’t match her face. A girl he knew.

Mukuro.

And the sound echoing through the room around him was Junko’s laughter… in the moment that she’d murdered her twin sister.

The horror of it sank into Naegi’s mind, dragging him back to a reality that was crueler than he’d wanted to remember. Junko had done that. The girl sitting beside him, offering him comfort in his grief and talking wistfully about having real friends, had laughed as she’d betrayed the sister who’d loved her.

He couldn’t look at the monitor showing that image, not for another second. He tore his eyes away, to the next screen down the line —

And Naegi found himself staring up into Alter Ego’s brave, determined eyes.
Chapter 328

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Of all the people Naegi had thought he might see on Junko’s monitors, Alter Ego had to be one of the last. After their plan to try to access the school network had ended in such horrific failure, he’d thought he would never see his brave friend again. After the additional executions Monokuma had cruelly staged after the fourth trial, he’d assumed that Alter Ego was as lost to them as Toko or Hina… but maybe that hadn’t been the case. For a being born of circuitry and coding, with Chihiro’s brilliant programming giving him life in place of blood and bone, maybe bullets didn’t have to mean a mortal wound.

Maybe Naegi hadn’t been the first of Junko’s victims to survive an execution.

A sharp staccato clattering tore Naegi’s gaze away from the screens, and he looked halfway across the room to see Junko bending over one of the computer terminals. Her fingers flew across the keys faster than her long nails should have allowed, a blood-red blur just below the dark glow of the screen. Her eyes never so much as flickered away from the terminal screen, but Naegi could feel the fury blazing from her towards Alter Ego’s screen.

And then suddenly — silence flooded into the room, filling a void where background noise had been. Naegi’s gaze shot back up to the wall of monitors — and the sight of a dead black screen where Alter Ego had been hit him like a blow to the stomach.

But before Junko could even lean back in her chair, another screen crackled to life. Far across the wall, on the opposite side of black screens, Alter Ego stared back at them with silent defiance.

Junko snarled up at him, the vicious sound full of an anger too pure to be forced into words. When Alter Ego’s image didn’t so much as flicker, she lunged back to the keyboard, typing with renewed energy. With the sudden burst of rage spurring her on, it didn’t take long for her to wipe Alter Ego’s face from the second monitor.

And it took even less time for him to reappear on a third screen.

It could almost have been a game, as Alter Ego popped up on screen after screen, appearing just long enough to meet Naegi’s eyes each time before Junko banished him again. And with every repetition, she managed to send him packing just a little faster.

It couldn’t go on forever, Naegi realized. No matter how good Alter Ego might be, eventually Junko would corner him. Even without knowing much about computers, he could see that much — and if he could, then Alter Ego had to as well. Why was he still showing himself to taunt her instead of hiding? He was too smart to make her angry on purpose, not without a good reason… so what was he trying to accomplish?

Whatever his reason, surely it couldn’t be worth the ever-multiplying rage tearing itself from Junko’s lips in scream after frustrated scream. The longer she slammed her fingers against the keyboard, the more blows she sent flying in Alter Ego’s direction, the angrier she got. This was only going to make her more determined to hunt the brave AI down… and Naegi knew he couldn’t just sit back and do nothing.

Watching Junko shut down yet another screen bearing Alter Ego’s face, Naegi knew he didn’t have
time to hesitate. He needed strength, enough to interrupt the chase, enough to help Alter Ego as the AI had helped him. He drew breath to speak as another screen flickered to life —

But this time, it wasn’t Alter Ego’s face looking back at him. Instead, the screen showed a floor of the school.

No… not just one of the floors… as another screen came lit up to show the floor from another angle, Naegi recognized it as the fifth floor. The floor Junko had hidden.

The floor where Byakuya had fallen apart so painfully, clutching garden shears like they held a way to escape from the nightmares.

A third screen appeared, and this one showed the garden — the place Naegi had last seen Byakuya. As more screens came back to life to show the room from every angle, Naegi scoured them one after another, searching for some glimpse of Byakuya… but he couldn’t find anything. There was blood drying dark on the bench and ground where he’d been sitting, there were the shears fallen nearby… but the heir himself was nowhere in the garden that the cameras could reach.

He wasn’t there. His broken, blood-soaked body hadn’t collapsed on the bench, letting his life drain from his wrists. He hadn’t left Naegi alone in the school with only a grisly corpse to remember him by. All the nightmares Naegi hadn’t been able to stop himself from seeing, the icy fears that refused to loosen their grip on his heart, the nausea clawing up his throat at the vision of how his boyfriend’s life might have ended… none of it was true. **Byakuya wasn’t there.**

But then… where was he?

The other screens — Naegi’s eyes shot towards the other screens, showing views from the many other cameras on the fifth floor. Other sounds buzzed around him, a too-high voice that should have held some meaning for him — but he didn’t have time for that voice, not now. He needed all his attention to sort through the screens, view after view of the hallway, the classrooms, the dojo —

The dojo.

Naegi froze, eyes locked on the screen showing the row of dojo lockers. Unlike all the other screens he’d seen so far, that one wasn’t empty. Genocide Jill leaned against the wall opposite the row of lockers, twirling a pair of scissors in a deceptively idle gesture. She wasn’t focused on her scissors… no, all her attention was glued to the opposite wall…

To **Byakuya.**

Naegi couldn’t have torn his eyes from the small blond figure on the screen for any offer in the world. The angle was awkward and indirect, only capturing his back as he leaned intently over the last locker in the row — but even without a clear view, there could be no mistake. The tense set of the shoulders, the too-straight line of his back, the irritated push at his glasses to show displeasure at what he was seeing — it all added up to one wonderful, incredible truth.

**Byakuya was alive.**

And he wasn’t just existing, not any longer. He was **fighting again,** throwing all his strength into accomplishing some new goal. Naegi didn’t know what looking at the dojo lockers would accomplish, but that hardly mattered — not when Byakuya had chosen to do it rather than seeking out the garden shears again.

Naegi could have watched that screen forever, drinking in the simple proof of his love’s continued
life — but a sharp crack rang through the air, shattering the momentary relief and yanking his gaze away from the screens.

Junko stood, one hand flat against the table where she’d slammed it down to get Naegi’s attention — but she wasn’t looking at him. She was glaring down at the computer screen in front of her, where a long string of complicated code glowed back.

“You aren’t a player in this game,” she said softly, voice colder than Naegi had ever heard it. “You do not get to interfere.”

She raised her other hand above the keyboard, poised to let it fall with a terrifying finality. And as he looked at her, Naegi realized what it was that he couldn’t see… the one image that no longer appeared on any of the monitors.

Alter Ego had disappeared.

Or… not quite disappeared. Naegi looked back at the code again, shining through the air with quiet defiance. It pulsed just a little brighter as Junko’s hand dove for the keyboard, like a spirit refusing to go quietly into darkness.

“Don’t!”

The word clawed free of Naegi’s dry throat — and Junko’s finger froze a millimeter from the keys. She blinked once — then spun towards Naegi with a blinding smile.

“Aw, sweetie — if it bugs you so much to watch me pay attention to anyone else, you should’ve just said so!” She sat back down in her chair and steepled her fingers before her face, watching him over the arc of blood-red nails. “Fine. You want my attention that bad? Then let’s chat.”

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule note:** For the next two weeks, I am going on a vacation -- which sadly means I won't have time to write anything. I won't have a new chapter until Sunday, October 7. See you then!
Naegi drew back against the mattress as Junko smiled down at him, wishing he had a way to put even more distance between them. Her bright grin wouldn’t have been out of place during any moment of that first year they’d spent as classmates… but now, a lifetime away from those carefree days, the sight sent icy shudders slithering across his skin. She looked so much like the girl who’d been his friend… and yet she wasn’t. The girl he’d known would never have intended real harm to another one of his friends.

Or rather… the girl he’d thought he’d known. Because whether he wanted to admit it or not, the girl locked in the data center with him was the same Junko Enoshima who’d spent two years with him and the rest of their friends. If she could do something like this… he’d never really known her at all.

And Alter Ego had been the one to remind him of that crucial fact. Without the AI’s intervention, Naegi didn’t know how long it would have taken him to remember that the Junko he knew now wasn’t his friend. Alter Ego had freed Naegi from the power those false beliefs had held over him… and Naegi knew he couldn’t let his friend be hurt in retaliation.

And that meant that he couldn’t keep backing away when Junko raised an eyebrow in his direction and prompted, “What’s the matter, sweetie? Don’t know how to handle a girl once you’ve got her?”

The superficial nonsense coating her words barely even registered now. He could hear the meaning beyond it, the threat she hadn’t bothered to speak aloud. If he couldn’t persuade Junko otherwise, she would go right back to the computer keyboard. Even now, as she kept her eyes on him, one hand fell to rest on the desk beside her, fingers drumming near the keys.

“You don’t have to do this!” Naegi burst out, before he could even think about whether it was the right approach. “He’s just like the rest of us, he can’t do anything to you anymore — he isn’t a threat now! And — and if he can’t fight back, then — then isn’t it just a one-sided fight?”

She shrugged. “And?”

There was only one argument left that he could make. Naegi met her gaze squarely and said, “And that means you don’t have anything to care about. A one-sided fight would be boring.”

Junko went still. For a long moment she stared at him without moving a muscle, not even the faint quiver of drawing breath. It might just as easily have been a corpse sitting in that chair, the bright smile on her lips twisting into the eerie grin of a skull.

And then — she laughed. Not Monokuma’s wild cackle, not the schoolgirl giggle, not any of the sounds she’d used to punctuate her conversation — but a deep, full belly laugh, as though she’d just heard the funniest joke imaginable. Her whole body shook with the force of it, slumping bonelessly back against the seat as she let it rock through her.

Had he made a mistake? Naegi bit his lip, wondering if he’d misunderstood her. The way she’d been talking had made it seem like she hated anything that bored her… but how could he believe it when so many of her other words had been lies? Why had he thought this one was true?

He cast frantically back through his mind, trying to come up with some way to mitigate the apparent damage, to convince her that it had all been a misunderstanding — but her laughter cut
short before he could, just as abruptly as it had started. Junko grinned at him, and any words he’d meant to say fled from the terror of her smile.

“What a nice thing for you to say!” she said, bouncing up in her seat and clasping her hands at her chest. “I never thought that you would be so sweet and nice to me, after everything we’ve been through together! Wow — you must think we’re really good friends, huh?”

Naegi was pretty sure that this was a question with definite right and wrong answers... but he couldn’t quite work out which one was which. His mind whirled from option to option, discarding each one before he could even fully consider it.

“Aww… too shy to answer?” The fond smile Junko sent his way reminded Naegi uncomfortably of the way someone might look at a particularly endearing puppy. “That’s okay — I know exactly what you meant!”

Naegi blinked, trying to decipher her words. The pain in his head had begun to ease a little, but even the ability to think a little more clearly couldn’t help him work out what she was trying to say. Was she being sincere or wasn’t she? Either way, it wasn’t very reassuring.

“I know you agree with me, sweetie,” Junko went on, leaning down towards him until she was nearly bent double. “I mean, you must! After all, you asked me for the kind of favor that only a really close friend would grant, right?”

Now it was Naegi’s turn to freeze, his muscles locked in place by an icy grip. He’d asked her for a favor? She couldn’t be talking about his plea not to hurt Alter Ego, could she? Surely it wasn’t a favor to ask her not to murder an innocent person in cold blood… was it?

He looked up at Junko Enoshima... the girl who’d already killed so many of her friends... who’d killed her own sister... and he realized he couldn’t be sure.

“Hmm? What’s the matter?” Junko’s voice sounded as though he’d broken her heart — but her smile never even wavered. “Are you trying to say that we’re not friends? That you weren’t trying to ask me for an extra-special friends-only favor? Is that it?”

“No!” The word burst from Naegi’s mouth before she’d even finished her question. He didn’t need her to make the threat any more overt — what she’d said already made it perfectly plain.

“Oh? Then you’re saying you agree with me?” Junko asked, her eyes growing large and wide.

Naegi grimaced at the idea of conceding her point — but with Alter Ego’s life in the balance, he didn’t dare try anything else. “Yes.”

Junko tilted her head to one side, looking innocently confused. “You know, it’s pretty hard to understand you when you’re being so vague about everything. Why don’t you try saying what you want me to hear?”

Naegi’s throat tightened, tongue freezing behind stone lips. She… she couldn’t really want him to say what it sounded like, could she? Not… not really?

“How could you possibly mean it…?” Junko raised an eyebrow.

He didn’t have a choice. He pried his lips apart, glaring at her all the while, and spat, “We’re friends.”

Junko looked at him a moment longer — and then ever so slowly, her face fell. “I don’t believe
you.”

He stared back in disbelief. “You — what?”

She shook her head, eyes quivering with — with wetness? Was she actually pretending that he’d made her cry? “I don’t believe you — not if you’re going to say it like that.” She sniffled. “But you know... I think after all the time we’ve spent together, maybe I can give you the benefit of the doubt. I’m sure you didn’t mean everything I thought you said before... so I’ll let you try one more time to convince me.” She gave him an imploring look, and somehow managed to force a tear to trickle down her cheek. “This is your last chance, sweetie... tell me how you really feel about me.”

Naegi wished with all his might that he could do just that. He could feel a scream trying to claw itself free of his throat, full of all the pain and anger and grief she’d caused to the people he cared about, people she’d hurt for no reason at all. They’d all called her their friend once, and she’d used that word to cause them unbelievable pain. How could she demand this from him now when she hadn’t wanted it before?

But he swallowed the scream back, forcing it back down to churn through his stomach with nauseous fury. He couldn’t say any of that, no matter how much he wanted to — the computer screen glowing behind Junko was proof of that. He’d watched too many of his real friends suffer and die to sit back and let it happen to another... not when he had the power to stop it.

He took a deep breath, trying to release the tension from his jaw long enough to tell the lie she’d demanded. Even the thought of it made the sour heat of vomit burn against the back of his throat — but no, no, he couldn’t let himself focus on that, not if he wanted this to work. He had to think about Alter Ego, who somehow hadn’t died... about the other students who wouldn’t get such a miraculous second chance... about the friends he’d left to mourn his own apparent death.

He thought about Byakuya, who had somehow found the strength to move beyond a despair that had nearly destroyed him... and he looked Junko in the eye with as much sincerity as he could muster. “We’re friends.”

A brilliant smile lit Junko’s face. The sight of it made Naegi’s skin crawl, as though she’d splattered sewage across his face and shoulders. He still wore two days’ worth of blood and grime on his skin, but he’d never felt so dirty as he did in that moment.

“That’s all I wanted to hear!” Junko glanced over her shoulder at the computer screen. “But if you interfere with my computer systems one more time, the deal’s off.”

The green writing flickered once more, and then the monitor changed to display Alter Ego’s face. “I won’t do anything else.”

Junko nodded once, sharply.

Alter Ego’s image looked past her, to where Naegi lay. Naegi wasn’t sure how much the computer screen could pick up of what he was doing, but he tried his best to smile anyway. It hurt to force his mouth into the shape, like he’d almost forgotten how to do it — but he persevered anyway. Alter Ego deserved that much at least.

And maybe he had a way to see it somehow, after all, because Alter Ego smiled back. “Thank you, Naegi. I won’t forget how much you’ve done for me.”
With Alter Ego smiling on the computer screen, alive and safe, Naegi could almost convince himself to feel a little better about what he’d had to do. A lie wasn’t really such a big price when compared to his friend’s life, after all.

As if she could see a few drops of misery disappearing from Naegi’s heart, Junko looked back at the computer monitor with another bright smile. “Glad to see you’re enjoying the time while you’ve got it. I mean, it’d really suck if our sweet little friend here went to all that trouble to buy you a few extra hours, just for you to waste them.”

And just like that, any relief Naegi had been feeling drained away, leaving an even deeper dread behind. “What are you talking about?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Naegi asked, though he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

“Oh… I guess you didn’t think about that part.” Junko shrugged. “Oh, well — it’s not like it’s all that important or anything. It’s just that if he’s in the same boat as the rest of the group, that means he’s also bound by Kyoko’s little bargain. That’s all I meant.”

Kyoko’s bargain…? For a few bewildered seconds, Naegi had no idea what Junko meant — but then it came back to him. Kyoko had made a deal with Monokuma, right before Byakuya’s grief had come to a head in the fifth floor garden. She’d gotten Junko to agree to let them try to solve all the mysteries of the school in one final class trial… and she’d staked all the survivors’ lives on succeeding.

And she would succeed… Naegi knew that beyond any doubt. Kyoko and the others had already uncovered enough clues to work out the truth… and when they did, Junko wouldn’t be able to hurt them under the terms of their deal.

She wouldn’t need to. The truth would do more harm than anything else in her power.

And not just the others… it would hurt Alter Ego, too. He hadn’t known the truth of the outside world any more than the rest of the students. How could he have, when all he’d had to start with was the knowledge Chihiro could give him? Naegi couldn’t be sure what Alter Ego might want from the world outside the school… but even so, he knew it would hurt his friend to know so many of the other students had died for a world that was already gone.

“What’s the matter, sweetie?” Junko’s kind smile and friendly tone made Naegi’s insides twist with revulsion. “Having second thoughts?”

She knew what was going to happen. The realization knocked the breath from his lungs like she’d driven her fist into his gut. Junko knew what the truth would do to the other students. She wanted it to hurt them.

Of course she did. Even as the shock still left him breathless, Naegi felt like an idiot for not understanding it sooner. Junko had let despair consume her, that much was painfully obvious… and even if he couldn’t really grasp such a mindset, he’d seen too much of the patterns of behavior that despair caused. A girl this driven by despair might be willing to kill, as Junko so clearly was…
but murder in itself wouldn’t be the goal. After all, dead victims couldn’t feel any despair of their own.

Despair… Naegi shuddered at the thought of such a mindset twisting his friends’ thoughts. They’d all fought so hard not to let it consume them, to resist the madness that had destroyed the world around them… had all those struggles been nothing more than a prelude to despair’s final triumph over them?

No. No. That wasn’t possible. He wouldn’t let it be possible.

Even if his friends no longer had memories of what they’d endured in the world outside or the strength they’d gained from overcoming its challenges, he still did. He remembered… and he would do whatever he had to in order to protect the friends who didn’t.

“Man, that’s awfully sweet of you.”

Naegi looked up at Junko with a start, her voice jolting him from his thoughts. Her face had taken on that unnerving emptiness again as she stared down at him, chin propped idly on one fist.

“Sure, it’s pretty impractical, too,” she went on, words devoid of any tone or inflection. “I mean, here you are, just a few steps away from death’s door, and you’re thinking about how to take on more challenges? Not a chance, with the state you’re in. But you know, sweet that you want to throw your last energy into the useless effort.”

Naegi didn’t even waste time wondering how she’d known what he was thinking — he just sent her a fierce glare. “I’m not going to let you hurt them!”

“Yeah?” She gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Okay. How are you planning to stop me when you can’t even sit up without help?”

Naegi hesitated, his mind going blank at the question. He hadn’t thought that far — how could he have, when he hadn’t had time to consider his words?

Junko seized the pause. “You get it, too, right? I mean, let’s face it — you keep trying to fight me now and you aren’t even gonna make it to the trial. Not like you can help any of our precious little friends if you’re unconscious.”

She had a point, as much as Naegi hated to admit it. He might be getting ever so gradually stronger, but just saying full sentences without gasping for breath already had him at his limit. And if he had to face off against Junko, the mastermind of this whole nightmare — how much more energy would that take? How long could he continue before it all became too much?

Which had to be exactly what she wanted him to think. Naegi knew she hadn’t pointed out his physical weakness out of any genuine concern for his wellbeing — no, she’d wanted to remind him how little he could do against her. How little he would be able to do as her confrontation with the other surviving students came to a head.

“And it’s not like I want you to pass out, either,” Junko went on, heaving herself to her feet with a sigh. “I didn’t go through all that trouble to save your life just so you could take a break during the big finale.” She began wandering idly through the room, no particular pattern to her movement as she trailed her hand along the tops of tables and the backs of computer monitors. “Don’t get me wrong, I understand where you’re coming from — who wouldn’t want to nap through all the tedious build-up? I’d skip out if I could, too.”

Naegi blinked, eyebrows drawing together in puzzlement as he tried to work out what Junko was
saying. It had at least made sense when she’d been making digs at his current physical weakness… but why was she complaining about being forced to participate in the plan that she herself had concocted? Was she trying to trick him into asking her not to participate, so that she could have the joy of refusing him? He couldn’t see why she would care, and trying to trace out her convoluted thoughts only brought back his headache.

“But of course I can’t do something so selfish.” Junko continued roaming the room as she spoke, passing in and out of Naegi’s field of vision as she wandered through the area. “There’s no trial if I’m not there… and after all the work our friends are putting into preparing for it, I can’t just leave them hanging. Guess I’m just gonna have to put up with it.” She stopped in front of Naegi and smiled down at him. “And you’ll be coming with me.”

Before Naegi could ask what she meant by that, her hand shot out — and jammed a hypodermic needle into his arm. In the split-second it took him to blink in shock, she’d already injected the contents into his veins.

Naegi stared at the empty needle in horror. “What… what was that?” he demanded, fear coursing through his body as he felt his limbs grow even heavier.

“Just a little something to make sure you’re all nice and rested for the trial!” Junko beamed at him, tossing the empty needle into a nearby trash can. “Sweet dreams!”

Even as he tried to fight it, Naegi’s eyelids drooped closed, dragging him into darkness. The last thing he heard before sleep took him was Junko’s terrible laughter.

Junko watched Naegi’s breath slow and his eyes slip closed, a brief laugh of satisfaction escaping her as he drifted into a peaceful slumber. She’d known he needed rest, and the ease with which he’d let her administer the sleeping drug only confirmed it. She hadn’t initially intended to dose him with anything else, since it meant that she’d have to wait till he woke up again to start the trial… but he’d used up so much of his strength just to chat with her! It had been so ridiculously sugar-sweet that she’d just had to respond in kind.

And it wasn’t just his eagerness to talk with her, either — he’d actually made an effort to make the conversation interesting. Her thoughts flickered back to their debate over Fujisaki’s talking calculator.

A one-sided fight would be boring.

Before she knew it, she was grinning again. She reached out to ruffle the sleeping boy’s hair, absentely noting the cuts and scrapes remaining from his ordeal as her fingers brushed his scalp. She still couldn’t believe he’d survived everything she’d thrown at him, survived against all odds… and not just as a colorless lump of flesh with nothing better to do than suck up oxygen. No, he’d chosen to use his miraculous second chance at life to try to understand her.

Not that he could, of course. Even Junko’s dearest twin sister, the one who claimed to know her best, hadn’t really managed that — and Mukuro had spent a lifetime slaving away at it. Someone as sweet as Naegi wouldn’t get far if the world’s most disappointing sister couldn’t do it…

But he’d tried. It was so unexpectedly nice of him that Junko just wanted to throw her arms around his neck in a great big hug, squeezing tighter and tighter till his face turned blue.
Not before the trial, though. Junko heaved a sigh at the thought of all the dull, tedious work that would need her attention if she wanted the trial to turn out properly. Much as she would have liked to stay and watch Naegi sleep a little longer, she really did have a lot to do.

But maybe while she worked, she could spare a little time to prepare a special gift for him. After all, he did deserve a reward for being such a good friend to her… and now that she thought about it, she knew just the right present for him. She laughed to herself, preparing to swing back into action. She couldn’t wait to see the look on Naegi’s face!
Togami scowled as he and Jill left the dojo, considering what they’d found. Just as Kirigiri and Ogami had claimed, the locker where the final bottle of poison had been hidden hadn’t appeared at all different from when they’d locked it several days ago. It had been left ajar, presumably from the girls’ earlier investigation, and so he’d been able to take a thorough look for himself. He’d found no signs of tampering, and the wooden key they’d incinerated hadn’t been replaced.

The hidden lock still functioned, of course. With Kirigiri’s master key, even the fact that the dojo locker key was gone had posed no challenge. But that would only have mattered if the poison had been missing. Since the bottle had in fact been where they’d left it, that meant none of the students could have meddled with it since sealing it away. It was just one more piece of proof that only the mastermind could have set up the trap to murder Ikusaba.

As he and Jill turned to head towards the stairway entrance, the click of heels further down the hall stopped them. Togami nearly turned the wrong angle at first, his ability to perceive space by hearing still distorted by his deafened ear — but he caught himself before completing the motion. He reoriented himself to look back down the hall, as Kirigiri and Ogami approached from the ruined classroom.

Had they found what they were looking for? It was impossible to tell from Kirigiri’s expression if her investigation had been worthwhile or not. Still, Togami supposed that she wouldn’t have left the classroom if she’d still thought there might be clues to find there.

“Ready to head on down for round two?” Jill called to the other girls, impatiently tossing her scissors from one hand to the other. “Or are we all gonna split off again for some more alone time?”

“Neither,” Kirigiri answered promptly, glancing around the small group. “The mastermind demanded that we solve every mystery in the school — and there’s still one room on this floor that none of us have visited yet.”

“The Bio Lab,” Togami realized, nodding slowly. “There must be a reason it was locked. If we’re going to try to determine why, we should all see it — and it would be safest to do so as a group.”

“Not to mention the most practical,” Kirigiri added, one corner of her mouth twisting into what was almost a smile as her hand fell to rest against her pocket.

It only took Togami a moment to realize that it had to be where she’d kept the stolen key. She was right — it wasn’t as though they could explore locked rooms separately as long as she had that. He would have expected the mastermind to confiscate the key at the first opportunity… but they hadn’t, even though Kirigiri must have used the key on camera to open the dojo locker. Did that mean it didn’t matter if the students saw all the hidden rooms now?

He couldn’t come up with an answer that satisfied him, mulling it over as they all headed down the dim, dark corridor that led to the Bio Lab’s locked door. Kirigiri moved swiftly forward to open it, pulling the key from her pocket without so much as glancing up towards the cameras. It was an impressive show of confidence to ignore the potential threat so thoroughly — but of course Togami hadn’t expected anything else from Kirigiri at this point.

She swung open the heavy metal door — and rush of icy air burst out, sharp as a slap to the face. Togami’s breath hissed through his clenched teeth in a startled gasp, and the chill of it settled
heavy in his lungs. That wasn’t just air turned cold and stale from disuse… no, that was the result
of deliberate temperature control. What could the mastermind have hidden in this room that needed
to be kept so cold?

Kirigiri seemed to be considering the same questions, if her hesitation to enter the room was any
guide. She stood at the threshold of the lab, motionless except for the hand sliding the key safely
back into her pocket. Her eyes darted across the door frame briefly, and then again, lingering at
odd points as she frowned. A sudden stab of curiosity shot through Togami’s mind, and he found
himself wondering what exactly Kirigiri was thinking about.

But before he could decide whether he wanted to ask, she gave her head a single sharp shake and
stepped forward into the room. Ogami and Jill followed after her, so Togami didn’t have much
choice but to do the same if he didn’t want to be left behind.

Based on the other examples of Hope’s Peak facilities he’d seen here, Togami would have
expected a room called the Bio Lab to be similarly well-equipped — but the room in front of them
would hardly even have been recognizable as a lab if not for the sign. The room was empty of any
of the equipment he would have expected to find, save for a few odds and ends shoved haphazardly
against the walls. Enormous flat tables claimed the majority of the floor space, but the dingy gray
lighting meant they could hardly be put to use in any kind of experiment — although the blotched
remains of stains on the nearest one suggested that someone had tried anyway.

But the main indication that this room wasn’t any kind of biology lab any longer came in the form
of the opposite wall, filled with row after row of deep cabinets. Strange lights glowed red or green
beside each door, though without any hint as to what the colors meant.

Togami’s first thought was to make a beeline for the mysterious cabinets and begin pressing
buttons until he understood their purpose — but he knew better than to try something so reckless.
Normally he had a sufficient grasp of mechanics to work out how a device operated just by
handling the controls for a few minutes… but in Monokuma’s domain, trying that would be an
invitation to getting everyone in the room blown to pieces. He’d had more than enough of the
mastermind’s taste for explosives.

But even so, he supposed that looking should be safe enough. There was something oddly familiar
about the way those cabinets had been set up, and he was certain he could figure it out if he just
examined them more closely. He took a step towards them — but before he could take more than a
step in that direction, a sharp gasp caught his attention.

He spun back towards the other girls — and there was Ogami, white as a sheet as she stared down
at a small, colorful booklet.

Anything that eye-searing had to be Monokuma’s creation — and anything that bear produced
could only lead to trouble. It would be stupid to let Ogami waste her strength on more of the
mastermind’s nonsense when they still had a trial ahead of them. He stepped briskly forward and
plucked the booklet from her trembling fingers before she could protest.

As soon as the booklet left her line of sight, Ogami took a long, slow breath, as shaky as if she
couldn’t quite remember how to do it. Whatever was written in the booklet had apparently hit her
hard. What could have caused such a powerful reaction?

Togami’s eyes darted automatically down to the booklet — and although he hadn’t meant to read it,
a single phrase leapt off the page to assault him.

*For all your cadaver needs.*
Slowly, as though his head had somehow lost the connection to his body, Togami looked up… up… up at the walls of cabinets. He remembered now… he remembered where he’d seen this kind of set-up. This room wasn’t any kind of bio lab at all.

This was a morgue.

And behind one of those cabinet doors… those cold, sterile, steel-gray doors… all alone in the dark and frozen air of this awful locked room… behind one of those doors…

The rest of the thought couldn’t form in his mind, too huge and horrible for him to grasp. The cabinets loomed above him, filling the entire scope of his vision with a wall of gray, speckled with sickly green and blood-soaked red. His stomach writhed in nauseous revulsion at the sight… but he couldn’t tear his eyes away. How could he look at anything else in the room when behind one of those doors…

And then they were gone.

Togami blinked — and the world reoriented itself. The cabinets weren’t gone — but he’d somehow turned away from them to face back towards the door.

No — he’d been turned. The hands gripping his shoulders had turned him away. He couldn’t move his head to look at his rescuer, not yet… but the feeling of gloved fingers on his arm meant that he didn’t really need to.

Slowly, gently, Kirigiri began walking forward, her grip meaning that Togami moved along with her. He could have fought against her… but he couldn’t remember why he would want to. It was easier to let her guide him forward, step by careful step, until the warm air of the hallway brushed against his face. Togami took a long, deep breath of it… and a bit of the ice inside his chest began to thaw ever so slightly.

The steadying hands left his shoulders, and Kirigiri took a step back. “I don’t think you should go back inside that room.” Her eyes flickered over Togami’s shoulder, to where Ogami had followed them. “Either of you.”

The implication that he wasn’t capable of investigating that room sent indignation prickling furiously down Togami’s spine — but the thought of turning around and reentering the morgue snuffed it out again. He nodded slowly, and out of the corner of his eye he could see Ogami doing the same. Someone was going to have to investigate that room… but neither of them could do it.

“Don’t worry, darling — I’ve got no problem being your eyes, ears, or any other body parts you need!” Despite Jill’s grin, there was no amusement lurking in her dark eyes as she spoke.

“We’ll meet back up and resume our investigation after Jill and I investigate this room,” Kirigiri agreed calmly. She met Togami’s eyes for a moment, waiting to see if he objected — and then gave him a single nod before turning to head back into the morgue with Jill.
Chapter 332

Togami didn’t want to think about what Kirigiri and Jill might find in the morgue. The murder victims had been bad enough, but the ones Monokuma had gotten his paws on had been truly horrific. He’d done his best not to envision the results too clearly, avoiding the whispers of his knowledge of post-mortem anatomy. At first, there had been no point in dwelling on an unpleasant inevitability that would only leave him nauseous and grim… and these last few days, it had become too painful to contemplate.

But now, he couldn’t stop the images from flooding through his mind. Maizono, slumped down with her chest torn open… Ishimaru, Hagakure, and Yamada, with their skulls caved in… Asahina and Enoshima, riddled by rains of the mastermind’s wrath. Was there anything left of Owada, or had Monokuma’s implication that he’d been liquified had any semblance of truth to it? Were Celeste and Kuwata still recognizable, or had they been bludgeoned so much that they couldn’t even be differentiated? And Fujisaki… had the marks faded from his wrists from where Togami had bound his corpse to the wall in a deliberately-flawed mimicry of the genocider’s methods? For some reason he didn’t quite understand, Togami found himself hoping that they had.

But even so… even with all the horror and pain those thoughts brought with them… even so, they were still nothing more than distractions from the nightmare lurking beyond. The moment of death he hadn’t actually been able to witness… the final state of the body he hadn’t gotten to see… the ruined wreck of a body that was all that remained of the boy he loved.

Naegi. What remained of Naegi beyond the doors of the morgue?

He didn’t want to know. He didn’t want to see it, to have the face of a murdered corpse replace Naegi’s smile in his memories… but he couldn’t stop his mind from circling back to the thought time and again until it left his head spinning. Would it be better to know…? Or should he continue to avoid seeing a nightmare he would never be able to un-see? He didn’t know, and the uncertainty clawed at his brain until he thought he might scream.

“This isn’t helping.”

Togami nearly did scream at that, stifling the sound only when he realized the voice had come from the girl beside him. He looked over at Ogami, neck practically creaking as his muscles fought against the tension… and in her face, he could see the same cycle of pain and confusion twisting through his own soul.

“It isn’t helping,” she repeated, meeting his eyes. “Sitting here and thinking about — about what’s happened to the people we’ve lost — it won’t help anything. It can’t. All it’s doing is making us think about them as something ruined and broken. And — and that isn’t right. It isn’t how we should think of them.”

Togami hadn’t expected to hear his own thoughts spoken in someone else’s voice — but at the same time, it seemed perfectly natural for Ogami to have reached the same conclusion he had. She, too, had lost someone dear to her in the mastermind’s game… and like him, she had struggled to cope with the aftermath. Anyone might have said the same words, making the idea into a hollow murmur of pity… but Ogami understood him.

And he understood her. Togami inclined his head in a fraction of a nod, barely enough to be noticed. “We owe them more that. We have to remember them as they deserve to be remembered.”
Except that they didn’t remember — not everything. Togami had to look away from Ogami as Jill’s story of the past came back to him, the years of time they’d lost stretching out around him like invisible chains that bound him in ways he couldn’t understand. How could he claim to honor Naegi’s memory when so much of it was missing?

“Wow, what’s up with this gloomy atmosphere? It’s like someone died!”

Togami froze as the unrepentantly cheerful voice filled the hallway. Standing in front of the bio lab door was that godforsaken robot, head tilted at them like he’d asked the question seriously.

“Go away,” he forced out from between clenched teeth, sending Monokuma a vicious glare.

Monokuma drew back, pretending that he actually had feelings to hurt. “So cruel! If this keeps up, I won’t have anyone left to talk to.”

Togami took a deep breath, trying to remind himself not to get swept up in the bear’s idiocy. “Do you have a point, or are you only here to interfere with our search? Because meddling with our investigation after making a deal with Kirigiri would be cheating.”

“Hmm? I don’t remember any clauses like that,” Monokuma said, eyes wide. “But lucky for you, I don’t want to get in your way — I’m here to help!”

Togami didn’t bother to do more than roll his eyes. The mastermind couldn’t possibly expect that line to keep working now, after all the lies they’d told — this was just an attempt to unsettle the two students who seemed most vulnerable. Well, they’d realize soon enough that neither he nor Ogami had any intention of letting it work.

After the silence stretched on for several long seconds, Monokuma’s face fell. “Wait — do you mean you don’t want my help?”

“We don’t want anything from you,” Ogami said, low voice just a hair away from a growl.

“Really?” Monokuma blinked, then shrugged. “Well, okay, then. I mean, I was gonna tell you all about why Naegi’s not on the class trip to the morgue, buuuumut…”

It had to be a trap. Togami knew it, he could see it, Monokuma was barely even trying to hide it — but even so, he couldn’t stop himself from taking the bait. “What are you talking about?”

Monokuma grinned, sharp teeth flashing bright in the dim hallway. “I thought you’d be interested.”

“He’s not the only one.”

Kirigiri stepped out of the bio lab, arms crossed as she fixed an impenetrable stare on the robot. “I would also be very interested to hear why Naegi’s body isn’t in the morgue.”

“You mean that it really isn’t?” Ogami asked, eyes widening in shock. “It’s not some kind of trick?”

“A trick? Oh my, what a terrible accusation!” Monokuma grinned. “Don’t you know that I always tell the absolute truth?”

“Then get on with telling it!” Togami snapped, in no mood for the bear’s absurd taunts. “What have you done to him?”

“Umm… you mean other than putting him through an execution?” Monokuma tilted his head
inquisitively. “Do you want a chronological list of everything, or just the ones you don’t know about yet?”

Sour vomit burned at the back of Togami’s throat, and for a few seconds he thought he was about to be sick all over the hallway. The mastermind had taken Naegi’s body? They’d done things to him?

“I didn’t ask for horror stories,” Kirigiri interrupted flatly. “Where have you moved Naegi — and why?”

“I know I haven’t told you all of Naegi’s whereabouts,” Monokuma heaved a sigh. “But repeating myself is boring.”

“Then it will be a relief to know that you haven’t told us anything yet.” Kirigiri raised an impatient eyebrow.

“Oh, I know I haven’t told all of you anything,” Monokuma said with a shrug. “The only one I told about Naegi’s whereabouts is Togami.”
Chapter 333

*The only one I told about Naegi’s whereabouts is Togami.*

The sheer impossibility of the words froze Togami in place, his face going slack with shock at the magnitude of the lie. The other students turned to look at him after the accusation, but he couldn’t find a response to give to the questions in their eyes. What answer could there be? He hadn’t even known about the morgue’s existence until a few moments ago — how could Monokuma have told him that Naegi’s body wasn’t there?

After a moment, Kirigiri’s gaze snapped back towards Monokuma. “Apparently you’ll need to jog his memory.”

“Huh? Really?” Monokuma looked heartbroken. “It hurts to know that you could just forget about something so important!”

Forgotten about something important…? That almost sounded like a reference to Jill’s story about the two lost years. Was it a warning — some kind of threat — or something even worse?

The paranoid jolt of fear at the words hadn’t even finished its path down Togami’s spine when Monokuma’s sorrowful expression melted back to glee. “I guess you didn’t care at all when I told you Naegi’s here hanging out with me!”

And then — Togami remembered. Those awful moments he’d spent in Naegi’s room, watching Monokuma trample the bed and spout lie after lie about Naegi’s miraculous survival. It had been so cruel, needlessly and pointlessly cruel, to taunt him with the possibility that Naegi hadn’t died in the execution — but perhaps, for someone like the mastermind, it hadn’t been cruel enough.

Perhaps there had been just enough truth to the words to twist the knife even deeper.

Looking into the blood-red glow of Monokuma’s eye, Togami realized that he couldn’t fathom the depths of cruelty lurking beyond it.

“I’d offer to let him chat if it would help,” Monokuma said cheerfully. “But you know, I just don’t think he’s up to saying much right now.”

And they’d do it, too, Togami realized in a distant sort of way. Whoever was speaking to them through Monokuma, whoever had put the students of Hope’s Peak through these nightmares, whoever the person was who would do such horrific things — that person would have no problem putting a microphone to the mangled lips of a dead body so they could broadcast the silence.

“Should I try being the understudy?” Monokuma tilted his head. “Let’s see, let’s see… how’s this?” His eyes grew wide and innocent, and a repulsively kind smile blossomed on his face. “I’m so happy that you’re all starting to become friends! I knew you could resist the killing game’s despair if you just worked together — and you’re doing it!”

The words sent Togami reeling backward, banging hard against the wall. It had sounded so much like Naegi — his thoughts, his phrasing, his way of speech — words from the one person he’d wanted so desperately to hear just one more time — but in Monokuma’s repulsively robotic voice.

“So? How was that?” Monokuma’s voice was his own again, his face taking on his usual vindictive cheer. “Want me to keep going?”

Trembling gasps hissed from Togami’s lips, chest heaving like he’d run through the entire school.
The need to scream battered at his throat, a wrenching drive to tell the mastermind how obscene that impersonation had been — but with that Monokuma’s horrible grin glaring in front of him, he couldn’t catch his breath long enough for so much as a whisper.

And then — white and silver washed across his vision, wiping Monokuma’s red and black from sight. Togami blinked once, then again… and as his breathing gradually deepened, he recognized the wall of white and silver as Sakura Ogami’s back, shielding him from Monokuma’s line of sight.

“You’ve said more than enough,” she said, voice a low rumble of danger.

“Oh, my, what’s this?” Monokuma didn’t sound daunted in the slightest by the huge fighter looming over his small robotic form. “Looks like someone’s itching to go another round with me! Well, if you’re that desperate to break school rules, who am I to say no?”

“We aren’t the ones who are desperate,” Kirigiri countered, intercepting the taunt before Ogami got a chance. “You’re scrambling for any excuse to get rid of us before we can face you in a trial — and tricking us into breaking your rules would be the perfect opportunity.”

“Aww — guess I’ve been found out!” Monokuma let out an obnoxious laugh. “Oh well, I’ll just have to try harder next time I want to kill somebody!” His wild laughter echoed through the hallway a moment longer before his shadow vanished from the floor.

Some measure of tension relaxed from Ogami’s spine, and she took a step to the side so Togami could see the empty hallway again. He didn’t really like the way she moved, as though she were acting like some kind of hired bodyguard — but on the other hand, continuing to interact with Monokuma in a vicious mood would have been worse. Togami decided the best course of action was to give her a slight nod of acknowledgment, as he might have done to an employee who had greatly exceeded his expectations… but even as he attempted to do so, something about the interaction didn’t match what he wanted to convey.

“Doing okay, darling?” Jill asked, coming out to lean against the door frame like a coiling spring. Her narrowed gaze darted over him head to toe, and this more serious examination wasn’t much better than when she’d been leering at him.

“I’m fine,” he snapped, straightening his spine as much as he could. “This is hardly the first time Monokuma has shown up to mock me.”

“No… he mentioned that, didn’t he?” Kirigiri frowned, drumming her fingers against the opposite elbow of her crossed arms. “This would have been… what, after you left us in the cafeteria?”

Thinking about those moments alone with Monokuma in Naegi’s room felt like the air in Togami’s lungs turned to ice, as though the hallway had suddenly chilled until it grew as frozen as the morgue. A sharp shake of his head wasn’t enough to banish the memories, but at least it gave him time to force back the urge to scream.

“That’s right,” he answered, taking what comfort he could from the way his voice was almost completely free of any shaking. “The same as he said now. Naegi was there with him, safe and —” He stopped short, closing his eyes tightly when the rest of the words wouldn’t come.

“He told you Naegi was safe?” Kirigiri repeated slowly, as though she couldn’t quite understand what he’d said. “He actually said that?”

“Like he thought I’d believe him.” A dark, ugly laugh ripped free of his throat. “He even said
Naegi wasn’t — that the execution hadn’t —” He shook his head again, but it couldn’t erase the
words burned into his memory.

*He’s right here with me, safe and sound.*

He bit down hard on his bottom lip, and only the sharp tang of his own blood let him force back
the flood of words the memory summoned. He couldn’t say that, he *couldn’t*, not with the
mastermind’s cameras still capturing every move he made. It was bad enough that they still saw
the effort it took to retain even this thin vestige of control.

After a long moment, Ogami broke the silence. “That’s *horrific.*”

“I’ll say,” Jill agreed, without even a hint of respect for a fellow sadist. “Takes a lot of gall to say
*that* and then go claiming he doesn’t tell lies!”

“Yes,” Kirigiri agreed, almost too softly to hear. “I wouldn’t have expected it from the
mastermind.”

The words sank into Togami’s mind, turning into a force gentler and milder than the literal
meaning of what the girls had said. It wasn’t enough to drown out Monokuma’s taunts, not on its
own… but somehow it did bolster his strength until he found he could open his eyes and face the
world again.

And the girls gathered in a semi-circle around him were the first things he saw. His eyes darted
around the circle, looking from face to face without quite meeting any single person’s gaze. They’d
just been standing there… watching him? That… that ought to be an uncomfortable thought, as
unpleasant as the staring eyes of the cameras…

But it wasn’t. Maybe he’d used up all his worry and suspicion on the mastermind’s antics, or
maybe there was some other reason he couldn’t understand right now… but whatever the reason, it
didn’t bother him the way it should have.

After a moment, Kirigiri stepped back, breaking the circle as she shook her head. “I believe we’re
done here. We should move on to the next floor while we still have time to investigate.”
Chapter 334

Togami couldn’t help but feel some measure of relief as he and the other survivors left the fifth floor behind. While none of the school floors had been particularly pleasant, the uppermost one had definitely been the worst. Nothing positive had ever happened up there, and he could breathe a little easier now that they’d taken the stairs back down a level.

Not that the fourth floor was much better.

Togami knew where they were heading even before Kirigiri turned away from the path to the stairs down to the third floor, and he took advantage of those extra few seconds to school his face into the little stoicism he could manage. It was pathetically little… but at least he didn’t obviously flinch when they came face to face with the door to the data center.

He kept his eyes locked on Kirigiri as she confirmed the door was locked. Watching her every movement let him keep the memories of his last visit to the data center at arm’s length, distant enough that he would be able to enter the room without screaming.

Or at least that was what he thought — right up to the moment when the door refused to open after the master key unlocked it.

Kirigiri froze, key still embedded in the lock. Togami knew her mind had to be whirring away at lightspeed in the brief moment before she tried again. The click of the lock rang too loud for comfort in the otherwise silent hallway, but the door itself refused to budge an inch.

“Guess we know where the resident rat is holed up!” Jill gave the door an alarmingly speculative stare as she twirled a pair of scissors in one hand. “Think they’d wanna come out and play?”

“I doubt you’d get more than a visit from Monokuma,” Togami said, before she could take that line of thought any further. “And I for one have had more than enough of him.”

Ogami frowned, glancing from the door to the other survivors. “So you’re saying the mastermind is behind this door? And — the key turned, so — so it isn’t locked?” She started to take a step forward, before hesitation overcame her and she looked back at them for support. “Then should I try to break it down?”

“No!” Togami ordered sharply — at the same time that Jill sang out, “Yes!”

Kirigiri sighed, pocketing the key again. “Not right now. We can’t be certain it isn’t a trap of some sort, trying to lure us into breaking down a locked door without realizing it. I don’t believe the situation is dire enough to warrant that level of risk at the moment.”

“Except that the whole locked door deal only matters as long our little rat is the one running the show,” Jill countered, scissors flashing bright in a silver whirl. “We get in there and have a little four-on-one action, and maybe we can set a few rules of our own!”

“That’s one possibility.” Kirigiri shrugged. “But more likely, we’d be killed before we even got a chance.” She shook her head. “Besides… I don’t think that any of us are prepared to face the mastermind at the moment. There are too many questions we need to answer before we’ll be ready.”

With that, she turned away from the door and began walking towards the stairs down. Ogami seemed content to follow without argument, but Jill didn’t move immediately.
“You sure you wanna keep playing detective, darling?” she asked after a moment. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m up for any game you’re into — but a little blood and gore might be the cleaner option here!”

The thought of making the mastermind suffer for once did have its appeal… but Togami knew better than to give her any encouragement. He shook his head firmly. “No. I agree with Kirigiri — the risk right now is too great.” He glanced at the nearest camera, still trained on them as unblinking as ever. “If we really had a chance, they’d have stopped us before we could try.”

“So that’s a no to getting it over with once and for all?”

Jill looked at him for a moment that went on just a little too long, and his eyes began to narrow with the suspicion that there had been more to her question than what she’d asked aloud. But before he could demand an explanation, Jill’s mouth curled back into her signature grin, wider than ever. “Just making sure!”

She spun and darted after Kirigiri and Ogami. Togami blinked for a moment — but he wasn’t about to let the girls wander away while he loitered in front of the mastermind’s lair. He followed, doing his best to look like he wasn’t actually hurrying, and caught up to them on the stairs down to the third floor. Kirigiri’s brisk pace didn’t falter in the slightest, but she did catch his eye and nod as they crossed the floor to the next set of stairs.

As they entered the second floor, Togami’s shoulders tensed. He could feel the library’s presence looming to his left, the intensity of so many memories with Naegi pulsating out from its heavy doors. He found himself lagging a half-step behind the others, and then a pace further than that, feet growing impossibly heavy while so close to everything the room represented. Seeing everything in there again would only hurt, he knew that… but turning away from it would hurt even more.

No one noticed that he’d turned in the opposite direction from the stairs until the low creak of the library door wrenched its way through the hall. Togami could hear their footsteps pause, but he pushed aside the distraction and stepped into the room.

Silence washed over him as he entered, softening the rest of the world to a bearably muffled level. Somewhere in the back of his mind, memories of psychology essays whispered about tricks of mental association and illusory comforts, but he tuned them out. Even if the blessed moment of quiet was nothing more than a product of his own mind, he would take the scraps it offered.

A day ago, even a few hours ago, the idea of standing calmly in the room where Naegi had nearly died would have made him sneer… but now here he was. And as he stared down at the spot on the ground, all he could think about was that this was a moment when Naegi hadn’t died. It could have been the end, could have been the last moment he’d seen his lover… but it hadn’t been. They’d had another day, just one single day, not enough to make a real difference in the outcome… but enough that he’d had the chance to reconcile with Naegi after their stupid fight.

It was almost enough to make him feel grateful, in a twisted sort of way. He would have laughed at bizarreness of his own situation, if he’d had the strength to pry his clenched teeth apart.

And then the click of heeled footsteps broke the silence. Togami looked behind him to see Kirigiri following him into the library, while Ogami and Jill hovered at the doorway.

“I know — we don’t have time for this,” he said, before she could try whatever painfully awkward interruption she had in mind.
But instead of seizing the opening to drag him out, Kirigiri stood at his shoulder and looked down at the place on the floor that had first drawn his gaze. “So many terrible things happened to him… more than any of the rest of us. There were so many times he could have died.”

So she finally understood what Togami had been saying to her from the start. There should have been at least a dull sense of triumph that she’d conceded the point at last… but he couldn’t summon the energy for that kind of vindictive glee. He just stood there next to Kirigiri in silence, a little of the tension easing from his shoulders at the knowledge that her thoughts were running along the same track as his own. He wouldn’t have to fight with her about Naegi ever again.

After a few seconds ticked past, she drew a long breath and drew her eyes away from the place where Naegi had fallen and bled. “I won’t make the same mistake again — I can promise you that much. I won’t let the mastermind manipulate me again.”
Kirigiri’s declaration against the mastermind’s manipulations came a little late, in Togami’s opinion — but he swallowed the words back rather than spitting them in her face. What satisfaction would there be in gloating over her admission, when she was far from the only one who’d made unforgivable mistakes? If any of them had made even a single different choice… if any of them had chosen trust instead of letting the mastermind scramble their thoughts… maybe that nightmare of a trial would have ended differently.

But before he could figure out how to put such a strange, complicated thought into words, Kirigiri shook her head and turned back towards the door. With the moment past, Togami let the thought go and hurried after her.

Leaving the second floor was a mixed blessing. Much as he knew that staying near the library would prevent him from focusing on what he had to accomplish, he couldn’t quite shake the lingering regret as he headed down the stairs. No matter how the upcoming trial ended, it seemed unlikely that he would ever return to the library again. Even if some of the memories held there were terrible, the idea of being barred from the room was not a comfortable one. He did his best to push the thought to the back of his mind, focusing instead on the path down the stairs and across the first floor.

Crossing the classroom-oriented half of the first floor seemed reasonable enough — but when Kirigiri continued to lead them past the entrance to the bathhouse, Togami blinked. He’d assumed the room free of the mastermind’s prying eyes had been her destination, but that was apparently not the case. She headed back towards the dormitories —

And then turned a sharp right, towards the stairs heading up to the second floor of the dorms. The floor that had been locked for the entirety of their imprisonment in the school… the floor that only Kirigiri herself had entered. Of course there would still be unsolved mysteries here, that should have been obvious. He schooled his face as best he could while Kirigiri unlocked the gate, bracing himself to encounter yet another piece of this nightmare.

But nothing could have prepared him for the wreckage they encountered as soon as they set foot on the sealed-off floor. Piles of rubble littered the floor, blocking pathways and threatening any possible footing. Walls divided the space in name only, torn into shreds that looked a breath away from collapse. The air hung thick and heavy with the memory of spilled blood.

As bad as the ruined classroom on the fifth floor had been, this hallway was worse. The classroom had been a single moment of slaughter, preserved behind closed doors like a monument to murder… but whatever had happened in this hallway couldn’t be contained. This hallway hadn’t just been the site of murders, more pieces of the mastermind’s carefully-orchestrated game… no, this place had been a battlefield.

“What happened here?”

That was the question running through Togami’s mind as well, but Ogami was the one who asked it aloud. He glanced up at her, and found his own horror written across her pale face.

“I haven’t found anything to explain it,” Kirigiri said, her impassive mask snapping across her face again. Togami might not be able to see past her deliberately emotionless features, but he could recognize the hint that she felt a reaction strongly enough to want to hide it. “It was like this when I entered the first time. All I have are theories, with no proof to back any of them up.”
And he had enough baseless theories of his own without adding hers to the mix. Better to hold the speculation till they had evidence one way or the other. Togami nodded his understanding, in full agreement that they should all take the chance to look around this floor before trying to work it out.

And there were certainly more than enough mysteries here that needed to be solved. Why had this area of the school been destroyed so thoroughly, when the other areas had been almost entirely untouched? Or if the other floors hadn’t escaped this kind of wreckage, why repair them and leave this area alone? Was it that the mastermind had never meant for them to see this part of the school? That answer would certainly be the simplest… but Togami had the sinking suspicion that the simple answer was never going to be the right one when it came to the mastermind.

But looking around the ruins as they crossed the floor, Togami realized that there was one thing that he didn’t see, one thing that haunted almost every other space in this godforsaken school. There were no cameras or monitors here. Like the bathhouse, this entire floor appeared to be completely free of the mastermind’s observation. If that was true… then as long as they stayed here, they wouldn’t have to worry that the mastermind would interrupt their conversations or use their plans against them. They could speak freely.

And Togami knew exactly what he wanted to say. This was the perfect opportunity to tell Kirigiri and Ogami about the past two years that they’d all apparently forgotten. They’d have Jill on hand to back up the story and answer any questions, and with no cameras, the mastermind couldn’t intervene to stop them. They wouldn’t have a better chance.

He turned towards the others as they walked down the center of the hall — but when he saw Kirigiri’s face, the words died in his throat. The iron-cold mask he’d begun to know so well had fallen away, and her gaze burned down the hall ahead of them. He couldn’t say for certain what emotion blazed from her face now, but no one could have missed the intensity of it. Togami knew that interrupting her now would be a waste of time — not with whatever demon had her in its grip.

He wasn’t the only one who noticed, either, if Ogami’s sidelong glances were anything to go by.

“Is something wrong, Kirigiri?” she asked, jumping into the fray while Togami was still considering the risks of such an approach. “Is there some kind of threat here that we should watch out for?”

Kirigiri blinked once, as though she’d forgotten that she wasn’t alone in the hallway for a moment. Her eyes refocused on the three students around her, and Togami had the distinct impression that she’d been looking somewhere far away from them. “I’m not aware of any overt threats, no.”

Togami knew a dodge when he heard one. “But…?” he prompted.

She sighed, more resigned than upset at being called out. “But… you could say that something is wrong. When I was here the first time, there was one mystery I couldn’t solve… and one door I couldn’t open.”

“Man, another one?” Jill laughed. “Guess your super-special magic key isn’t so awesome after all!”

“It has an electronic lock that requires a password,” Kirigiri explained, her steps slowing as they approached the end of the hall. “I… wasn’t able to get through.”

When they reached the final door in the hall, Togami was about to point out the distinct lack of a password-entry system — but since Kirigiri swung that door open without hesitation, she must have been referring to someplace else.
Stepping into the room beyond, it was like they’d reentered the rest of the school. The destruction of the corridor outside was nowhere to be seen, with all the elegant furniture intact and unmarred.

Although… as Togami looked at the room more closely, he had to amend that thought. It wasn’t quite like the rest of the school… no, this room had a far more mature feel to it. Monokuma always seemed to delight in mocking their status as students, but this room didn’t have any school-like touches. It could have been a room in a cozy apartment somewhere, rather than part of a dormitory. And that… that had to mean…

“So this would be the part of the teachers’ quarters?” he asked, looking back at Kirigiri.

She nodded, not that he’d needed the confirmation of his assumption. “Yes… I believe that this floor was dedicated to rooms for teaching staff. And this particular room belonged to… the headmaster.” She took a deep breath. “To my father.”
Chapter 336

So this room had belonged to the headmaster? Togami wasn’t surprised, considering the location. Naturally the highest-ranked member of the faculty would be in possession of the corner room, with the greatest amount of space attached. He would have made that assumption without having Kirigiri spell it out, if he’d had the time.

But there was another piece of the puzzle that made him frown deeply. “So the headmaster’s room is the only place in all this destruction that remains suspiciously untouched?”

“I’m aware of the implications,” Kirigiri said, tension vibrating through her quiet words. “There was a deliberate choice here, even if we can’t determine just what that choice was at the moment.”

“Wait.” Ogami looked from one of them to the other. “Wait… you’re saying that this room belongs to the mastermind?”

“No.” The word snapped out before Ogami had even finished her question. Kirigiri’s eyes burned dark in her pale face as she met Ogami’s startled stare. “No. The headmaster is not the mastermind. I don’t know what else is going on here, but… I’m sure of that.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jill stepped forward, not at all intimidated by the anger radiating from Kirigiri. “Maybe it’s easy for you to have faith in Daddy Dearest, but the rest of us aren’t gonna be bought off with ponies and picture books.”

Kirigiri crossed her arms, and though the pose seemed relaxed, Togami could see how tightly her fingers dug into her elbows. “Don’t call him that. He’s made his lack of interest in the position clear, and I assure you that I do not harbor any unnecessary affection for such a man.” She took another breath, shallow and too quick. “Nevertheless, I… I do not believe that the headmaster is the mastermind. I know I could still be wrong… but too many parts of this game wouldn’t make sense if the headmaster were the one behind it.”

“I agree,” Togami found himself saying. He hadn’t thought much about the headmaster since realizing the truth of that horrible trial… but now that he did, some pieces were clicking into place. “The mastermind… they knew we would be suspicious of Kirigiri once we learned about her connection to the headmaster. They used that to… to…” Tightness closed his throat, freezing the words unspoken.

“To create discord among us,” Kirigiri finished, jumping in before he had to acknowledge his inability to say as much. “They wanted us to fight one another during the last trial, using in-fighting to distract us from the truth that was right in front of us.”

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“Those clues about the headmaster were an attempt to isolate Kirigiri,” Togami added, forcing his voice back under control. “And while that doesn’t make it impossible for the headmaster to be the mastermind… it does seem unlikely that the mastermind would use their true identity for a distraction, after going to so much trouble to hide it.”

Jill’s eyes darted from Togami to Kirigiri, scissors snipping absently through the air while she searched for whatever answers she expected to find. After a moment, she shrugged, scissors disappearing as swiftly as they’d appeared. “If you say so, darling.”

“Then… who is the mastermind?” Ogami asked, brow wrinkling with confusion. “If it isn’t the headmaster… then we don’t have any way of knowing. Surely they will expect us to be able to
identify them as part of solving the school’s mysteries, won’t they?”

“Undoubtedly,” Kirigiri said crisply, mouth thinning to a white line. “Which is why we’re investigating. I’m certain that there are clues to the truth somewhere — it wouldn’t be a game if we had no chance to win. The trick will be uncovering the evidence we need, and understanding what it means.”

Not that they had any evidence on this matter — none that Togami could see, at any rate. All the clues he could think of were nothing more than part of the mastermind’s gambit to delude them. But even so, he didn’t doubt Kirigiri’s assertion that evidence would exist somewhere — that much fit with what they’d all experienced of the mastermind’s twisted methods. That made it all the more vital to uncover new information — and more to the point, searching new places for secrets they hadn’t yet found.

Kirigiri had mentioned a door, Togami remembered… a door that she hadn’t been able to open. His eyes flew across the room… and yes, there on the far wall, he could see the outline of a hidden door near the computer desk. And there, he could see the keyboard on hand for electronic input… so it had to be the door she’d meant. He strode across the room to try it, more out of reflex than because he doubted Kirigiri’s claim that it was locked.

Sure enough, the locked door only clattered beneath his fingers, refusing to move in either direction. He scowled at it for a moment, then turned back to the other girls. “It’s obvious that there must be a room back here. And even if the headmaster isn’t behind this game, the mastermind has been using him as a decoy. This room could hold the information we need — especially since they’ve gone to all the trouble of sealing it.”

“Doesn’t do us much good if we can’t get at it, though,” Jill pointed out.

Ogami examined the door, pressing a palm against it near the hinges to test the weight. “I suppose that if there are no cameras here… I could try to break it down.”

“Don’t,” Togami said at once, before she could take that idiotic plan any further. “Cameras or not, we’d still be stuck with a broken door as proof that we’d ignored the school rules.”

As he spoke, the memory of the other broken doors flashed through his mind — the headmaster’s office, and Ogami’s own dorm room. His long-held instincts flared, screaming at him to use the obvious vulnerability to burn his point in as deeply as possible — but he swallowed it back before the words could form. There would be no value in reopening the wounds of Asahina’s death. And it was unnecessary, in any case. Ogami nodded easily enough at his order, letting her hand fall from the door and stepping back out of range. The same result, but without the distress that would have come from using her friend against her. This was… better, surprisingly enough.

“We should avoid such drastic measures as long as possible,” Kirigiri agreed, her eyes fixed on the closed door. “Our best chance of opening the door is to figure out the password. But… I will say that I have exhausted every possibility that occurred to me.”

“Any chance Papa Bear was the type to leave his passwords stuck under the keyboard?” Jill asked, tapping her scissors against her palm.

Kirigiri grimaced, though Togami couldn’t tell if it was at the suggestion or at the absurd nickname. “I’ve already searched the room quite thoroughly. If he were careless enough to leave such a reminder, it was removed before any of us could get here.”
Meaning that their only option was to guess. Togami grimaced as the range of possibilities. “The most secure passwords are entirely random.”

“I’m aware,” Kirigiri said tightly. “But very few people actually follow that particular security precaution. Most passwords have some kind of meaning to the person who chose them.”

And a detective would certainly have reason to know that, regardless of any personal connection to the matter. Togami saw no reason to doubt her conclusion, at least for now. Still, it wasn’t as though it did them any good. With the little Kirigiri seemed to know of her father, she would hardly be able to provide any more insight than the rest of them. After all, if any of them had even met the headmaster, it wasn’t as though they would remember —

Togami froze, eyes locking onto Jill.
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Togami didn’t even dare to breathe as he stared at Jill, in case the idea settling in his mind might flutter out of reach like a startled butterfly. They needed to understand the headmaster better in order to guess what password he might have chosen, needed the memories that the mastermind had stolen from them if they had any hope of solving this riddle… and Jill’s memories hadn’t been wiped.

It only took a few seconds for Jill to realize she had his full attention. A wide grin curled across her lips as she met his gaze. “What’s the matter, darling — see something you like?”

He paid no attention to her nonsensical chatter — he needed answers from her, not games. “Did you ever meet the headmaster?”

“Oh, that’s all you’re after?” Jill heaved a sigh of dramatic disappointment. “Well, not like I’m gonna say no to you, darling! Sure, I met him once or twice, even if I had to fake it as boring Miss Gloomy the whole time.”

“You… you’re saying that you met the headmaster?” A deep frown creased Ogami’s face as she tried to make sense of it. “Before you came to Hope’s Peak?”

"This was far from the ideal way to share that particular revelation — but there wasn’t much choice. With the password to uncover, they no longer had time to dance around the idea. “The mastermind erased our memories to conceal the fact that a great deal more time has passed than we believed.”

“Oh.” Ogami blinked, then glanced down at her own arms. She touched a hand to one bicep and nodded slowly. “Oh… yes, I see. I’d wondered why…” She took a slow, shaking breath, then shook her head as if to clear it. “Then only Fukawa’s memories were erased?”

“Guess so.” Jill’s expression darkened, fingers squeezing tight around a pair of her scissors. It didn’t take a genius to see that she had to be thinking about the other time Fukawa had lost her memories.

Nothing good could come of dwelling on that. The last thing any of them needed in this situation was for the genocider to go back to the half-mad state she’d been in after losing her other half. Togami crossed his arms, reaching back into his memories for his best attempt at the imperious attitude that always got her attention. “The headmaster,” he ordered sharply. “Tell us, now.”

Jill’s eyes flickered towards him, and for a moment he thought he saw grateful relief twist across her face. But then he blinked — and it was gone, her mouth spread wide in an exuberant grin. “Gotta love a guy who knows what he needs! Okay, darling, since you asked so very nicely, I’ll give you anything you like!”

She tilted her head and thought for a moment, light flashing round the room as she spun her scissors idly around one finger. “Not like we spent a whole lot of time chatting, though. I knew better than to get up close and personal with anyone — too much risk I’d get stuck in a hardcore bondage cell with no way out! Only times I saw him were when I couldn’t steer clear.”

“Did he have any interests?” Togami pressed, refusing to let the lack of an immediate answer discourage him. “If you know the ways he chose to spend his time or the topics that drew his attention, it might give us a direction.”
“If you’re talking interests, I’d say he seemed like an all work and no play kinda guy to me,” Jill said, shrugging. “No idea what he kept behind closed doors, but out where I could see him it was all schoolyard business.”

Kirigiri sighed. “Passwords related to Hope’s Peak were one of the first ideas I tried. None of them got me anywhere.”

Jill put one hand on her hip and shook her head. “Then I hate to run out of steam when you’re still good to go, darling, but that’s all I’ve got. The teacher’s favorite pet might’ve had more to say if she could remember any of her Daddy-Daughter bonding time, but I’m out.”

Togami was about to try to jog her memory again when the words she’d said actually registered. Teacher’s pet…? Daddy-daughter bonding…? As impossible as it sounded considering her apparent attitude, there was only one person that Jill could be referring to. His eyes shot to Kirigiri almost of their own accord — and the stony mask that concealed her face told him that she’d come to the same conclusion.

“Are you suggesting that I spent any amount of time engaged with the man who left the Kirigiri family behind? That I allowed him to go back on his decision to abandon everything we represent?” Tension coiled through her words, shaking as the pressure behind them rose. Togami wouldn’t have expected her to be so willing to give them a glimpse of the emotions behind her iron mask… but the idea that she might be unable to conceal her feelings on the headmaster, of all possible topics, was even more disconcerting.

Not that anything about it disturbed Jill in the slightest, of course. She tossed her braids back and gave a one-shouldered shrug. “Dunno about any of that stuff! All I know is that every time I saw the head honcho, he had you right there along with him.”

Kirigiri would keep fighting against Jill’s argument — Togami could see the rejection of it burning in her vicious glare. Once, not so very long ago, he would have taken a sadistic glee in seeing such obvious proof that her icy mask concealed a girl as fallible and human as the rest of them… but now, a twisting pit of fear began to open in his stomach at the sight.

Did the mention of her father really strip away her defenses so thoroughly, when so many other painful topics couldn’t? He didn’t want to believe it was possible. Yes, old wounds most often cut the deepest, but how bad could her past relationship with her father really be? Surely not terrible enough that she’d risk losing everything just to deny him any presence in her life… surely not. The girl who’d bet all their lives on her ability to defeat the mastermind had to be stronger than that. She was stronger than that, even if she’d lost sight of it at the moment — and they didn’t have time for her to pretend otherwise. Togami narrowed his eyes and cut off her attempt to ignore the real point. “What you think right now doesn’t matter.”

Summoning the knife-sharp ice he knew the words needed took more effort than he’d expected, even with his own current state of weakness — but it was more than worth it when Kirigiri spun to face him with shock overcoming the anger in her eyes.

“We’re talking about two years that neither of us remember,” he snapped, jumping onto the offensive before she could respond. “Whatever you think might be possible, the truth is that you don’t know what happened. You can’t know, not for sure. And as long as you refuse to consider one of the possibilities, you might as well hand the mastermind the weapon to use against you.”

Her eyes widened at the mention of the mastermind, and she drew a breath as sharply as if he’d struck her. Good — if he’d managed to drive home the reality of their situation, he’d take even so
meager a win without complaint.

“I… I understand,” she said, one hand curling into a fist at her side. Her gaze dropped to the ground in front of the door, rather than meet any of their eyes. “I don’t speak of my father at all, if I can avoid it. And knowing the mastermind knew about this…” She shook her head sharply, lips thinning to a tight white line. “I would only have chosen to share information as personal as this with a very trusted friend.”

“The mastermind has certainly proven themselves more than capable of learning our darkest secrets before now,” Togami reminded her grimly.

“Yes… that’s right, isn’t it?” Kirigiri seemed as though she was talking to herself, rather than any of the other people in the room. “They knew all our secrets, not just mine. Secrets no one wanted to entrust to anyone here… secrets some of us would kill to protect. Somehow they knew all of it… and they used it to hurt us.”

“They knew exactly how to exploit my own weaknesses against me as well,” Ogami spoke up, her shoulders stiff and tense. “I’m glad that at the very least, you’ve spotted the trap before repeating my mistakes.”

“The trap…” Kirigiri reached up to twist her fingers through her hair where her braid had been. “This is one of the mastermind’s traps, isn’t it? And if that’s the case… if this is about the mastermind rather than the headmaster…”

She didn’t complete the thought, turning on her heel and striding over to the computer.

“What are you doing?” Togami demanded as she bent over the keyboard.

“There’s still one password I didn’t try,” she answered. “It… it wouldn’t have been a choice the headmaster would have made for himself… but if this is a trap the mastermind set for me…”

Her fingers flew across the keyboard in a handful of staccato taps, too loud in the quiet room. Togami opened his mouth to insist she explain herself properly, but before he could —

The locked door swung open.
Togami blinked at the door for a startled moment. After all the difficulties with locked doors in this school, he hadn’t expected it to open so easily. He turned to frown at Kirigiri. “What password did you use?”

“I —” She shook her head. “No, it doesn’t matter. We can’t waste time on the mastermind’s tricks.” She strode forward and plunged into the new room without hesitation.

Togami wasn’t about to let her search an untouched room alone. With the sound of the bomb that destroyed so many clues on the fifth floor ticking in his ears, he hurried after her, with Ogami and Jill close behind. The three of them together ought to be enough to stop Kirigiri from doing anything stupid.

Fortunately, she seemed to have regained some measure of her usual competence, standing in front of the table in the center of the bare-bones room to survey it rather than launching an immediate search. Togami glanced down at the table to see what had her so enthralled — and his eyes widened sharply.

A brightly-wrapped gift box perched atop the table, exuding a cheeriness that had no place anywhere in this school. It grated against his nerves with the same horrifying wrongness that Monokuma evoked… and that made it all the more sinister.

“That has to be a trap.” He didn’t raise his voice, but his words still seemed to ring too loud in the heavy silence.

Kirigiri shook her head, so slowly that it took him a moment to realize the motion was deliberate. “No… not the kind of trap you’re imagining, anyway.”

“It looks very suspicious,” Ogami said, studying the box doubtfully. “But… if the mastermind wished to prevent us from searching this room… surely they would have made the trap less obvious to trigger?”

“Yeah, a box like that might as well scream ‘open me!’ when we got in the door!” Jill added. “It’s got my fingers itching to take a peek!”

“And that’s what we’re meant to do,” Kirigiri said, her gaze never wavering from the box. “We’re supposed to find out.” Her mouth twisted upward in a dark echo of a smile. “They wanted us to know all along.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her. “All right, then — you clearly have some idea about what’s in that box, if you’re so sure it isn’t a trap. So let’s hear it. What exactly are you expecting to find?”

For a moment, he thought she would refuse to answer… but then she sighed. “Information about the headmaster. The mastermind knows I came to Hope’s Peak to find him. I’m… I’m almost certain that it will have definitive proof about his whereabouts.”

There was still something she wasn’t saying, Togami was sure of it — but he was equally sure they didn’t have the time or the means to pry the rest out of her if she was so determined not to share. If he’d learned anything about Kirigiri over the last few weeks, it was that she knew how to keep her
mouth shut when she wanted to do so.

But… even if she didn’t want to tell the rest of them what she’d deduced… did that mean she’d willingly send them into danger when she could have prevented it? She’d done it to Naegi too many times to count, just for the sake of furthering her own investigation… was this the same thing? Did she want one of the others to take the risk of opening a potentially trapped box so that she could gain the information inside?

Kirigiri was more than capable of doing all those things, he knew that too well. Given the right motivation, she had no problem manipulating others into danger for her own gain. To uncover the school’s mysteries and unmask the mastermind, she’d been willing to do anything.

But… would she behave the same way for information about her father? For a trap that could be nothing more than an attempt to distract them from the truth about the killing game?

It would be stupid for her to do that, after using her own life as part of the stake in her final gamble with the mastermind. However much she might want to know about her father, however much she might be willing to sacrifice others to gain that information… it wouldn’t do her any good to learn it at the cost of her own life. And no matter how many crimes he’d laid at her door in the past few weeks, Togami had never genuinely believed that Kirigiri was stupid.

So the only question left was how far he was willing to rely on her judgment.

Togami shook his head once, short and sharp. He could let the thoughts spin round and round through his brain till they drove him mad, and all it would do was waste what time they had left before the trial. That would hand over victory to the mastermind just as thoroughly as any other method… they’d only be dragging it out through an interminable and unresolvable argument. And… he hadn’t dragged himself out of the garden to argue himself to death.

Before he could remember all the reasons it was a terrible idea, Togami strode up to the table and reached for the box. He paused for a split second, fingers hovering a hair away from the box’s surface, just barely long enough for Kirigiri to interrupt him if she thought the better of her position — but when she stayed silent, he pulled the box’s lid off.

And found the bone-white eye sockets of an empty skull staring back at him.

The breath froze in Togami’s lungs, a block of ice lodging beneath his chest as he realized what he’d uncovered. A tangle of bones filled the box beneath the skull, bones of every shape and size he knew of… human bones. Enough human bones to make a full skeleton.

Someone had wrapped a shattered human skeleton up like a birthday gift and left it in the headmaster’s room for them to find.

Togami turned around, hardly even thinking about what he was doing until he met Kirigiri’s eyes. He tried to think of the words he needed to explain this travesty of a gift to her — but before he could, she gave a single nod.

“I thought so.” Her voice didn’t tremble, bespeaking an unimaginable amount of will. “After Alter Ego told us that the headmaster was still somewhere in the school… I thought so.”

“The headmaster?” Ogami caught her breath. “But — you mean —” Her voice died away as she stared down at the contents of the box.

“Guess that’s why the mastermind’s been saying their pet robot gets to lead the school now — victory by conquest!” A burst of dark laughter exploded from Jill’s throat, though there was no real
“And Monokuma introduced himself as headmaster from the start,” Togami remembered, mouth twisting into a grimace at the thought of his first sight of the bear.

“Of course. It would hardly be a fair game with spare players cluttering up the board.” Kirigiri swallowed, hard enough that the movement showed along her throat. “I think — I think that I would like to be alone for a while. I need time to consider — all of this.”

Time to come to terms with the death of her father — that was what she needed. At least she would be able to pull herself together here, away from the prying eyes of the cameras. If the mastermind had been able to get to Kirigiri now, who knew how much damage they could cause? Better to give her the time alone that she needed before the investigation period ended, he could see that much easily.

But even so… a shiver of unease whispered through the back of his mind at the thought of leaving Kirigiri alone with her father’s skeleton. Even if she’d requested it, even if she needed it in order to prepare herself for the trial… he couldn’t quite rid himself of the lingering worries. If they left her alone and unwatched here, with neither cameras nor company to keep an eye on her… what would she do?

Naegi would have known how to respond to her. He would have had the right words to soften what they’d found, to make the pain just bearable enough to keep moving forward. He would have seen a way to purge the poison from the mastermind’s malicious trap.

But… Togami knew that he couldn’t. Even if he knew the right words to say, they’d ring hollow from his lips. None of the remaining survivors could reach Kirigiri now.

All they could do was give her a farewell nod and file quietly out of the hidden room, leaving her with all that remained of the man she’d come to Hope’s Peak to find.

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule Note:** As you may have noticed, we are getting remarkably close to the endgame of this story! With that in mind, I need to take some time to outline the rest of the story in more detail, to make sure it all works out the way I want. Between that and the approaching holidays (and related real life obligations), I’m going to put the story on a brief pause for the rest of the month. The next chapter will be posted the first Sunday in January, 1/6. Happy holidays, whichever of them you celebrate! See you all in the new year!
With Kirigiri staying behind in the headmaster’s hidden room, Togami found himself at a bit of a loss for what to do next. He wouldn’t have minded staying in the main part of the room to look through the headmaster’s other belongings — but he suspected that wouldn’t be in the spirit of Kirigiri’s request to be left alone. The last thing any of them needed was to waste time arguing over semantics. With a sigh, he headed through the doorway back to the destroyed hallway.

He paused just beyond the threshold, eying the ruin around him. Could there be anything to be gained from examining this mess in further detail? It was always possible that there were clues buried here, hints that might give some further scrap of insight into the mastermind’s plans… but it seemed just as likely that those traces would have been long since wiped away. How far was the risk of finding nothing balanced out by the off-chance that Kirigiri had overlooked a crucial clue?

As the debate whirled through his head, Ogami looked over at him. “Do you want to remain here longer?”

That decided him. “No,” Togami said firmly. He didn’t want to spend the rest of their investigation time gambling on the chance that Kirigiri had been incompetent — and so he wouldn’t. He strode back down the hall without another glance at the room around him, ignoring the dozens of hiding places that clues might be lurking. He wasn’t going to fritter away his precious time on possibilities — not when there was a far more certain source of information he hadn’t fully investigated.

His eyes flickered back to Jill as the three of them made their way back through the ruined hallway. She seemed as unfazed by the destruction around them as she’d been by almost every other piece of the mastermind’s game. Was that ease a facet of her genocider personality, or was it proof of just how far the world had fallen in the two years that they’d lost?

He didn’t know the answer, not even after pondering the question all through the long walk back to the first floor of the dorms. He could never quite read Jill as well as he would have liked, and the fact that she was the only one who knew information that he needed made that even more worrying. Not that he expected her to lie to his face, of course, there’d be no point talking to her at all if he thought she’d deliberately deceive him — but that was a long way from being completely trustworthy. How much of what she claimed would actually match up to reality?

Not that it made a difference to his intentions, of course — since he still needed to know the secrets hidden in Jill’s head, his pace never slowed or wavered until he reached the bathhouse door. But the moment he crossed the threshold — the labyrinth of paper and string stopped him in his tracks. He’d forgotten just how much of the room Kirigiri had taken up with her notes.

Ogami gasped from behind him, and Jill gave a low whistle. “Didn’t know you were so into arts and crafts, darling!”

“It isn’t mine.” Togami contemplated the mess for a moment, then let out a sigh of resignation as he began to pick his way through the lone path to the center of the room. Pulling the whole mess down might have been faster and easier — but there was no guarantee it would leave the room any more accessible than it was now. Besides, Kirigiri must have gotten something of value from it if she’d put all this work into it — there was no point in ruining a tool before ascertaining whether it might still be useful.

“This… all of this was not here a few days ago.” The words Ogami murmured as she copied his path barely reached Togami’s ear. “And… if the three of us didn’t create it… why would Kirigiri
“She said that she wanted to see how past events are connected,” Togami explained as he finally reached the end of the twisting path. He immediately claimed one of the benches in the center of the room, leaving no space for the genocider to worm her way next to him. To his surprise, she sent him a wide grin instead of pouting before she plopped down on the opposite seat.

But instead of taking the seat beside Jill, Ogami continued to peer at the tangled strings around her. “These represent the events of the killing game?” She reached out to touch one of the papers, as gingerly as if she feared it might explode. “Then if she’s done all this… does Kirigiri understand what’s really been happening?”

“She certainly seems to think so,” Togami said, shrugging. “But there’s no point in worrying about what she knows — she’s quite capable of handling her own arguments. Right now, I’m more concerned with what you know about what’s happening.” He pointed squarely at Jill.

She beamed back at him. “Sounds like a blast, darling — go on, ask me anything, and I’ll be glad to bare it all!”

Togami couldn’t stop his grimace at her phrasing — but at least she’d agreed without argument. “I want to know about the world outside this school.”

Nothing about Jill’s smile seemed to dim, but her face froze around the grin until a simple glare would have been less awful. “Yeah, figured that was what you were after when you dragged us all the way in here. But it’s like I told you already, darling — I wasn’t around for most of it. Even if I give you all I’ve got, it’s never gonna fill in some of those blanks.”

“I don’t recall asking for your commentary,” he said, taking an odd kind of comfort from the easy way ice flooded through his tone. “All you need to do is provide the information — I’ll decide what to do with it.”

For some bizarre reason, the cold words brought Jill’s smile back in full force. “Anything you say, darling! So what is it you’re looking to hear?”

“As much as possible,” Togami told her. “Start with your first memory that something was wrong and work from there.”

Jill shrugged. “Well, there’s not much to tell if that’s it. As far as I knew, one day everything was a-okay, and the next it was screaming chaos all over the place. Cities burning, people turning on each other, the whole armageddon schtick.”

She’d obviously tried to speak as lightly as she ever did about death and mayhem — but in spite of her efforts, the words sank into the room with the force of lead weights. Whatever she’d experienced, there was no doubt that it had been terrible enough that even a remorseless serial killer shuddered to recall it. Even though he’d been the one to demand she relive the memories, he found himself unexpectedly unsettled by their impact on the girl before him. He let his eyes flicker away from the genocider, giving her time to pull herself back together —

And he found himself staring straight into Ogami’s wide, horrified eyes.
Ice flooded through Togami’s veins as he heard his conversation again as if through Ogami’s ears. He and Jill had been discussing the end of the world — not as a bit of hyperbole in poor taste, not as a failed joke, but as an actual event that Jill had witnessed. It was an unpleasant enough topic for him even with his prior information about whatever horrors had occurred — but Ogami hadn’t known any of that. The first she’d heard of it was now, at this moment — and now that the opportunity was past, Togami could only wish he’d thought to take a few moments to prepare her. The painful shock written across her face spelled out a time sink that they couldn’t afford.

“We don’t know the full extent of what’s happening,” he said, giving voice to the arguments he’d already developed to counter the fearful images that Jill’s descriptions evoked. “Jill admitted herself that she doesn’t recall the event properly, since Fukawa was the one to experience the majority of it. Yes, it seems certain that something terrible has happened in the world outside this school — but until we can verify it for ourselves, we don’t actually know what it was.”

It took a moment for his words to filter through the horrors to reach her — but as she understood his point, Togami could see her slowly regaining possession of herself. When she met his eyes with the veil of unthinking fear lifted from her gaze, he gave her an approving nod. If they wanted to retain any hope of surviving the final trial, they couldn’t let their own imaginings weaken them. They had to save their strength to oppose the mastermind’s attacks.

In fact… perhaps it might even be better that Ogami had heard Jill’s story about the outside world now. If they knew the truth already, then the mastermind couldn’t attack them with a sudden revelation during the trial. Anything that gave the mastermind one less weapon to use against them had to be a good thing, no matter how painful the experience might seem in the moment.

“We can’t let these questions about the rest of the world distract us,” Ogami said softly, clenching one fist. “The mastermind is our opponent — we can’t afford to divide our attention if we want to escape. And… and surely… even the worst world we could imagine would surely be better than remaining imprisoned in the mastermind’s killing game.”

Togami’s jaw clenched tight at that, so tense he could hardly bend his neck enough to nod his agreement. Remain here — in the power of the monster that had murdered the boy he’d loved? No — no — no. He flexed his hand beneath the wrapping of Jill’s skirt, focusing on the bite of his barely-healing wound. Anything would be better than remaining here.

“Then if you’re gonna forget about the past again, does that mean we can skip the history lesson?” Jill asked, her eyes fixed on the scissors she’d begun twirling rather than on either of the other two. Skip it? Just… give up on learning more…? A frown creased Togami’s face as he realized that path didn’t sound right, either. He shook his head slowly, the reason barely formulated to support the decision. “No… I don’t think we should risk ignoring it, either.”

Ogami’s lack of enthusiasm for this decree all but screamed from her face — but however reluctant she might feel, she still nodded her eventual agreement. “If you believe it to be necessary.”

That final word cemented his resolve, a shot of iron straightening his spine. “I do.” He looked back at Jill, whose eyes remained locked on the rapid whirl of her scissors. “So? Going back to the beginning — when did all of it start?”

Somehow, Jill kept her scissors moving without a single spray of blood from a missed catch.
“About a year ago, maybe? First I heard was sometime in 2011, but it had already pretty much happened by then.”

“A year ago… in 2011?” Ogami’s eyebrows knit together in concentration. “Then you’re saying that the year now is… 2012?”

Jill shrugged. “Probably? Dunno how long we’ve been in here, and the year wasn’t exactly fresh out of the box last I heard. I guess it could be 2013 by now, and we wouldn’t know the difference!”

2012, or even 2013? Goosebumps prickled down Togami’s neck at the thought of those dates. No matter how many times he repeated to himself that he’d lost two years of memories, his mind couldn’t quite grasp that it was no longer 2010. He remembered writing the date on his response to the Hope’s Peak acceptance letter, and in spite of every fact he’d been told, the memory felt no more than a few months old.

But that wasn’t true. His own mind was lying to him — had been lying to him from the moment he’d awoken in this hellhole of a school. Each and every time he’d thought that the world was the same one that it had been before he’d come here, his mind had lied.

What was left for him to believe, if his own thoughts could no longer be trusted?

His gaze flickered back toward Ogami, and he saw the same kind of anxiety written in her eyes. What could they do with the knowledge that the world no longer matched what was in their heads? How could they find answers if they didn’t even know what questions they ought to ask?

But… at least now they had the chance to try. They knew now that something had been lost, and Jill had agreed to help them try to find it again. Even if they didn’t know what to do, at least they had this time to —

_Ding dong bing bong._

Togami froze, the cheerful schoolyard chimes striking through his heart like the grim knolls of a funeral bell. It couldn’t be time for this, not now, not yet. It couldn’t —

“How long has it been since I’ve seen your happy, smiling faces around me?”

Even without any speakers in the bathhouse, Monokuma’s voice still rang loud and clear from outside the doors.

“It’s so hard to remember the last time all our friends were together, isn’t it?”

A wistful sigh drifted out from the speakers, and Togami couldn’t help the intense stab of relief that he couldn’t see the mockery of an expression on that bear’s face now.

“Let’s give one last shot, for old times’ sake. See you all at the usual spot for the big finale!”

A burst of his wild laughter cut through the room, leaving the three students staring at one another as it died into silence.
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Junko sighed, flopping back against her chair as her maniacal laughter died away. Man, this whole Monokuma act was beyond old — practically prehistoric! It was frustrating enough to make the self-destruct buttons for all those stupid bears look awfully intriguing. It wasn’t like she needed all of them anymore…

Any other moment in her life, that would’ve been all the incentive she’d needed to send years of work and millions of dollars up in a blaze of fire and noise — but now, her hand froze poised above the first button. It would be such beautiful chaos, watching her careful plans collapse into pointless mayhem… but the thought of the looks on her precious friends’ faces stopped her. They’d feel confusion, panic, maybe even some terror… and then it would all be over. The extended school life they’d worked for would be over for good, before they’d even gotten the chance to understand the truth of it.

She couldn’t do that to them. They’d fought so hard in the game she’d built for them, going above and beyond anything she’d expected. After all that they’d done to make her game work so well, she couldn’t just rob them of the chance to experience the delicious despair she’d planned for the finale.

And what about Naegi? She’d practically promised him an extra-special experience all his own, in return for all his hard work. She couldn’t just go back on her word. Keeping her promises was important.

Junko whirled her chair around to face away from Monokuma’s self-destruct button, launching herself out of the control room and back to the main data center. If she was going through with her big plan, she’d better get a move on with the final prep work before everyone beat her to the trial room!

Landing smack in the middle of the data center, she twirled in place, gaze skimming over the piles of materials she’d set out. Was everything where it was supposed to be?

Leftover evidence from the previous trials — check!

Stack after stack of photos documenting the forgotten years of friendship, pre-sorted by intended effects — check!

Recorded footage of the hard work her loyal followers had accomplished on her behalf in the outside world — check!

Green glowing computer terminal — che-

Oh. Right. Junko stopped short, the world spinning dizzily as her eyes narrowed at the computer terminal where Fujisaki’s little toy had gone to ground. That still needed dealing with. She strode over to the terminal, fast enough that the remnants of dizziness could at least lurch queasily through her stomach once before fading back into blandness.

Reaching the computer, she clattered a few strokes on the keyboard. “Knock knock!”

The screen flickered a moment, probably processing the idea of jokes, before the pale text flickered back a hesitant response. “Umm… who’s there?”

She smiled fondly down at the screen — only sweet little Fujisaki would have programmed a
It really made her wish she’d taken the time to compliment the programmer on his abilities when she’d had the chance!

Too late to gush about it now, though. With a shrug, she went back to the keyboard. “The mastermind!!”

The cursor froze, no longer even blinking at her. It was just adorable — for a few seconds, anyway. Junko rolled her eyes with a huff, the cuteness of a scaredy-cat machine waning fast. She didn’t have all day to wait around for it to finish cycling through its terror programming.

“So... you're bestest buddies with all the other students now, huh? Trying to fight for them and everything?”

She watched the screen carefully, tapping her nails against the keyboard as letters began to appear — and then vanished again before any words could form. She was just considering whether it needed a little more encouragement to chat when the words finally began to glow on the screen.

“I guess so. I'd like to help them if I can.”

That was an awfully familiar sentiment... Was it Fujisaki’s programming showing up again? Or had someone a little more recent had that particular impact on the learning AI?

Someone else… That sent Junko’s gaze darting over at the corner where Naegi still lay unconscious in the last throes of the drug she’d given him. The poor boy would be so upset if he woke up to see her chatting with his precious digital pet… it was almost enough to make her want to slow the conversation down, in spite of her tight timeline!

But no, she couldn’t do that. She’d been the one to set the twenty-four hour time limit, after all, and there was no point in setting a challenge if she was just going to ignore it half way in.

“Wowwww, look at you talking like you think you're friends with them!” She grinned at the monitor, even though it didn’t have any video input to see the gesture. “Do you really think a computer program can be a human’s friend? Isn’t it all just one big game of pretending?”

It was a tough question for anything to process, let alone a pile of code — she gave it a good thirty seconds to sort through the philosophic questions of existence, humanity, and the nature of life before her nails began tapping out an impatient pattern again.

“Naegi said we could be friends.”

The response made her grin spread even wider. “So you trust Naegi an awful lot, huh?”

There was no hesitation at all this time — Alter Ego’s “Yes” appeared bright on the screen the moment she’d asked the question.

“Great! Me too!” Junko clapped her hands gleefully, stepping away from the keyboard. Looked like she’d have some good news for Naegi when he woke up — he always liked it when his friends got along! She glanced back over at his corner —

And a flicker of motion stopped her in her tracks. Naegi’s head had twitched out of place — his eyelids were flickering —

She threw herself across the room, reaching his side just as his eyes fluttered open again. The recognition jolting across his face made the extra bit of effort worth it — so nice to know she’d been the very first thing he saw!
“Rise and shine, sweetie!” She beamed down at him. “We’ve got a busy day ahead of us!”
“Rise and shine, sweetie! We’ve got a busy day ahead of us!”

Naegi recoiled from the blinding smile Junko sent his way, as sharply as if she’d woken him at knife point. Her cheery enthusiasm for continuing her killing game sent nausea roiling through him, pushing him back in an attempt to put as much distance between them as he could —

And it turned out to be more than he thought. His head moved, actually moved several inches away from her, to the point where he came precariously close to hitting the wall beside him. Naegi blinked, looking down at the span of inches he’d moved in disbelief.

“Looks like you’re doing better!” Junko bounced forward to peer more closely at his face, the ends of her pigtails skittering over Naegi’s neck like spider legs. Pressed against the wall already, he had nowhere left to retreat, so he did his best to ignore the goosebumps shivering down his spine from the barely perceptible touch. “I bet it won’t even hurt much when we get you sitting up for the big finish!”

“When — what?” Naegi couldn’t quite follow her train of thought, the remnants of drug-induced sleep still clouding his mind.

“The trial, duh!” Junko rolled her eyes like he was the one who wasn’t making any sense. “Keeping track of everyone is enough of a pain from the screens — no way you’d be able to do it lying down all the way over there. You’ll have to be up and at ‘em in the next few minutes if you want to be ready when we get started!”

“The trial — is going to get started? In a few minutes?” Naegi’s eyes shot towards the monitors, scouring the row that depicted the first floor. And sure enough, he could see Byakuya, Sakura, and Jill passing through the bright red door that led down to the trial rooms. “But — are they done investigating? Did they have enough time?”

“Sweetie, they’ve had hours.” She heaved a put-upon sigh. “We’ve all been toiling our hardest, working ourselves right down to the bone while you snoozed away! You can’t possibly expect us to wait around even longer just so you can catch up after your nap!”

“Well…” There was something wrong with what Junko was saying, but Naegi couldn’t quite put his finger on what. “Well, I guess not, but —”

“Great! Then let’s get you moving before our loyal viewers get bored!” Junko clapped her hands as she bounced back to her feet.

Before Naegi could process what she’d just said, she swooped forward and forced her arm beneath his shoulders. It thrust along the width of his body, and every nerve in his back screamed with alertness at her unwanted touch. If a snake had wrapped itself around his upper body, he would have felt less terror than he did now, finding himself encircled by Junko’s arm. She could do anything, anything with her bare arm against his shoulders, her hand curling its blood-tinged nails around his upper arm —

And then she yanked — and pain blazed across his consciousness with all the fury of an explosion, drowning out any other awareness of the world. Blades of white scorched through him, tearing screams from a throat too weak to endure them. He couldn’t bear this, couldn’t maintain his newfound consciousness in the onslaught of agony —
And then he didn’t have to. The pain receded, slowly but surely, until he could regain enough control of his mind to string coherent thoughts together again. The white static of pain cleared from his vision, bringing the room around him back into focus — and as he blinked at the data center, Naegi realized that he was viewing it from a different angle than a few moments ago. He was… sitting up?

Yes, that did seem to be right… the wall pressing against his back confirmed it. Junko had forced him to sit up, just as she’d threatened… and now, when Naegi looked at her sitting beside the mattress, he could look her directly in the eye.

She grinned. “See? Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Naegi grimaced. He was certain she’d done it knowing exactly how painful it would be — anything she did to suggest otherwise was just another attempt to confuse him.

“So I’m sure the next step will be even better!”

Naegi shrank back against the wall when her red-tipped hand snaked out towards him again. “Don’t touch me!”

“Huh?” Junko tilted her head in confusion, sending her pigtails swishing in perfectly-timed unison. “Are you saying you’re going to skip out on watching the trial, after all that?”

Even the thought of his friends enduring the horrors of a trial while he couldn’t watch them turned his blood to ice. “No! Of course I’m going to watch!”

“From aaaaaall the way over here, though?” Junko turned to look from the monitors to the mattress, head twisting back and forth multiple times with exaggerated concern.

She didn’t have to say anything else — the distance to the screens where the trial would be shown made her point for her. Naegi could see the monitors from the corner where he sat… but with so many rows of them together, no individual screen could be too large. He would be able to follow the course of the trial, yes… but not the small details. Changes of expression, small movements, posture and attitude — all of it would be hard to catch from where he was sitting.

He needed to be closer.

“It’s a simple instance of deductive reasoning.” Her voice shifted, leaping to the cadence of a lecture. “To fulfill the desire to observe will require the means to do so. Any attempt at denying such an obvious truth is simply a pointless delay of the inevitable.”

Looking back at her, Naegi wasn’t surprised at all to see that a pair of prim steel-rimmed glasses perched on Junko’s nose as she looked down at him. She’d changed her behavior again, that was all — and he couldn’t let himself be distracted by something as simple as altered mannerisms. No matter what else she pretended to be, she was still the mastermind behind the game that had taken so many of their friends.

“All right,” he said slowly, praying that he wouldn’t regret the words. “If that’s what it’ll take to watch… you can help me move.”

She unfolded herself to her full height, one hand planted on her hip as she looked down her nose at him. “Of course I can, and you should be well aware that I would whether you wished it or not. But even the least observant of us should realize that there’s a key component missing before I can do so.”
Spinning neatly on one heel, she strode over to the data center door and opened it, stepping out into the hall. Naegi’s eyes shot wide, drinking in the sliver of light trickling in from the hallway outside. The barrier keeping him from the rest of the school had vanished, just like that — and if he could only find a way across the vast expanse of floor, then maybe —

Shadows fell across the doorway, drowning the scrap of light from the hall as reality swept back over him. There was no chance of escape through that door, open or not. Even if by some miracle he found the strength to drag his injured body across the floor, Junko would never let him any further.

She stepped back into view just outside the door, looming larger than before in the dim light. Or… no, it wasn’t that she herself was larger… she was pushing something ahead of her, something so large it took her some delicate maneuvering to get it through the door frame.

“What is that?” The question escaped from his lips before Naegi realized that he probably didn’t want to know.

Junko looked back at him, the eerily pleasant smile on her lips making Naegi’s mouth go dry with fear. “I decided that you’ve earned a present, sweetie! Originally meant it for someone else, but I think you need it a little more than she does.”

As she angled her way through the door, Naegi could finally see that she’d brought a large metal wheelchair with her, a gleaming creation of black and white decorations. And at the back of the chair, attached to the edge of the seat where they’d be just visible above a particularly short occupant, sat two bear’s ears in black and white, with a red lightning bolt blazing between them.
Naegi stared at the wheelchair emblazoned with Monokuma’s likeness for a long moment, then glared at Junko. “No.”

“Well, that’s pretty rude, after I went to all the trouble of getting it up here.” Junko kicked the door closed and flicked the lock firmly back into place before turning to peer back down at him. “I’m not sitting in a chair with Monokuma’s face on it.”

Trying to parse out what she meant by that just made Naegi’s head hurt. He shook it away and dragged his focus back to the main point. “I’m not sitting in a chair with Monokuma’s face on it.”

“Huh? You think it looks like him?” Junko leaned forward to squint at the wheelchair from above. “I dunno, I think you might be imagining things.”

Naegi stared at her in disbelief. “You’re kidding.”

“Oh!” Junko giggled like they’d just shared some kind of private joke. “As if a face this adorable could belong to anyone else!” She bent down again to press her cheek against the soft black fur of the nearest ear.

He couldn’t hold back a grimace at her affectionate touch towards the symbol he could remember emblazoned across so many monuments to despair in the world outside. Watching her snuggle up against that mockery of a teddy bear brought sour nausea burning in the back of his throat.

But then — she stopped, pulling away from the chair with a sigh. “Oh, don’t be like that, sweetie! I know the design’s not up to your usual ultra-boring taste, but are you really gonna reject my awesome present just because of that? I thought you’d at least appreciate a chair that you could move around yourself!”

She patted the wheelchair’s arm, where an elaborate control panel sat. Though the interface did look complicated, none of it looked physically difficult to operate — Naegi could probably manage it on his own, even weakened as he was. Once he worked out the way it operated, she was right — he’d be able to move.

He’d be able to move.

Against his will, Naegi’s eyes flew back towards the door.

There had to be a trap in this, he knew it. She wouldn’t really give him the means to escape without any strings attached. No matter how confident she might be that she could keep him penned up in the data center, there was no way that she would really give him this kind of chance.

But even so… even so… how could he ignore the possibility? How could he turn his back on the chance to leave, just because he didn’t like the way it looked?

A knife-edged smile flashed across Junko’s face. “So should I take it back out into the hall? Or better yet, maybe drop it off in the trash room? I mean, as long as you don’t want to use it…” She trailed off, raising her eyebrows invitingly.

Naegi pushed aside the frantic whispers that he was making a terrible mistake, and said, “No — don’t get rid of it. I’ll use it.”
She laughed. “Of course you will.”

Anything that made Junko smile that way had to be a terrible idea… but even knowing that, Naegi still couldn’t bring himself to object as she bent down again to lift him from the ground. No matter how clearly he knew that this was likely to end badly, he couldn’t help but think that maybe, *maybe* there was a chance that it wouldn’t. Maybe he could get out, maybe he could find a way to his friends, maybe there was still some way to escape from this nightmare… as long as there was even a sliver of hope that he could see those possibilities come true, what else could he do but cling to it?

So when she wrapped her arms around him once again to pick him up from the sleeping bag, he clenched his teeth and endured the slimy touch of her hands. He almost found himself relieved when the inevitable pain began, because at least it gave him some respite from the sensation of filth pressed against his skin.

When the pain finally cleared away, perhaps a little more easily than it had the first time, Naegi blinked to find himself ensconced in what was actually a pretty comfortable wheelchair. The cushions curved to the shape of his back, giving his weakened body the support he needed to keep himself upright. He wasn’t exactly enthusiastic about the prospect of being stuck in a wheelchair for any extended length of time… but if he had to be, he supposed this one wouldn’t be too bad.

Or at least, that was what he thought until the bright flash of a camera snapped his attention back to the girl in front of him. He blinked away the white remnants of the flash that echoed across his vision until he could see Junko grinning down at the screen of a small digital camera.

“Well, isn’t this just the cutest thing anyone has ever seen!” she cooed, with all the saccharine gooiness of children in ad campaigns. “You and Monokuma, in the same picture? I bet this would be enough to beat out even the cutestest of kittens for the social media spotlight!” And then the brightness vanished from her face as if it had never even existed. “Too bad there’s nowhere left to post it.”

Naegi stared at her — or more accurately, at the camera in her hands. She’d wanted a picture of him *here*, like *this*? The thought sent chills running down his spine. “W-what are you going to do with that?”

“Huh?” Her head jerked back up towards him like he’d startled her, although no glimmer of surprise broke through her deadened expression. “Oh, I don’t know, really. Treasure it, I guess. Maybe I’ll stick it on the wall or something. Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do with pictures of your friends?”

Naegi had a flash of her pinning that picture to the data center wall beside the monitors, like some sick kind of trophy, and his stomach lurched in response. “Don’t,” he choked out, before he could think about whether or not it would be a good idea to say so.

One of her eyebrows twitched upwards, ever so slightly. “No? Should we try for a better one, then? I’m pretty sure this thing has a self-timer function — we could get a shot of both of us together.”

He drew back against the soft cushioned back of the chair, fear clutching at his heart. Nothing she’d said was a threat, not really, not in the actual words she’d spoken — but somehow, he couldn’t hear anything else.

“Well, maybe not.” She shrugged, tossing the camera down onto a nearby table with a clatter. “No point going to all the trouble of setting up a cute besties shot if you’re just gonna make *that* face in it. I’ll hold off till you’ve got a better expression — once I win our bet, maybe.”
“Win… the bet?” Naegi’s forehead creased in bewildered whiplash. “You mean… Togami? But… he didn’t kill anyone.” His eyes flew back to the monitors, confirming that all four students were indeed waiting impatiently in the room outside the elevator. “They’re all still alive — so the bet’s over!”

“Not yet, it isn’t.” Junko said, one finger tapping meaningfully at the opposite wrist — the place where a watch would be. “We said twenty-four hours, starting at the last nighttime announcement. Nothing’s over till ten tonight.”

“But… he’s going into the trial now,” Naegi said, trying to puzzle out what she meant. “Those take hours… and he can’t kill anyone in there.”

“Yeah, that was your bet, wasn’t it?” She shrugged again, just a single shoulder this time. “Guess we’ll find out. Personally, I’m still pretty sure I’ll be the one who gets the prize.”

“Prize…?” Naegi was getting the uncomfortable feeling that this conversation wasn’t heading in the direction he’d thought. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, we bet about getting a friend back, right? You win, and one of your precious friends gets their memory back.” She rolled her eyes, as if deeply annoyed by having to explain something so obvious. “So it only makes sense that if I win, you have to give me one of my friends back.”

Naegi stared at her, trying to force the words she’d spoken to make some kind of sense. She wanted one of her friends back…? What friends — surely she couldn’t mean the ones she’d killed, could she? And even if she did, even if she’d begun to regret what she’d done to them… how could she possibly think that he could give that to her? Was it just an impossible task she wanted to force him to try… or was there something else that he was missing?

“So like I said, we can try taking the picture again later,” she said, sparkle flooding back into her face as she gave him a brilliant grin. “It’ll be a great way to celebrate when we’re really BFFs!”

She blew him a kiss before skipping through the Monokuma door that led to the control room, leaving Naegi to slump back down in the wheelchair as horrified realization hit him.
Togami was certain that the students had never stayed in the pre-trial chamber for this long before any of the other class trials. In every other case, moments after the last of the remaining survivors had passed through the red door, Monokuma would burst into the room to prod them towards the elevator with a twisted combination of taunts and threats. There had been no time to confer as a group before the trial… hardly even the chance to catch their collective breath after their investigations.

But now, minute after excruciating minute ticked away while the he and the three girls stood silently in front of the elevator doors, with no sign of the mastermind’s mouthpiece. It should have been a relief to delay the trial just a few moments longer… but it only gave him time to feel the cold dread pooling in the pit of his stomach. That had to be the reason Monokuma was giving them time to stew now, of all the trials… it had to be a power play to rattle their nerves before the upcoming battle.

But even knowing that… one look at the elevator stole the breath from his lungs, locked him frozen in place across the room. The last time he’d taken that elevator down to the trial room, Naegi had been with him, warm and alive in his arms. That elevator had been the last place he’d held the boy he loved, the last place he’d seen him other than the nightmarish trial room… and he couldn’t bring himself to take a willing step towards it.

“Putting it off won’t accomplish anything.”

Kirigiri’s voice was first to break the silence, punctuated by the staccato-sharp rap of her heels as she strode across the floor. Tension creaked through Togami’s neck as he followed her path to the elevator doors. She reached out towards the button that would open them — but then her hand fell away again without pressing it. After a moment, she turned back to look at them again.

“Chickening out after a declaration like that?” Jill asked, one hand planted on her hip as she scowled across the room. “Didn’t think you were the wishy-washy type.”

“That’s not it,” Kirigiri said, with only a hint of an edge to her words. “I have something to say, before we head down.”

“We’re listening,” Ogami said, cutting off whatever unpleasant joke Jill was clearly preparing to make. “Please, go ahead.”

Kirigiri’s head jerked down in a single sharp nod, and for a moment Togami had the disorienting feeling that she was nervous. Not that it would be a shock, in these moments before they all had to face off against the mastermind… but still, even if she did feel it, he wouldn’t have expected to see the signs of it so clearly. He’d never seen them before, no matter how he’d searched for any hint of weakness in her. Were these signs of her nerves new — or had he simply not known how to see them before?

“This trial is going to be difficult,” she said at last, hand reaching up to tangle in the hair where her single braid had been. “Not just the questions we’ll need to answer, but — the entire scope of what we’re doing. We’re facing off against the mastermind, and —” She paused, so briefly that Togami was sure neither of the other girls had noticed. “And they aren’t going to make it easy for us.”

“Well, duh,” Jill said, tossing her braids with studied indifference. “Isn’t that the point of having the whole big showdown?”
Kirigiri shook her head. “That’s not what I meant.”

Togami could see where she was going with this. “You think they’ll try to turn us against each other.”

Her gaze flickered towards him, but she didn’t meet his eyes. “I think it’s inevitable, considering their actions from the start of this game.”

Giving them motive after motive to kill, raising the stakes with every day they spent here… yes, Togami could see her point all too easily. It wouldn’t be a question of if the mastermind tried something, but when.

“But if that’s true — if that’s their plan —” Ogami’s face went pale. “We can’t let them!”

Togami didn’t even need to glance in Kirigiri’s direction to know that she was already shaking her head. “It won’t work,” he said, stating the obvious before she could. “Not with the way the mastermind operates. We’ve known from the start that their goal has been to make us see one another as enemies — they’ve made no secret of it. Fighting against it has made no difference so far.”

“But —”

“They’re planning for us to fight it,” Togami said, flat words cutting off her protest before it could take shape. “They know we’re aware of their intention, and they’ll have taken it into account. We can’t fight distrust, not the way the mastermind crafts it.”

A string of images blurred before his eyes — a bright smile, clear hazel eyes, a single fist clenched in simple determination. Naegi had always known what to say in these moments, when they’d all been searching for the strength to resist the mastermind’s manipulations. He’d given them a guiding light to follow, the lone north star that had kept them from falling entirely into darkness. He’d insisted that they could all be friends in spite of everything the mastermind had done against it… and he’d almost been able to make them believe it.

But Naegi wasn’t here any longer. He was gone… and there was no one left to say the words that they all needed to hear.

Togami shook his head until a sharp ache jolted from temple to temple, tearing his attention away from the hazy visions of a boy who couldn’t be with him any longer. They couldn’t rely on Naegi’s strength for this last fight… and trying to invoke a pale echo of his spirit would only underscore how pitifully short they all fell in comparison. None of them could be what Naegi had been.

Did that mean they’d lost already, before the trial had even begun?

“I don’t believe there will be a way to fight directly against the mastermind’s manipulations,” Kirigiri said, her words hardly louder than a whisper. “But if we know they’ll try it… if we know that it’s coming… we might be able to recognize it when it happens.”

She looked around the room at them all, studying each of them one by one. “That’s what I wanted to say to all of you, before we begin. During the course of this trial, a moment is going to come when we find ourselves at odds. And when it does… no matter how reasonable it seems, no matter how separate from the mastermind’s actions it appears… when it happens, I want all of us to remember this conversation. Remember that this trial will be the four of us against the mastermind… and anything else that distracts us from that fact is going to be part of the mastermind’s plan.”
Togami frowned. As reminders went, that one seemed a little too obvious to deserve the gravity she’d given it. “I can’t see how any of us could possibly *forget* that the mastermind is going to be our opponent.”

Kirigiri looked at him for a long moment, meeting his eyes for the first time since she’d rejoined them after the trial announcement. “I hope so,” she said finally.

Before he could answer, she turned to press the elevator button. “Let’s go,” she decreed as the doors opened, taking the first step towards the trial room.
Chapter 345

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As the elevator began its slow descent to the depths of the school, Togami could almost believe he was standing there alone. With so few of the students left to take part in the mastermind’s trials, the once crowded elevator now seemed vast enough that whole galaxies could stretch between him and any of the others. They’d all fallen into the same places they’d taken before every class trial… and from his position at the back, the empty center of the room drew his gaze like a gaping wound. Naegi had always chosen to stand there, surrounded by all the people he’d called his friends…

And now it was just another empty space that could never be filled again. It was no wonder that the surviving students had always shied away from standing where their dead companions had been.

The elevator dragged them deeper and deeper, sinking down and down and down until the descent had taken longer than any of the earlier trips. Was it just a trick to skew their perception, or were they going to a different location entirely? Maybe every trial had been in a different set of rooms — if the circle of podiums stayed the same from floor to floor, how would they ever know? Maybe the room where the elevator was taking them would be one that they’d never set foot in before.

Maybe it wouldn’t be the one where Naegi had died.

Would that make the trial easier… or would it just be all that much worse? Both options hurt to consider, and he still hadn’t come to a conclusion by the time the elevator doors finally creaked open to a dark room.

“ Took you long enough!” Monokuma’s voice rang out from the room. “I was starting to think I accidentally made the announcement for Senior Skip Day instead of the class trial!” He burst into obnoxious laughter at his own joke.

Kirigiri paid him no attention, already halfway across the room. The harsh clip of her heels never faltered, even as the bear’s peals of mad laughter nearly drowned them out. She moved with the single-minded determination of a woman on a mission, and for the first time it struck Togami that this, this was the Ultimate Detective on the trail of a case. She would go wherever her quarry led her, if it brought her closer to the truth she sought — even if she had to go into danger alone.

Before he knew it, Togami found himself striding forward after her, leaving the dubious security of the elevator behind. He had the brief sensation of plunging into darkness, in the moment before his eyes adjusted to the shadowy lighting. Even then, he could see little more than the pale flash of Kirigiri’s hair as she took her place at the circle of shapes he could only assume were podiums.

After five trials, he hardly needed to check the podium names to find his place. Using Kirigiri’s position as a marker, he navigated around circle until he found the space he knew would be his, with portraits of Fujisaki and Celeste on either side. In the darkness, the sepia-toned pictures were impossible to see clearly… and knowing which portrait would be added to their number this time, Togami could almost feel a twisted sort of gratitude.

Other footsteps sounded through the room, darkness moving against darkness in the space around the circle. If he looked closely, though, Togami found that he could track the line of Ogami’s hair and the flash of Jill’s scissors as the two girls inched their way to their places.
Were they really meant to proceed with the trial in a room this dark? Arguing with voices that they couldn’t put to faces? Togami narrowed his eyes, trying to peer through the shadows to his left. He knew Jill stood with a mere two podiums between them, closer to him than either of the other girls — but even so, he could only see a few glimmers of definition against her dark silhouette. He could probably tell if she smiled, if she frowned — but no more than that. Any nuances of expression would be invisible to him. And as for Ogami and Kirigiri across the circle —

“Do you really expect to prove anything by holding a trial in the dark?” Kirigiri asked, a flash of irritation coloring her words. “I thought you wanted the world to watch us. Don’t tell me you’ve decided that you have something to hide after all.”

“Hide? Me?” Monokuma’s voice rang through the room. Even with his perception distorted by his limited hearing, Togami could still tell that the sound came from speakers all around them, not just the robot perched on a throne at the head of the circle. “Aw, and here I thought you could read me like a book!” He laughed, as if there had been a joke in the words.

Togami glanced across the circle to where he knew Kirigiri stood, but at this distance he couldn’t tell what she was thinking. Had the taunt hit her like a blow the rest of them couldn’t see, or had she ignored it as she did everything else she deemed unimportant? Was she standing strong, or had the doubt he’d seen creeping into her manner begun to make her falter? With darkness consuming the room, there was no way to know.

After far too long, Monokuma’s laughter screeched to a sudden halt, as abruptly as it had started. “Well, fine, I guess I can make allowances just this once,” he said brightly. “After all, I wouldn’t want you to come crying afterward saying that I wasn’t fair!”

And with that final word, light blazed through the room. Togami’s breath hissed sharp through his teeth as he clenched his eyes shut a moment too late, pain shooting deep into his skull. Laughter roared through the room again, the mastermind’s petty pleasure in causing them physical pain from flaring bright light against vision adjusted to deep darkness.

The laughter stopped before his eyes recovered from the assault, and the ringing silence left behind seemed even louder. Muscle by muscle, Togami forced his clenched eyes to ease enough that he could pry them open again.

Spots flared up again at the bottom of his vision, burning white hot against the dark — but Togami blinked several times in rapid succession, forcing himself not to retreat behind closed eyes again. After a moment, the light imprinted on his vision began to dissipate, letting the room come back into focus at last.

And finally, finally he could see the other girls, standing around the circle. He knew objectively that he’d seen them just a few minutes ago in the elevator, but even so, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d just found them again after an eternity trapped alone in the darkness.

Although the darkness hadn’t left them entirely, not yet. The shadows still drenched the room around them, almost tangible beyond the lonely circle of podiums in the center of the room. The only defense against the dark was a ring of lights, shining a narrow beam upward from each of the sixteen podiums. The beams of light were barely enough to illuminate each of the faces, human or picture, in the ring around him.

No… that wasn’t quite it. With the three girls, it wasn’t quite so obvious, but the portraits made it clear. Looking from image to image, Togami could see that the lights had been meticulously set to illuminate exactly half of each student’s face. All the students had been split down the middle into light and dark, black and white.
And then his eyes fell on Naegi’s portrait — on Naegi’s innocent face, painted black and white in the mastermind’s colors — and the room tilted around him until gravity lost all meaning. The sheer, obscene \textit{wrongness} of the picture seized through his chest, knocking the breath from his lungs — but he couldn’t look away, couldn’t find the strength to tear his eyes from the image. It wasn’t Naegi, wasn’t anything like having him here in the circle, was actually worse than if there had been nothing but empty space where he used to stand — and Togami \textit{couldn’t look away}.

“Is this supposed to be some kind of joke?” That was Ogami’s voice, he noted distantly, her words fierce with the outrage he couldn’t quite feel.

“If you wanted to get some lighting, looks to me like we found the Wikipedia entry for a half-assed job!” And that one was Jill, too sharp and edged with a wild laughter that didn’t spring from amusement.

“Aw, you mean you aren’t a fan of the mood lighting?” Monokuma sang out. “And after I worked sooooo hard to get it just right!”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Kirigiri’s flat dismissal cut through the room, jolting through Togami’s entire body — and before he could think about it, he found his gaze snapping across the circle to stare at her. She stood with her arms crossed, one finger tapping impatiently against her elbow as she scowled at Monokuma. “I don’t care about your decorations as long as we can see each other. We can start the trial now.”

“Huh? You want to start now?” Monokuma tilted his head in confusion. “Before everyone’s here?”

Togami frowned. What was that supposed to mean? All four of the surviving students had entered the trial room already — who was left? His gaze swept around the circle, confirming the girls were still where they ought to be. Jill, scissors snapping at the ready… Ogami, poised as if she expected to lunge into battle at any moment… and Kirigiri —

Kirigiri, frozen at her podium, one visible eye wide against a face bleached too pale in the beam of white light. The expression would be slight on anyone else, hardly noticeable on a more expressive face — but here, now, with her of all people, Togami could see the shock as if she’d written it plainly. Monokuma’s words hadn’t just confused her as they had the other three students — they’d hit her with the first blow of the trial, drawing blood before she’d thought to defend. Why had those words hit her? What had she heard in them that no one else could?

“Come on, everyone!” Monokuma called out in his cheeriest voice. “Let’s give a big warm Hope’s Peak welcome to someone who wasn’t \textit{queiiiiiiite} as dead as we thought!”

Red gleamed through the room, sparks of light flying sharp and bloody from the floor. Lightning slashed across the middle of the circle, a jagged bolt of lightning as red as Monokuma’s eye, its tip pointing straight at Kirigiri — until it began to spin.

Round and round it flew, too dizzying to track, a solid blur of motion, red on red on red —

And then it stopped, lightning blazing along the floor of the circle in a line that pointed directly at Fujisaki’s podium… just as the portrait began to turn a familiar green.

“Um… hello? Can you all really hear me?”

Fujisaki’s face glowed a moment longer on the portrait… and then it flickered for all the world like a computer screen. And when the image came back… Alter Ego was peering out at them.
Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: No new chapter next week, due to Real Life stuff that will be happening. Next chapter will be on March 3, 2019. See you then!
Chapter 346

Togami stared at the portrait on Fujisaki’s podium — or no, that had to be a monitor of some sort, not a portrait like the others. A computer screen hidden in a portrait frame, concealed so that the mastermind could spring this revelation on them. Alter Ego hadn’t died in the aftermath of the fourth trial, even though the execution had certainly made it seem that way.

But then again — of course he hadn’t died. He was a computer program, why would he be permanently destroyed by gunfire? Now that he thought about it, Togami couldn’t believe the thought hadn’t occurred to him sooner. Not that he’d ever spared much thought on the AI’s fate. He’d only ever considered it as something that had mattered to Naegi — another undeserving thing the boy had called his friend. Another person he’d risked his own precious life to protect.

Naegi would have been happy to know Alter Ego had survived. A heartfelt smile would have lit up his face, bright and brilliant even in this dark nightmare of a trial room. Maybe that was another instance of the mastermind’s cruelty — they’d only revealed Alter Ego’s survival after that joy had become unreachable.

The thought burned in the center of Togami’s chest, spite blazing hot and bitter against the mastermind’s plan. Naegi might not be with them any longer… but someone else was. Alter Ego was. And if Naegi would have seen that as a cause for happiness, then Togami would not let the mastermind twist it into another source of pain.

“You… you can really hear me in the trial room, right?” Alter Ego asked, voice faltering with uncertainty. “They said you’d be able to, but —”

“We can hear you,” Togami interrupted.

Or tried to interrupt, anyway.

“— but I can’t really tell without any video input feeds.”

Oh — of course. Togami’s mind flashed back to all their previous interactions with the AI, when they’d had to communicate by typing into the laptop. Alter Ego could speak to them, but he’d never been able to hear what they said.

“Whoops! Guess I left out a couple steps!” Monokuma said brightly. The too-loud clattering of keys blasted out of the speakers, almost certainly a pre-recorded sound bite rather than the actual sound of someone typing.

Alter Ego’s worried expression eased as the typing sounds faded. “Oh… good. I’m glad that I can be here with all of you again… even if we can’t talk directly.” He gave them a tremulous smile, the same one he’d offered when sharing the information he’d decrypted. He wouldn’t have been able to see them back then, either… but Naegi had smiled back anyway.

“Is there a point to this?”

Kirigiri’s words snapped through the room like the crack of a whip. Eyes shooting back across the circle, Togami could see that she’d crossed her arms tight across her chest with her fingers gouging deep into the flesh of her elbows. It had to hurt, but she hardly seemed to notice — not with her glare blazing straight at Monokuma. “Or is this your idea of being funny?”

“Eh? A point?” Monokuma tilted his head inquisitively. “You mean other than returning one of
your beloved friends who you thought was lost forever? Gee, I would’ve thought that would be
enough! I mean, you’ve just found out that someone you thought was dead is really alive — what
more could you possibly ask for?”

“The trial. That’s what we’re here for, isn’t it?” Kirigiri raised an eyebrow.

“Ugh, fine!” Monokuma huffed. “You’re no fun, you know that?”

Those words were nothing like the bear’s usual bright and cheery tone. It sounded different, almost
as if there was someone else speaking… someone who hadn’t spoken to them directly before.
Togami blinked —

And the impression vanished, leaving only the unnervingly cheerful robot in its wake. “Then let’s
begin with a basic explanation of the class trial!”

The bear spewed out the same list of rules he gave every trial, in an upbeat tone that would have
been better suited to a kindergarten teacher. The same tone, the same words… was this spiel just a
recording, like the morning and nighttime announcements? He supposed that it would have to be,
considering the abrupt switch from one way of speaking to another. Obviously no human operating
the robot could have shifted personalities so quickly… probably they’d activated the recording to
give themselves time to calm down.

The logic made sense, and yet… something about it nagged at the back of Togami’s brain. He
almost had the feeling that he was forgetting something…

But he didn’t have time to worry about it now. It couldn’t matter all that much in the scheme of the
killing game — not when they were about to try to solve everything. That question hardly made a
difference next to the other mysteries they had to solve.

The other mysteries…? Togami frowned, his attention snapping back to zero in on the tail end of
Monokuma’s speech.

“— and the one who deceived everyone else will graduate!”

But that rule didn’t make sense, did it? Not this time, when they all knew none of them had killed
anyone. They weren’t trying to find a blackened student who’d killed another player in the game
— they were hunting the mastermind behind it all. And if that was the case…

“That rule shouldn’t count any longer!” He hurled the words at Monokuma like they could
physically connect. “The way you’ve stated it, that rule doesn’t even apply to this trial.”

“Eh?” Monokuma sighed. “Seriously, you want me to go to allllll the trouble of rewriting a rule for
this teensy little variation? Can’t we just figure it out as we go along?”

“You’ve always been the one who likes rules so much,” Kirigiri said, a hint of bitter amusement
twisting one corner of her mouth upward. “If you’re going to give up on your rules now that you’re
under attack, then maybe you were just manipulating them all along.”

“Oh oh! We can’t have that, can we?” Monokuma drew back in melodramatic shock. “Well, okay,
if you’re the one who wants it, who am I to say no? Let’s see, a special rule just for this trial…” He
trailed off for a moment. “Ah — I’ve got it!”

A huge smile split the bear’s face, fangs gleaming deadly bright. Ice plunged through Togami’s
stomach at the sight, and he cursed himself for bringing up the question of rules in the first place.
“If you can figure out Ikusaba’s killer, and go on to solve all the mysteries of this school — you guys will win!” Monokuma announced with even more glee than usual. “But if you can’t… then I win! And of course, waiting for the loser is an extra special heart-pounding punishment!”

A small snort of disbelief followed. Togami turned to look back across the circle, where Kirigiri’s one visible eye had narrowed to a sharp line. “And you’re claiming you’ll execute yourself if you lose? You expect us to believe that?”

“Of course!” Monokuma paused. “Well, I can see why you might have some doubts. But I really mean it this time — cross my heart and hope to die!”

“And that’s final?” Kirigiri persisted. “No loopholes? No wiggling out of it later?”

“Of course not! Bears never go back on their word.”

“Maybe not — but people do,” Kirigiri leaned forward. “Are you going to keep your promise?”

“I see… so that’s how it is, huh?” Monokuma sighed. “Okay, then, I guess you leave me no choice — I’ll have to give you a little something extra!” He rubbed his chin for a moment, as if thinking hard. “How about this? If you guys make it to the point where a body turns up, I’ll give you the chance for a little post-execution examination to make sure we haven’t got any behind the scenes cheating going on. It would be just dreadful if something were to put a blotch on the pristine reputation of the Hope’s Peak headmaster, wouldn’t it?”

Togami would have admired that touch of cruelty once, not so very long ago. The mastermind dug their claws deep into Kirigiri’s weak point without even a direct mention of her dead father. They even managed to wring a flinch from her, however much she’d tried to fight it.

But no matter how successful the taunt had been, Togami couldn’t even bring himself to find an intellectual appreciation for it. Not after seeing the cheerfully wrapped present the mastermind had hidden for Kirigiri in her father’s room. The mastermind was mocking her for pain caused by the death of a man they themselves had killed — and after hearing Monokuma’s jabs about Naegi after that last terrible trial, Togami couldn’t hear these words the way he would have before.

“Stop it!” he snapped, before the bear could twist the knife any further. “We’ve established that the winners survive and the losers are punished — anything else is irrelevant. The mastermind has never failed to go through with an execution, after all. If we’re able to confirm afterward, that’s all we’ll need.”

“You think so?” Monokuma beamed at him, and Togami had to grip the edges of his podium to stop himself from leaning visibly away. “I always knew you trusted me!” He burst into wild laughter, drowning out any attempt Togami might have made to argue with that last offensive statement.

Since his objections wouldn’t be heard anyway, he took the opportunity to glance back across the circle to see if Kirigiri had shaken off the mastermind’s attempts to rattle her — and to his surprise, he found her looking back across the circle at him. Her eyebrow quirked upward as their eyes met, and he could see the same question he wanted to ask her written in her gaze. Were they ready?

He nodded — and after a moment, just as the noise filling the room began to fade, she did the same. They were as ready as they’d ever be.

“Then here we go!” Monokuma sang out, before the last echoes of laughter had even died away. “First stop — Mukuro Ikusaba’s trial! You think we picked the wrong killer last time? Then let’s
“That’s easy,” Togami said, crossing his arms and glaring at the robot that represented the mastermind among them. “It was you.”
Togami would have liked to think that somewhere behind Monokuma’s controls, the mastermind had flinched backwards at the accusation. There was no way to know, of course, not when none of them had ever seen the mastermind’s mannerisms in person — but still, he could take some satisfaction in the idea that he’d forced the mastermind to react to his words. It might even be true — after all, he’d thrown the truth of their actions in their face when the trial had barely started. Only the most controlled of opponents could stay calm in the face of such a tactic.

Not that he’d ever find out, though. All he could see was the puzzled tilt of Monokuma’s head as he gave them all his most innocent wide-eyed stare. “Huh? Me? But haven’t you heard that bears can’t be guilty of murder? We’re just following the instincts of an animal when we kill, after all — it takes a real live human to get that genuine murderous intent!”

“Yes — a human like the person behind that robot,” Togami shot back.

Monokuma twisted around to check the space behind his chair. Togami rolled his eyes at the ridiculous pun, and he could hear Jill’s exaggerated groan even from so far away.

“Not that,” he said, cutting off whatever idiotic joke had been planned as a follow-up. “The human who’s operating the robot in front of us. The mastermind.”

“Ohhhh!” Monokuma shook his head. “You really need to be more specific about these things, you know! Good communication is absolutely critical for a class trial — otherwise we might end up with some tired old sitcom scenario that would be resolved in minutes if everyone just talked to one another.” He grinned at them. “And where’s the fun in that, right?”

“Pretty sure no one’s having fun here but you.” Jill flicked the points of her scissors towards Monokuma with an emphatic flourish.

“Really? Aw, that’s too bad!” Monokuma grinned. “So you wanna end early?”

“No. We aren’t stopping until we’ve solved the school’s mysteries.” Kirigiri narrowed her eyes. “And don’t think that your attempt to change the subject got past me. I agree with Togami — the mastermind was the one behind Mukuro Ikusaba’s death.”

“Is that so?” Monokuma shrugged. “Well, this is a class trial, you know — if you want to make an accusation, you’ve gotta prove it!”

“Gladly.” Kirigiri tilted her head towards Ogami. “I think you should have the evidence we need.”

Ogami blinked, clearly taken aback when all eyes swung to zero in on her. “Me? I — I’m not sure what —”

“She means the poison bottle,” Togami interrupted, scowling at Kirigiri. Her behavior now reminded him a little too much of the obnoxious way she’d acted with Naegi, refusing to share what she’d deduced and prodding him to solve mysteries on his own. It had been bad enough when they’d only been facing off against one of the other students — but now that they were up against the mastermind, there was no excuse for her to withhold information like that.
Once she’d been given the necessary information, Ogami wasted no time in pulling out the bottle. The light shining up from her podium only left a narrow space illuminated, but she did her best to position the bottle so that as much of it as possible could be seen.

Of course, that didn’t stop Monokuma from leaning forward and squinting at it in a ridiculously exaggerated show. “Eh? Whuzzat? Did you stop by the cafeteria before showing up for the trial?”

“Only if you’ve started decorating the kitchen supplies with skulls,” Togami said, rolling his eyes. He wouldn’t have been surprised to see the symbol of deadly poison show up on food the mastermind had left for them to eat, but fortunately it had never been an issue. If their supplies had been laced with anything, it hadn’t been labeled.

“You know what it is,” Kirigiri said, finally picking up the thread of her own argument. “This is the last of the three bottles of poison that could have been used in Ikusaba’s murder — the bottle that we sealed in a dojo locker before Ikusaba’s murder occurred.”

“Sealed and burned the key,” Togami added, just to make sure it was clear.

“Oh? So no one could’ve gotten into that locker, is that what you’re saying?” Monokuma tilted his head. “Not even with an extra special key and a sneaky hidden lock?”

“It doesn’t matter whether someone could have gotten into the locker again,” Kirigiri said. “The point is that we didn’t — otherwise the poison bottle wouldn’t still be there, intact and unopened.”

“And since Fukawa used one bottle of poison during her murder plot, that only leaves one bottle unaccounted for,” Togami smirked up at the robot. “The unopened poison bottle that you confiscated after it was used as evidence in the fourth trial.”

“Wh-what? You mean you’ve solved a murder with basic arithmetic?” Monokuma drew back in shock — and then stopped the motion halfway through. “Yeah, right! Your math only works if you’re abso-tively convinced about where that last bottle was. Who’s to say I didn’t hide it in an exciting goodie bag for some lucky winner in the class?”

Because they hadn’t. Togami knew they hadn’t, without even turning to see the expressions on the three girls’ faces. Their actions before and after the fifth trial, the way they’d argued and accused one another, none of it would make sense if any of them had been behind Ikusaba’s murder.

Ogami had been the one to drag him from the dark emptiness that had initially consumed him after that trial. She’d helped him try to learn the truth about what had happened to Naegi even before they’d been charged with solving the school’s mysteries.

Jill had found him in the garden… and she’d stopped him from making an irrevocable decision. She’d opened his eyes to the real horror of the mastermind’s game, telling him about the two years of memories they’d all lost.

And Kirigiri… she’d been the one to convene this trial in the first place, the one to challenge the mastermind and fight to end the game. She’d told him the truth of her mistakes, her fears and her missteps, everything she’d done that had led to the last trial’s hideous finale.

None of them had done what the mastermind claimed. It didn’t fit with everything he knew, everything he’d learned. It was impossible.

“Aw, out of comebacks already?” Monokuma heaved a sigh. “I’m starting to think you guys just aren’t into this anymore.”
“That’s because your argument is ridiculous,” Togami said. “The four of us all know we didn’t do this.”

“Eh? The four of you?” Monokuma tilted his head. “Oh, well, sure if that’s the issue — no complaints here!” He grinned. “After all, Makoto Naegi was the culprit you all chose, remember?”

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule Note:** And that's where I'm going to have to leave you for a couple weeks. I hate to do this so soon after the last time, but it turns out that Real Life doesn't actually stop just because I have important story writing to do! Next chapter will be posted on **March 31, 2019.**

Thank you for being patient with me as I try to balance reality with the much more interesting fanfic world in my head! :) See you in a few weeks!
As Naegi stared up at the monitors showing his friends’ poleaxed expressions, all he could wonder was why he hadn’t seen this argument coming. Of course Junko would take the position that he’d been the one to kill Mukuro. She had to, if she wanted to claim the last trial had been fair. But that didn’t make it any easier to hear her say it.

And from the fury rising on his friends’ faces, it had been even harder for them. Even split in half by the shadowed lighting, he couldn’t miss the fiery blaze of Jill’s red glare or the threatening battle aura pulsing from Sakura’s tense muscles. Kyoko’s head bowed sharply down at the words, shrouding her entire face in shadow, but even so the taut lines of her neck and shoulders were impossible to misread.

And Byakuya — god, Byakuya — Naegi couldn’t even bring himself to look at the other young man now, not if he wanted to stay calm enough to watch the rest of the trial. He’d only gotten a glimpse of the shock and pain written across the heir’s features before ripping his eyes away, but it had been enough to etch it irretrievably into his memory. However much Byakuya had been hurt already, Junko’s accusation had just added a little bit more.

“Noegi did not do this.”

Sakura was first to break the silence, her definitive words blocking the attack against her friends just as she might have tried to catch a physical blow. Her gaze locked on Monokuma, with the same look in her eye that had stared down opponents in fight after bloody fight.

Junko’s laughter rang out for a moment, before Monokuma’s cackles drowned her out. “That’s not the way I remember it! Now, be absolutely sure to correct me if I’m wrong about this, butuuuuut… I seem to recall Noegi fessing up when the chips were down!”

Noegi’s fingers clenched uselessly through the air, trying to curl together in a frustrated fist — but he couldn’t quite complete the motion. Of course she’d bring up his confession, the desperate lie he’d told to keep her from slaughtering their friends. Of course she’d do her best to turn it against him.

“Like that second-rate excuse for a confession means anything!” Jill lunged forward over her podium to jab the points of her scissors as far as they could go towards Monokuma. “The votes already pulled the pin — what else was Makyutie gonna do but jump on that grenade?”

“If he’d kept protesting his innocence, it would have opened the door to letting you execute all of us for voting wrong.” Kyoko’s head lifted just enough to reveal her lips twisting up in a thin, dark smile. “I wonder why you didn’t take the opportunity.”

The challenge froze Noegi in place, horrified images of his worst nightmares flashing through his imagination. It had sounded like Kyoko wanted to taunt the mastermind about missed opportunities, to goad her into murdering everyone after all. And if Junko took her up on it —

Then it would be as good as an admission that Noegi’s execution had been based on a lie. Even as he caught up to what Kyoko had to be thinking, he could hear Junko’s huff of annoyance. “Ugh, seriously, if that’s her opening act, this trial is gonna be a yawn!”

The words only sounded through the data center — for the first time since she’d headed into the control room, Monokuma didn’t echo Junko’s words. Not entirely sure it was a good idea, Naegi
risked a glance toward the Monokuma door — and met Junko’s eyes as she leaned back to grin at him.

His back slammed hard against the wheelchair as he instinctively jerked back, sending the chair wheeling ever so slightly in the opposite direction. She giggled, fluttering her fingers in a coquettish wave before bouncing back towards her control panel and out of his line of sight.

“Why indeed? Sure is a good question to ask!” Monokuma’s gleeful cackle rang out, even though Junko hadn’t laughed at all herself. “I guess it must be because the vote was right!”

“It wasn’t.”

The moment he heard Byakuya’s voice, Naegi’s full attention snapped away from the control room and back to the monitors. His boyfriend glared up at Monokuma, and Naegi just knew he was imagining the robot shredded down to its circuitry. He bit his lip, reminding himself that Byakuya was too smart to act on the impulse — and that surely, surely one of the girls would stop him from any potential lapses in judgment.

“There is no way that Naegi could have orchestrated Ikusaba’s murder.” Byakuya’s eyes never wavered from Monokuma, but his hands clutched tight at the podium’s edges, like it was the only anchor left to hold him in place. “During the entire time that the real killer would have been setting up the details of their crime, Naegi was unconscious from his injuries in the library. Between the exhaustion and the blood loss, he wouldn’t have had the physical ability to perform the necessary actions.”

“You think?” Monokuma spoke like it was a genuine question in a friendly debate. “But what if he was faking? I mean, that’d give him all kinds of opportunities, right?”

“Faking? Does that mean you’re gonna accuse my beautiful scissors of being forgeries next?” Jill spun silver blades around her head for emphasis. “Not a chance! You’d better believe I know exactly where they go — and he took it all the way to the hilt!”

Only after spotting the faint twitch of revulsion in Byakuya’s cheek did Naegi notice the innuendo hidden in Jill’s phrasing. A hint of warmth crept into his cheeks, in spite of the hundred other worries that should’ve been occupying his attention. Fortunately, his friends were nowhere near as distracted by Jill’s habit of inappropriate jokes.

“The wound was most definitely genuine,” Sakura agreed, her mouth thinning to a grim line. “I saw it quite clearly, both when I first extracted the scissors and later when I bandaged it. No fake wound would hold up to such close scrutiny.”

“And it was exactly as serious as it appeared,” Kyoko added. “I didn’t get a chance to inspect the library until after the trial — but once I saw the quantity and patterns of bloodstains, the truth was unmistakable. That blood came from an injury exactly like the one Naegi received — and it would have resulted in the exact symptoms of blood loss that he exhibited.”

“Wow… I didn’t expect so much corroborating testimony!” Monokuma looked slowly around the circle, as if meeting each and every one of the students’ eyes — even the portraits of the friends who would never stand in the circle again. “Do you guys know what this means?”

He grinned, and Naegi could see Junko’s gleeful smile behind her robot’s gleaming fangs. “You’ve all been plotting to circumvent my trials by basing your arguments on an unprovable theory!”
Chapter 349

*Unprovable*... the word rolled through the trial room like a death knell spreading through a silent church. Naegi could see the moment it hit each of his friends — the realization that the mastermind had just called them liars.

But they *weren’t* lying. They knew it, Naegi knew it, and most importantly, Junko knew it. Everything his friends had said was the exact truth about the circumstances surrounding Ikusaba’s death.

“It doesn’t matter if they can’t prove it. It’s still true.” Naegi gave the words all the force he could muster, willing them to reach across to the control room where Junko sat.

He wasn’t sure he’d managed it — but apparently she’d been listening for something of the sort. She leaned backward again to look out the doorway as soon as he spoke. “You seem pretty sure about that! But you know, it’s kinda hard to say for sure without a doctor’s note. Did our resident meat shield get some medical credentials when I wasn’t looking?”

Voices sounded from the speakers again as his friends tried to resume their arguments, but Junko’s eyes pinned Naegi in place so powerfully that even his attention couldn’t move away from her.

“It would be awfully hard to tell how bad an injury was without seeing it in person.” Junko shook her head, letting out a theatrical sigh. “And if I couldn’t tell, I just don’t see how anyone else could, either!”

Anyone else…? Naegi blinked for a moment before he understood her train of thought. The rest of the world — that was what she meant. The trials had always been about showmanship, meant to broadcast despair to the people watching outside. And after Kyoko’s challenge over the previous verdict, this trial came down to public opinion more than any of the past ones.

It didn’t matter if Junko knew the truth. As long as the rest of the world couldn’t be sure who was lying, the truth didn’t count. The only way his friends could win their argument would be with real proof that even Junko couldn’t refute.

And the voices from the trial room began to seep their way back into his consciousness, Naegi realized that he wasn’t the only one who’d worked it out.

“Nothing we can say will prove anything,” Kyoko said, her fingers tapping against her elbow in a single tiny blur. “Every suggestion so far would eventually come down to one of us pitting our word against the mastermind’s. As long as we don’t have evidence to back up our claims, we can’t progress.”

“Then what exactly are you proposing?” Byakuya snapped back, a glint of his old edge returning as his patience clearly frayed. “If what we’ve said so far is useless, what line of attack do you see that *wouldn’t* amount to hearsay?”

Kyoko quirked an eyebrow upward at his tone — and that expression jolted Naegi back to another Hope’s Peak, one that didn’t exist any longer. For a moment, he could see her sitting in the back of a classroom, trading thorny barbs with Byakuya on topics so complex Naegi couldn’t begin to understand. If he wanted to follow along, he had to watch their expressions, the glares and smirks, scowls and grins — and he’d noticed that Kyoko always raised her eyebrow just so when she knew Byakuya had realized she was right.
Byakuya caught the lift of her eyebrow and retaliated with a swift roll of his eyes — a look more often accompanied by his confident assertion that the current situation was no more than a temporary setback leading to his ultimate triumph in their ongoing line of friendly challenges. The whole exchange felt so familiar it approached the mundane… and the sheer ordinariness of it ached at the center of his chest.

They’d acted out the same pattern from their old lives... but did Kyoko and Byakuya even recognize what was happening between them with their memories gone? Or was Naegi the only one left who could see the meaning in such an insignificant gesture?

Or maybe there wasn’t any meaning left to find. If neither of his friends remembered the reasons that had once lain behind their gestures, then maybe it wasn’t the same at all. Maybe he’d grown so desperate to connect the people on the screens to the friends he remembered that he’d started imagining parallels where nothing existed. Maybe… maybe everything he’d seen was only there in his head.

No. No, that couldn’t be right. Naegi stared up at the trial room monitors, looking from Kyoko to Byakuya, Jill to Sakura, and back around again. Those were his friends standing there, no matter what they remembered. As long as he could hold on to that knowledge, he could still believe that everything could somehow turn out all right.

And when Kyoko’s lips twisted upward in a smile more for herself than any observers, Naegi knew he’d been right to believe in her.

“We need proof that supports our claims about the situation — tangible proof. We need a method of determining who was capable of doing what during the murder.” Kyoko looked across the circle — no, not just across the circle. She looked at the place where Naegi would have been standing if he’d been present, meeting his portrait’s gaze in lieu of his own. “And there’s only one viable source of that proof.”

Naegi frowned. What was she talking about? Could they have uncovered some useful clues during the hours he’d been unconscious? It didn’t seem like it, because the other three looked just as confused as —

Byakuya’s eyes shot wide, what little color had remained to him draining from his face.

“Togami? Are you all right?” Sakura leaned over her podium, anxious concern lining her forehead. “Are your injuries worsening again? Do you need rest?”

Jill rolled her eyes. “Not like it matters — pretty sure we won’t get to stop this ride for a nap break! Good thing that’s not the problem.” She spun to glare at Kyoko, braids flying out behind her. “Haven’t you done enough to my White Knight? Are you aiming for the trauma overload high score?”

Byakuya should have responded to that. He should have sneered at the insult, should have retorted with enough venom to make the genocider cackle with delight.

He shouldn’t have stood frozen and pale, as if her words had never even reached him.

“I’m not the one who caused this particular trauma,” Kyoko said, though her eyes stayed on Byakuya rather than Jill.

Jill huffed out a sigh, punctuated by the clatter of her snapping scissors. “Yeah, for once you didn’t cause it, maybe. But I’d bet my last bloodstain that you saw this coming back when we couldn’t
find him in the Bio Lab!”

The Bio Lab? What did that have to do with anything? Even if they’d gotten through the locked door, it wasn’t like there was much to find. As far as Naegi could remember, it was nothing but storage up there, the temperature-controlled room preserving a stockpile of supplies the headmaster had squirreled away for the day when they might finally leave their shelter.

“I suspected, certainly.” Kyoko’s steely mask shuttered down across her face, and Naegi couldn’t quite work out what she was trying to hide behind it. “The only reason for the mastermind to confiscate anything would be if we could use it to our advantage.”

“Wait.” Sakura looked from Kyoko to Jill, eyebrows knit together as she tried to keep up. “Wait… if you’re talking about the Bio Lab… about what wasn’t in the Bio Lab… then…”

“She means his body.” Byakuya had shut his eyes against the trial, and tension quivered from his jaw down to his throat and shoulders in a long line of visible pain. “The only chance we have to prove what he could or couldn’t have done… would be if we could show the injuries on Naegi’s body.”

Ice gripped Naegi’s heart as he struggled to understand the words. It didn’t make sense — how much had Junko forced him to sleep through?

“But… would such proof really exist?” Sakura asked, her voice uncharacteristically hesitant. “That is… after we last saw him…”

“Yeah, odds are there’s not much to see after a building fell on him,” Jill agreed, one hand on her hip. “Almost like it’d be an awful idea and a complete waste of time!”

“Not necessarily.”

If Naegi had learned anything about Kyoko in their years of friendship, it was that her calm tone was meant to mask the fact that she wasn’t feeling calm in the slightest. He couldn’t read past it, couldn’t hear what she’d hidden if she didn’t want him to know… but he knew something was very wrong.

“In fact,” Kyoko continued, “I think it’s far more likely that there is something important for us to learn from seeing Naegi. After all, he was the only executed student that the mastermind has dealt with so personally. There must be some reason for that — something that makes Naegi different from the others.”

A bright giggle burbled out of the control room, twisting Naegi’s stomach into knots. He wished she would keep that door closed… but then again, that was probably the exact reason why she didn’t.

“Uh oh — sounds to me like you’ve all forgotten that sequence-breaking is a big no-no!” Monokuma sang out. “We talked about this waaaay back when the first trial ended, remember? I promised to take care of all the clean up after every round of the game, so that you could focus on new ideas instead of getting bogged down in the past! If I brought a messy dead body to your nice clean trial room, that would mean breaking my word!”

“Oh?” Kyoko’s eyebrow arched high at that. “So you’re saying that you always keep your word once you give it? No matter what?”

“Sure! What kind of headmaster would go back on a promise to one of his beloved students?”
“I see.” Kyoko nodded once. “In that case, I have a promise that I would like to redeem.” She reached down to pull out an e-handbook — but instead of opening it for use, she flipped to the back of the case. Reaching inside, she pulled out a slip of paper that Naegi recognized.

Kyoko held up the last of the three trip tickets that Monokuma had given him.
Togami had never hated Kirigiri as much as he did in that moment, as she made a logical and well-reasoned argument to force him to confront the mutilated corpse of the boy he loved. How could she say that this was the only way to accomplish their goals? If she had any right at all to the title of Ultimate Detective, surely she could craft a better plan than this.

But no, apparently not. She held up that ridiculous ticket as if it offered the perfect solution to their problems, just like Naegi had when he —

Like Naegi had… when he’d used an identical ticket so that Monokuma would let him and Togami investigate the headmaster’s office.

“Where did you get that?”

He could hear someone speaking off to one side, the rapid-fire patter that could only be the genocider, but the words couldn’t break through to reach him. All his attention narrowed into a single spiraling lance, zeroing in on Kirigiri’s dark gloved fingers wrapped around that horribly familiar slip of paper.

“Why do you have that?”

It had to be the same ticket from before, he knew even from this distance. How else could it have the same childish artwork scrawled across it that he remembered? None of the other students in the circle had seen those tickets, so no one should have known enough to replicate them. And surely the mastermind wouldn’t be so careless as to give Kirigiri such an open-ended advantage, not after the earlier one had gotten them into an otherwise sealed room.

“That was Naegi’s!”

A loud crack shot through the room, shattering through the narrow tunnel of his awareness and jolting him back to the trial. His hand ached, new slivers of pain gouging into each of the cuts on his fingers, and only when he looked down did he realize that he’d slammed his palm against his podium.

Kirigiri sighed, lowering her hand so that the top of her podium concealed the ticket from his view. “Yes, I know that it was. I found it in the back of his e-handbook when I checked the front hall earlier.”

“You — found his handbook?” Togami blinked, the gears of his mind creaking slowly to the obvious conclusion. “You mean — you were looking for the upgraded map?”

“Initially, but that function was apparently removed before the handbook went back into circulation.” Kirigiri gave an indifferent shrug. She made it look natural, but he could still recognize the gesture as a declaration that she didn’t need the mastermind’s gimmicks. “However, the ticket was still where Naegi had presumably placed it for safekeeping. And when I found it…” A slight smile crossed her lips. “I thought that it would be fitting to use it during the trial.”

Togami’s throat clenched so tightly that he could barely move his neck enough to nod… but he dragged his aching muscles through the pain. For once, he agreed with Kirigiri completely — using Naegi’s possessions to defeat the mastermind was far more appropriate than letting them languish in an empty hall.
“I’m not sure I understand what you two are discussing.” Ogami’s hesitant interruption almost seemed like an apology for breaking into a conversation that had somehow narrowed to include only Kirigiri and him. “How would anything of Naegi’s help us find an opportunity to investigate a body more fully? I don’t think he would have had a chance to enter the Bio Lab.”

“It had nothing to do with the lab.” Togami had to force the words from an aching throat, and they emerged far softer than he’d intended. “It’s the mastermind’s idea of a joke — tickets for two students to go on some mockery of a date at any location in the school. Monokuma made him take them along with the upgrade to his e-handbook.”

“Ohhh, so that’s how Big Mac talked his way into my me-time in the library!” Jill nodded as if in agreement with herself. “And all this time I’d been thinking it was just Pooh-bear playing favorites!”

Considering the mastermind’s fixation on the appearance of fairness, Togami half expected Monokuma to jump in with some ridiculous defense of his actions — but the bear just sat still and unmov ing on its throne. The only other time Togami had seen him so unresponsive had been in the library before discovering Ikusaba’s corpse, when he’d taken the deactivated robot to pieces. Had the mastermind decided to avoid interfering in this particular debate? Or… was there some reason they couldn’t…?

“And you believe we could use these tickets to — to compel the mastermind?” Ogami’s eyes widened, a dark fear flooding through them. “No, we can’t! That would be far too great a risk!”

No one needed her to explain what she meant — not when her gaze had locked on Asahina’s faded portrait. They all knew that meddling with the mastermind’s loopholes could bring terrible consequences.

But after a moment, Kirigiri shook her head. “No… I don’t think the risk is quite as high as you’re assuming. Using the tickets obviously doesn’t break rules, because Naegi did so without consequences. And even if we inadvertently violated the conditions for using a ticket, there’s no indication that it would result in punishment, extreme or otherwise. Without a broken rule to justify a punishment, it would be nothing more than murder.”

Murder… like what the mastermind had done to Naegi. That was the reason they were all standing here right now… and the reason Naegi wasn’t. The mastermind wanted to hide behind their rules and their games, wanted to pretend that none of this situation was their fault even though they were the author of it all. He still didn’t understand what exactly the mastermind wanted to accomplish with this nightmare… but he knew they couldn’t do it if they appeared to act as a murderer.

But they couldn’t run from their crime forever. They’d forced him into this barren, empty world, devoid of all color or happiness… this world that didn’t have Naegi in it. And as long as he had to draw breath after miserable breath in this nightmare where Naegi wasn’t, Togami wouldn’t allow the mastermind to pretend their hands were clean. Even if it meant facing the ruin of his lover’s remains.

“The ticket should have information on the back about the criteria for using it,” he said, before he could think the better of supporting Kirigiri’s plan. “The one I saw listed it out quite clearly.”

Kirigiri nodded immediately. “As does this one.” She looked down at the ticket on her podium. “It says, ‘This trip ticket can be redeemed for one day’s heart-pounding excursion for the bearer and any one additional student of their choice. Locations include —’”

“Whoa there, Nancy Drew!” Jill slammed a hand down on her podium, metal screeching through
the air as her scissors gouged into the surface. “Back up a second — are you saying this gig has to be a solo job? One of us going off on corpse duty all by our lonesome?”

“I don’t see the problem.” Kirigiri shrugged. “As I was saying, ‘Locations include any area within the bounds of Hope’s Peak Academy that is unlocked at the time of redemption.’”

Togami could see her point — the trial room was certainly unlocked now, after all. And while the ticket did say that the bearer could only choose one person to accompany them on the trip, it didn’t actually specify that the excursion had to be limited to those two people alone.

In short, there was nothing to prevent Kirigiri from using the ticket to bring Naegi’s body here.

“Then do it!” he snapped, cutting off whatever confused protest the other girls had tried to make. “If you’re going to insist, then — then just get it over with!”

“Now, that’s not a very nice way to talk about this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!”

Togami spun towards the throne — and Monokuma grinned back at him, alert and aware as he’d ever been.

“After all, it’s not every day you get to experience the thrill of both a class trial and a group date at the same time!” Monokuma’s shoulders heaved as he pretended to pant at the thought.

“Then you’re saying that you wouldn’t prevent us from doing this?” Ogami asked, crossing her arms suspiciously. “This would indeed fit all the ticket’s criteria?”

“Hmmm…” Monokuma tilted his head innocently. “Well… I don’t know if I’d go that far.” His red eye gleamed directly at Kirigiri. “Sounds to me like someone needs to take a closer look at some of the fine print!”

Kirigiri didn’t answer. Not a single muscle in her face moved, not even when the three other students turned to look at her.

“Oh? Tired of reading?” Monokuma laughed. “That’s okay — I remember the rest!” He cleared his throat. “All deceased students are disqualified from participation in trip ticket adventures!” No necrophiliacs allowed here — I don’t care how much you want to paw at a rotting day old corpse, tickets are for live students only!”
Chapter 351

Togami’s stomach twisted into painful knots as Monokuma’s gleeful laughter rang through the trial room, and for one awful moment he thought he might be sick. He regretted every moment in the past that he’d spent studying cold case files, cursed the times he’d flipped idly through the photos attached to police reports — because now his mind had all the tools to paint a graphic illustration of Monokuma’s description. Until now he’d managed to avoid thinking too specifically about any of it in terms of Naegi’s body, but now… now…

His stomach heaved again, leaving him shaking on his feet. Only by clenching his hands around the edges of the podium and fixing his eyes on the shadowy lines of the floor could he dredge up the strength to choke back the sour nausea clawing at his throat.

“Does this ticket have that requirement written on it as well?” That was Ogami’s voice, he knew it even with his gaze still locked on the ground. Tense and quiet, he could hear that she too had been shaken by Monokuma’s pronouncement, more than multiplying her earlier anxiety. “Are there other hidden rules on it? How would we check?”

A derisive snort cut through the room, loud and overblown enough that it could only have come from Jill. “Sounds like a job for a super sleuth decoder ring! Got one on hand, or should we start checking the crackerjack boxes?”

But even with fear on one side and scorn on the other, Kirigiri still didn’t respond. He didn’t need to force his eyes up to know that she hadn’t moved at all. Of course the girls wouldn’t make a dent in her mask, not after she’d frozen when Monokuma had told them the final criteria —

No… wait. Togami frowned, the moment playing out in his head once more. Monokuma had interrupted with mockery and taunts… Kirigiri had refused to react… and then…

And only then had Monokuma read the ticket’s use criteria.

“You knew.”

Togami raised his head slowly to look across the circle, to stare blankly into Kirigiri’s stony face. “You knew that the tickets couldn’t be used for — for what we’d wanted. You knew that was one of the rules… and you didn’t say anything. You weren’t going to say anything, not if Monokuma hadn’t made you.”

He gritted his teeth, bracing himself for the anger he expected to flood through him at her highhanded behavior. She’d chosen to act alone again, to use manipulation and lies again, even after they’d all agreed to work together against the mastermind. After all the times he’d raged at her lesser sins, surely this would raise a fury in him like no other.

But as the seconds ticked away, no anger came. His chest stayed hollow and empty, cold where the rage should have burned. An infinity of darkness stretched down through him, and all he could find within it was a whisper of confusion.

“Why did you hide it from us?”

It should have been an accusation flung at her head, an attack to wound the girl behind the mask… but he couldn’t find the energy to do so. It took all the strength he had to force the question out into the open, exhaustion grinding his voice down to near inaudibility.
And for the first time since Monokuma had spoken, Kirigiri’s expression flickered. She didn’t drop her emotionless mask, not quite — but now she was looking back at him from across the circle. Their eyes met, and for one horrifying instant Togami felt as though Kirigiri could see straight through his soul.

Then she broke their locked gaze with a shake of her head, and the pressure of her scrutiny disappeared. “I don’t think there’s anything I can say to explain it to your satisfaction.”

Which didn’t make any sense. Surely he would be capable of understanding any logical reason she had for her actions. Even when Jill and Ogami had faltered during past trials, he’d never had trouble following her deductive processes. Why should this be any different? What was she planning that she didn’t want to share?

There had to be a way to convince her to explain herself. Not outright, perhaps, since that might tip her hand to the mastermind, but she should still be able to tell them something. He frowned, starting to sort through options to send a subtle hint —

But Kirigiri made her move first. She held the ticket up so that her podium’s beam of light hit it directly, turning to face Monokuma’s throne. “I am redeeming this ticket now, in exchange for an excursion beginning immediately. The location I choose is this trial room that we are currently using, and the student I choose to accompany me is Makoto Naegi.”

Silence rolled out through the room as her calm voice came to a halt. For one wild moment, Togami wondered if his damaged hearing had interfered with her words somehow, had twisted whatever reasonable statement she’d made into a mad string of nonsense. Of course he loathed the idea that his hearing might be even worse than he’d previously thought — but that had to be what had happened. It had to be, because the alternative was… was that she’d really said…

Laughter trickled through the room, so quiet that it took Togami several baffled seconds to recognize it as a different variation of Monokuma’s cackle. The same recorded sound, yes, but pitched low and slowed until it became a different sound entirely. The deep rumble vibrated through his skull, felt as much as heard, impossibly more sinister than the bear’s normal laugh had already been.

“Man, and here I thought detectives were supposed to be smart!” Jill glared at Kirigiri with an indignation that Togami could perfectly comprehend. “Do you need a magnifying glass to help you fact check? Brother Bear just said you can’t use the ticket that way!”

“Yes, he certainly laid out the rules quite clearly.” Kirigiri’s eyes remained fixed on the mastermind’s robot, hardly even acknowledging the other students in the circle — like she’d decided to disregard them all entirely. “And now that I’ve used the ticket, those rules should go into effect.”

“But — but you didn’t follow the rules!” Ogami’s hands curled into useless fists, in spite of the fact that she had no one here to fight. “Then — do you mean to say that you’ve given up? You’re forfeiting the ticket because it became unusable?”

Had that been it? No — Togami dismissed the possibility as soon as it entered his head. Kirigiri wouldn’t indulge herself in pointless dramatics simply to dispose of an unnecessary bit of paper.

“I’m not forfeiting anything. I just used an item in my possession.” Kirigiri raised an eyebrow at Monokuma. “And so?”

“Hmm?” Monokuma tilted his head. “You know, you’re very lucky to have a headmaster who puts
up with so much blatant disrespect! Just think how devastated a boring old human headmaster would be if one of their precious students tried to misuse such a delightful prize!” He grinned. “In fact, I’m so tolerant of your antics that I’ll even give you one shot at take-backs — we can pretend this whole thing never happened!”

“No.” Kirigiri crossed her arms. “I stand by my use of the ticket, and —”

“Why?”

The word tore itself from Togami’s throat before he realized he meant to say it. He hadn’t intended to interrupt whatever plan Kirigiri was in the midst of — but this was ridiculous. “Why are you still wasting time on this when we all know it won’t work?”

“What a good question!” Monokuma said cheerfully, as if this were a class discussion where Togami had made a particularly insightful comment. “You know, I think it deserves an answer — don’t you?” His red eye bore into Kirigiri.

“Fine.” She met the robot’s gaze without flinching. “It isn’t a waste of time because you yourself said that this situation meets the criteria on the ticket.”
Chapter 352

Togami found himself facing the very real possibility that Kirigiri had lost her mind. It wasn’t completely unbelievable — weeks in the mastermind’s clutches had left all the remaining students unhinged in one way or another. The pressure of the class trials must have finally gotten to be too much for her, deluding her into believing that her so-called explanation had made any sense at all.

“Monokuma did not say that you could use the ticket,” Togami told her, on the off-chance that the reminder would bring her back to her senses. “In fact, it was much closer to the literal opposite.”

“I don’t mean what he said a few moments ago during the trial. I’m talking about their previous comments outside the Bio Lab.”

Togami had to admit that did sound marginally more rational. Could the mastermind have inadvertently contradicted themselves in a way that the students could use? He cast his mind back to their investigation of the Bio Lab, trying to recall the specifics of that conversation. Had there been any trick of phrasing that could help?

If there was, he couldn’t remember it. Objectively speaking, he knew a great deal must have happened, but somehow all the details of the encounter faded into nothingness. The entire encounter was consumed by that horrible moment when Monokuma had taunted him —

Had taunted him about Naegi.

“Once we determined that the Bio Lab had been serving as a makeshift morgue, it was quite obvious that the number of bodies didn’t match up with the number of students who should have been killed during the game.”

Kirigiri’s words sounded far away, so very far away, much further than the mere expanse of the circle. His lopsided hearing distorted the distance, as if the words had to cross an infinitely long void to reach him.

“In spite of the damage to many of the bodies, it wouldn’t have taken long to match the wounds to each student’s cause of death. However, you intervened before we could.”

What was she saying? Togami felt as though he were trying to decipher one of the few languages that he hadn’t yet learned fluently. It took all his mental power simply to turn the sounds to words — comprehension lay too far beyond his reach.

“You provided us with an explanation before we had a chance to speculate on the situation — that you had Naegi’s body hidden with you. It would fit with your cruel behavior up to now. We wouldn’t question that you took Naegi’s body away to create fresh ammunition for mocking us.”

Worse than mocking, worse than scorn. He’d told the one lie Togami would give anything to make true, tangling grief with grief until the weight of it destroyed any hope of finding a way free. That lie had nearly ended in the garden, with shears and blood and pain, and he had no doubt whatsoever that the mastermind would have preferred that no other student get to him in time.

“But that wasn’t all you said. You took your malice one step further, and claimed that it wasn’t a corpse sitting in your hideout. On two separate occasions, before witnesses, you denied that Naegi was among the dead students — and that means he should be included as a potential subject of this ticket’s criteria.”
Breath hissed through Togami’s teeth, and he clung to the shock of cold air like a lifeline. She’d said it. He’d known where Kirigiri’s argument was going, where she had to be going — but even so, she’d actually said it.

It should have been easier to bear it, now that he’d heard the claim three times… but that was a fool’s dream. Nothing would ever be easier, not when his life would never be brightened by Naegi’s smile again. Hearing Kirigiri remind him of that fact only hurt more.

“Oh? So that’s what you think?” Monokuma tilted his head inquisitively. “Are you saying I was lying?”

A dangerous question, made all the more so by the too-innocent tone. The foundation of this trial — no, this entire game — rested on whether the mastermind could be trusted to keep their word. They couldn’t afford to let an accusation of lying go unchallenged.

But how much could that matter in this case? After all, the lie had hardly been subtle or open to misinterpretation. They’d all seen the execution. With the cameras trained on their every move, the entire world had witnessed the final moments of Naegi’s life. And after all that, Monokuma had told him twice, directly to his face, that Naegi wasn’t dead. In the face of all that, there was only one answer Kirigiri could give.

“No.”

And that… wasn’t it. Togami blinked, thinking back to the exact wording the mastermind had used. Had there been some hidden loophole he’d overlooked? Some trick of phrasing that twisted the meaning around into the opposite of what it ought to be?

He couldn’t find anything of the sort as he thought through the mastermind’s words — but even so, he knew it had to be there. Kirigiri must have had some reason for saying what she had, however strange and obscure. She had to be following a careful plan, had to be preparing some sort of trick, had to be doing something… because she couldn’t have meant…

“You weren’t lying.”

Kirigiri leaned forward, eyes locked on Monokuma. “You only tell direct lies when your hand is forced — and never just to cause pain. When you strike to hurt us, your favorite weapon is the truth.”

He froze, breath going still in his lungs, tension locking muscles in place. The words rang through the air with an almost physical force, so strong that small circle of podiums couldn’t contain it. They echoed out to fill the room with their thunder, rumbling deep and terrible until his bones shuddered with vibrations of a sound his ears couldn’t process.

“You didn’t need to lie about Naegi. You told the exact and literal truth.”

The room shook around him, the world blurring together in a morass of twisting shadows. His fingers clutched uselessly at the podium, trying to find some semblance of stability, but he couldn’t grip the surface as tremors rocked through it. Or maybe it was his hands that were shaking — was that it? With the world trembling around him, one ear filled with a deep roar and the other a rushing void, he couldn’t tell. He thought that maybe, maybe he could hear Monokuma’s laughter above it all, high and bright and dreadful, but for all he knew the sound was just a memory playing in his own head. He couldn’t tell anymore, couldn’t think, couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t —
Ding.

A quiet chime cut through the chaos — not the mastermind’s school bells, but the familiar ding of an elevator door. Silence followed hard on its heels, and he realized the rumbling sound had gone. The only sound left in the room was the low hiss of the elevator door.

His head moved on autopilot, turning towards the entrance they’d all used just a short while ago. The elevator doors slid wide, revealing that inside — inside —

Naegi sat in the elevator’s thin strip of light, staring straight back out at him.
The world narrowed to the narrow opening of the elevator doors, the rectangle of flickering gray light that had no place in the dark reality where Togami had spent these last days. Nothing existed outside of that space, not hands shuddering against a podium or a throat locked by too many words he couldn’t find or ears that couldn’t process the puzzled sounds from the circle around him. Nothing was there but a small window into another world, a world where the dream of seeing his love again had happened. A world so perfect and complete that his chest ached from the beauty of it…

So much that he wished he could believe it was true.

He didn’t know what kind of monstrosity the mastermind had created to sit in that repulsive wheelchair, but it did look strikingly like Naegi, at least at this distance. Bruised and battered, yes, even more broken than he’d been in the aftermath of his injury in the library — but what else would he be after a building, even a small building, had collapsed on him? If anything, it was ridiculous that he would look as well as he did after an execution — but the mastermind must have wanted to leave him intact enough for the other students to recognize.

But as the wheelchair began to roll slowly out of the elevator, Togami had to admit he couldn’t see any hints as to that thing’s true nature. In fact, it looked so very like Naegi that a terrible suspicion curled through his mind… had the mastermind sent Naegi’s body down to them after all? Clearly they had access to highly advanced robotics, and they certainly had no compunctions about mutilating corpses. Had they decided to use Kirigiri’s bizarre accusation as a tool to cause more pain?

It was far too believable that the mastermind would seize such an opportunity, Togami knew that all too well. But even so… he’d looked into those eyes across the room, and he knew that there had been someone looking back. Could circuitry and programming bring intelligence back to a corpse’s death-clouded eyes?

No — no, he couldn’t let himself start thinking that way. This was a trap, he knew it had to be a trap, and he couldn’t let the mastermind trick him no matter how good a fake they’d made. He had to keep his grip on reality, no matter how painful it might be.

Those weren’t Naegi’s eyes, even if they squinted into the room with the same puzzled wariness he’d worn whenever the mastermind unveiled some new horror.

That wasn’t Naegi’s hand, even if its fingers lay along the wheelchair’s arm in the exact pattern that had intertwined so perfectly with Togami’s own.

And those weren’t Naegi’s lips, even if they… they curved up… and…

And he smiled.

Bright and innocent… kind and gentle… a ray of sunlight gleaming through the darkness of the trial room. It pierced through the shadows and struck Togami with the full force of an expression he’d never believed he’d see again.

Naegi’s smile.

Everything else faded to gray beside it, slipping away into nothingness. The world could have shattered to pieces around him, and it wouldn’t have been able to tear him away. All he could do
was stand and stare, transfixed by the familiar smile, tracing every detail over and over again in the last moments before the elevator door closed.

With the additional gray light extinguished again, the trial room’s darkness loomed even larger than it had before the elevator doors had opened. Togami drew a sharp breath into aching lungs, peering into the shadows for any trace of movement — but the podium lights couldn’t reach so far beyond the circle.

Noise surged forward to fill the void, a rush of angry words he hadn’t been able to hear moments before.

“— don’t know what you think you’re —”

“— pretty sick, even for —”

“— isn’t funny, no matter what you —”

“— not gonna let you screw around with your tricks —”

The shouting voices tangled together, overlapping and running into one another as Jill and Ogami found different ways to say the same things. The specific words didn’t matter, not really — not when he knew exactly what they meant.

The mastermind must have planned for this moment all along. He could see it now, how all the pieces fit together. They’d designed a room too dark to see anyone clearly, forcing unsuspecting minds to imagine they saw what hadn’t been there. The darkness, the lighting, the whole set-up of this trial room was just a trick to convince him he’d recognized Naegi’s smile.

That had to be what had happened. That was the only explanation for what he’d seen. He knew it now, and he just had to remember —

And then the chair rolled out of the shadows beside him, and every other thought ceased as he locked eyes with the boy sitting before him.

“I’m sorry.”

… Naegi’s voice.

“I’m so sorry.”

… That was Naegi’s voice.

“I never meant to hurt you, I swear. I just wanted you to be okay — I wanted everyone to be okay!”

… And not just the voice. The shift of his expressions… the set of his shoulders… the wave of his hair… the warmth in his eyes… everything about the boy in front of him was Naegi.

“I didn’t mean for everything to turn out like it did. I wish I could’ve thought of something else, but — but I couldn’t.”

… It was Naegi.

“I’m sorry.”

It was Naegi.
“Can you — uh, what —”

Naegi’s hand was warm. Togami’s fingers traced across the back of his wrist, hardly allowing himself to think about the solid weight and what it meant. It only took a nudge to flip the hand so the palm was facing up, the back flat against the chair’s armrest. He let his fingers slid down to rest ever so lightly against the thin web of veins stark on the pale wrist.

And there it was beneath his fingers, faint but steady and unyielding — the pulse of a heart that hadn’t stopped beating. The pulse of someone alive.

“You’re alive.”

He could hear his own voice speaking somewhere far in the distance, but he hardly recognized the sounds.

“You’re alive.”

The room blurred around him, the ground trembled beneath his feet, but none of it mattered. He didn’t need to see, not when his world centered on the pulse of Naegi’s heart beneath his fingertips. He didn’t care when the floor shook until his legs buckled and brought him to his knees, not when it only brought him close enough to press his forehead against Naegi’s open hand.

The other boy’s gentle fingers curled to rest against his head, warm and steady and real, and he was undone. However much he’d grieved after that horrible trial, however much he’d tried to mourn, he hadn’t shed a single tear. But now… now that Naegi was alive, was here… now his shoulders shuddered as each ragged breath tore through him. Hot wetness burned in his eyes until streaks of fire trickled down his cheeks. He buried his head in Naegi’s hand and cried for all the sorrow that had so suddenly set him free.

The world had been empty, had been as dead and lifeless as he’d believed Naegi to be — but now, now he could see the possibility of a future stretching out before them both. He’d made mistakes, yes, that was still true — but he’d been gifted with a chance to fix what he’d done wrong. He could wipe away all the regrets that had tormented him. He could say the words he’d never had a chance to speak aloud to the one person he’d wanted to hear them.

Except that he couldn’t. Sobs choked through his throat, filling any space where words might have formed. Even now, even in an impossible second chance, he couldn’t make himself say —

“I love you.”

For a moment, he didn’t understand what he was hearing.

“I love you so much.”

That wasn’t his voice, not when he still couldn’t stop his tears.

“I love you, Byakuya.”

That was Naegi’s voice — no, Makoto’s voice — saying the words that had been ringing through his own head — words that he’d never thought he’d hear.

Makoto loved him.

And in that moment, Togami knew that he would do anything to keep Makoto Naegi safe.
Naegi hadn’t thought this moment would really happen. Even when Kyoko had pulled out the last of his trip tickets and demanded it, he hadn’t believed that Junko would allow it. She’d kept him alive for reasons he still didn’t understand, she’d refused to tell their friends about his survival, she’d taunted him with having to watch the trial alone — he knew she had to be planning something terrible. Of course she wouldn’t let Kyoko find a way to wriggle around it. He’d been sure that Junko would reject the suggestion out of hand.

Instead, she’d sent him through the trap door in her control room, pointing him towards a hidden elevator with a grin.

It could have taken him anywhere, could have trapped him inside, could have plummeted down to his death — but the elevator hadn’t done any of that. It had taken him down to a storage area that connected to the mirror-encrusted grounds from the last trial.

But even as he’d sped across the room in a beeline for the large main elevator, he’d still expected her to try to stop him. Surely the elevator wouldn’t open, or would be programmed not to approach the new trial grounds, or would do something to force him back into Junko’s clutches —

And then the doors had opened on the trial ground, and he’d seen his friends. Kyoko, steely-eyed and determined… Jill, sharp-edged glare above her gleaming scissors… Sakura, braced for fierce defense… and Byakuya.

Byakuya, pale but proud, shaking but still standing, and here, here in the same room with him for the first time in what felt like a century.

And Naegi hadn’t been able to stop the smile from spreading across his face. Even knowing the danger wasn’t over, even knowing that Junko still had plans to hurt them all, he couldn’t help but smile when he saw the man he loved.

Rolling through the dark stretch of space between them had taken an eternity, since he couldn’t work out how to make the chair move faster when he couldn’t see the controls. He’d just kept his gaze fixed on the narrow beam of light illuminating his lover’s face, aiming for that above anything else… until he’d finally reached him.

Even then, it had seemed impossible. Even with Byakuya standing inches away, close enough to touch, he hadn’t dared to believe it could happen. Wasn’t this how Junko had operated all through the killing game — giving them a chance at something positive only to snatch it away? It had to be another twist of cruelty, another path to lead them to unexpected pain.

“I’m sorry.”

The words slipped out before he even knew what he was apologizing for — the nightmare that had led them to this moment, the new horrors that would follow it, or some entanglement of the two.

“I’m so sorry. I never meant to hurt you, I swear. I just wanted you to be okay — I wanted everyone to be okay!”

His voice could barely pierce the room around them, let alone carry the conviction he’d wanted to convey. He’d needed to say this, to make sure Byakuya knew this, and if he didn’t speak now then he might not get another chance. They could be torn apart again at any moment.
But then Byakuya had reached out to touch Naegi’s hand. He’d touched his hand, and nothing had stopped him. The familiar weight pressed against Naegi’s wrist, and nothing came between them but the bandages twisting around injured fingers.

Warmth spread through Naegi’s veins, blooming outward from the point where Byakuya’s hand pressed against his own. His heart had lost its place in the center of his body, had relocated to the tiny stretch of skin that had taken on the core of his world.

“Can you —”

Forgive me? Remember me? Stay with me?

He hardly knew what he’d meant to ask — but the question vanished from his mind when Byakuya pushed against his wrist until his hand flipped over. “Uh, what —”

Byakuya’s fingers settled on his pulse point… and Naegi’s voice died away as he understood some part of what had to be going through his lover’s mind. For nearly two full days, Byakuya had believed that Naegi was dead. He’d been forced to watch as Naegi had been thrown into one of Junko’s executions, each of which she’d carefully designed to torment the audience as much as the victim. So many of their friends had already been lost to those executions… of course he wouldn’t have believed Naegi could somehow be the exception.

But even as Naegi realized the reason behind his boyfriend’s shaking touch, Byakuya’s expression changed. His eyes widened, new brightness gleaming through his hollow gaze. The lines of his jaw softened, no longer trying to force back an unbearable grief. He stared down at Naegi, and for the first time it felt like Byakuya was looking at him.

“You’re alive… you’re alive.”

And with those words, Byakuya — the heir who had been proud and clever and brilliant since he’d first introduced himself, who despised any show of weakness, who refused to accept anything but the best — Byakuya fell to his knees, pressed his forehead into Naegi’s hand, and wept.

And a cold knot of guilt coiled tight in the center of Naegi’s chest. It grew worse with every tear slid down Byakuya’s face, every sob that wracked his shoulders, every physical embodiment of what grief had done to the one person Naegi had never wanted to hurt.

“I love you… I love you so much.”

But not enough to protect him. Not enough to make this nightmare better. No matter how much he’d tried to help, all he’d done was cause more pain.

“I love you, Byakuya.”

And this time, he would make sure he acted like he meant it. This time, he wouldn’t let Junko trick him into betraying his loyalty. He’d hurt Byakuya so many times… but he wouldn’t do so again.

His new resolve gave him strength beyond anything that medicine or rest had been able to provide, and he raised his eyes from his boyfriend to smile at the rest of his friends.

And he found himself facing three cold glares. Fury roiled from Sakura as she clutched at her podium, as though forcing herself to obey the rule not to leave her place in the circle. Jill’s scissors flashed from hand to hand, so fast that he couldn’t tell how many spun through her fingers. And Kyoko… his best friend, the woman who’d been at his side through the entire Tragedy, the smartest person he’d ever met… Kyoko stared at him like she didn’t even recognize him.
She crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow, expression emotionless and unreadable in spite of all his memories of her. “So, Naegi… care to explain why you aren’t dead?”
“Care to explain why you aren’t dead?”

Naegi flinched at Kyoko’s question, asked in her most neutral and emotionless tone. He’d heard her use that voice countless times in another lifetime, when she’d worked as the Ultimate Detective to interrogate enemies and uncover lies — but he’d never thought she’d use it on him.

But no — he couldn’t let himself think like that. Kyoko preferred to take a cautious approach to new situations, he knew that. She hadn’t meant for her words to hurt him, and so it wasn’t fair to react to her simple question as if she’d launched an attack. She wouldn’t do that, not without a good reason.

He sighed, letting his fingers trace a few last gentle lines across Byakuya’s forehead. His boyfriend hadn’t even noticed the girls speaking, and Naegi doubted it had anything to do with his hearing loss. The trial wouldn’t stop just because they needed room to breathe, he knew that… but even so…

“It’s kind of hard to explain,” he said at last. “Can you give us a few minutes to —”

“No!”

Sakura’s snarl cut him off mid-sentence, taken aback by the fury of her explosion. He’d never seen her glare at anyone so viciously, not in old memories of fleeing from despair-stricken crowds or new memories of friends being forced to turn against friends.

“You think we’ll let you stay near him looking like that? When you’ve done who knows how much damage to him already, just by appearing?” Her podium groaned with the pressure of her fists clenched tight around its edges. “How dare you lie to him about Naegi!”

… Oh. Well, he supposed that explained her reaction. It even relieved a few of his worries to see how fiercely Sakura wanted to protect Byakuya, even if she’d misunderstood the situation.

“I’m not lying,” he assured her. “It isn’t a trick. I really did survive the execution, and —”

Silver flashed across his vision, and Naegi’s eyes focused on a pair of quivering scissors embedded in the top of Togami’s podium.

“Keep spouting that shit and you’re gonna be short a finger!” Jill grinned at him, but the cheerful expression only underscored the complete lack of humor in her eyes.

“But I —” Naegi swallowed back the rest of his protest when he caught sight of Jill’s fingers flexing to throw. He didn’t want to spur her into flinging more blades around the dark room, especially not near Byakuya. He nodded once instead of answering.

“Better!” Jill sang out brightly. And then she lunged forward, eyes flashing furiously. “Now — get away from him!”

No. No, not that. He’d do a lot of things for his friends, almost anything else they asked of him… but he couldn’t move away while Byakuya still knelt with his head in Naegi’s hand. He wouldn’t.

But Jill didn’t look interested in listening to any explanations. She glared at him with all the hatred she could muster for a fake who’d apparently showed up just to torment and mock her beloved
White Knight. With that look in her eye, he was lucky she’d started out with a warning shot instead of aiming for blood straight away.

He hadn’t decided what to do yet — but she reached the end of her patience. “I told you to —”

“Don’t talk to him that way.”

Even breathless and raw from crying, Byakuya’s voice could bring Jill screeching to a halt. She snapped her mouth shut with an audible click, watching through narrowed eyes as he slowly raised his head to glare at her. “No one is going to threaten him in front of me again. Not you — not anyone. Never again.”

Guilt twisted through Naegi’s stomach at the intensity driving those words. Sure, he was here with Byakuya now, but that couldn’t erase the nightmare he’d forced his love to endure. Nothing would fix the past two days.

And not just for Byakuya. Jill might be willing to stop talking at his command — but Sakura wasn’t. Her glare darkened when she saw Jill’s mouth close, until Naegi almost expected the force of it to send his chair rolling backward. “This has nothing to do with threatening Naegi — you don’t know that’s him!”

“Yes. I do.” Slowly, Byakuya pushed himself to his feet, struggling to manage one-handed so that he could keep his fingers pressed to Naegi’s pulse. “Do you really believe that I can’t tell the difference between my boyfriend and one of the mastermind’s tricks?”

Doubt flickered across her face, just for a moment — but she shook her head. “I don’t know. If the trick was good enough, maybe.”

“Fine.” Byakuya glanced down at Naegi. “This is still a class trial, after all — so prove it.” He smirked, in a flash of his familiar confidence. “Give them proof that you really are Makoto Naegi.”

Not even a trace of doubt that Naegi could do it — that brought warmth to his heart, even as he tried to cudgel his brain into gear. What would prove to his friends that he wasn’t just a trick of Junko’s? He could have come up with half a dozen ways if they’d all had their memories, but not now, with only Jill’s memories of the past to match against his own. He’d only officially met her during the game, so all the memories they’d shared would’ve been lost with Toko. And anything that had happened here in the game wouldn’t work, because Junko’s cameras had let her watch everything —

No… not everything. He would rather not have used this particular option, but he couldn’t think of anything else that might work. With a sigh, Naegi looked back across the circle to meet Sakura’s eyes.

“When Byakuya and I asked you about the fight I saw between you and Monokuma, you didn’t try to argue or defend yourself. You just admitted that you’d been helping him, and even when I tried to explain the rest, you said you had no excuses.”

Sakura’s jaw locked at the reminder of what she’d done, and one more knot of guilt twisted into Naegi’s soul. How many times would he have to keep hurting his friends? It might not be much next to all the rest of what Junko had done to them, but that didn’t make him feel any better about it. Nothing did, not even the practiced way Sakura pushed the pain all too quickly from her expression.

“You’re right — that’s what happened.” Some of the fury burning around her drained away,
“And we were in the bathhouse, without cameras — the mastermind wouldn’t have known.” She blinked once — twice — and — “Naegi?”

“Uh… yeah.” He tried to muster a smile in the face of her shock. “Hi?”

“So if you’re both convinced,” Kyoko interrupted before Sakura or Jill could say another word, “I’d like an answer to my question now.”

If they’re convinced… meaning she’d never doubted him. This time Naegi had no trouble beaming a smile at her. She didn’t return it — but of course they were still in a trial. Naegi tried to focus back on her words with the level of seriousness that she’d expect of him.

“You were asking why I’m not dead, right?” Naegi couldn’t help the sigh that escaped him at the thought of it. “Like I said, it’s a long story… but basically, the execution didn’t kill me. I was pretty hurt afterward, though, so I don’t really remember exactly how it happened. But apparently J — well, the mastermind — found me and brought me back to the control room for treatment.”

Naegi hadn’t quite meant to swallow back Junko’s name from his explanation — but he supposed it made sense as an instinctive move. No one else knew she was the mastermind, so it would just confuse and distract them to bring it up now. He — he didn’t want to name her, not unless he had to. And that was —

“So you’re saying you’re cute enough to make the mastermind of the killing game switch teams to play healer?” Jill rolled her eyes. “Some people just have no artistic commitment!”

“The mastermind saved you?” Byakuya asked, as baffled by the idea as Naegi still was. “Why would they do that?”

“That is an excellent question,” Kyoko said, one eyebrow arching up. “And I have one more. Why would the mastermind save you, and not any of the others?”
Naegi wished he had a good answer for Kyoko’s question. Why would Junko save him? Even after all the time she’d spent talking at him, he couldn’t figure it out. And any guesses he could come up with… he shook his head. “I don’t know why. I wish I did.”

Kyoko didn’t say anything to that — which meant she was thinking hard. Eyes locked on him, maybe, but he had no idea what she was actually seeing. She knew so much more than he did, even with her memories gone and his intact — if anyone could work out what Junko had been planning, it had to be her.

“Wait… wait a moment.” Sakura broke through his thoughts, her eyebrows knitting together. “The mastermind saved you… they let us all believe you were dead, but they *saved* you.” Her breath faltered, slow and painful, as if trying to fight against the words she was about to say. “Then… if you’re still alive… what about the others?”

*What about Hina?*

The question rang through the room, even though Sakura never spoke it aloud. Naegi winced at the terrible flickers of hope building in her expression. But still, he couldn’t blame her for wondering. After all, if he was alive, why not any of the others?

He couldn’t let her keep thinking that way. The longer Sakura let herself think there was a chance that her best friend might still return to her, the more painful it would be for her to hear the truth. He had to stop that hope from growing, before breaking it became more than she could bear.

“I’m sorry… but no one else survived.”

It would have been easier if the words had made her cry. As much as tears would have hurt, they would have been better than the slow fall of shadow in her eyes. That was what Junko wanted from all of them, Naegi realized, his own eyes burning at the sight of Sakura’s pain. For them to glimpse hope just long enough to believe in it… and then to learn it had been nothing but a cruel lie.

But Naegi believed his friends were stronger than that. They’d survived the worst nightmares a broken world had thrown at them. Even if they couldn’t remember it, they’d found a way to live through it all.

And sure enough, Sakura took a last ragged breath and pushed her grief aside. It cost her to do so, Naegi could see that in the heave of her shoulders and the lines in her brow — but she dredged up the strength to do it anyway.

“I understand, Naegi. Thank you for telling me the truth.” Sakura inclined her head towards him in a small, fragile nod. “Of course you were the only other student left.”

“Except that’s not quite what he said.” Kyoko spoke before Naegi could even begin to think of what to say. She crossed her arms as she stared at him, tapping one finger against her elbow in an unrelenting beat. “No one else *survived.*”

“Yes, we all saw the other bodies,” Byakuya said, the corners of his mouth tightening with impatience. “None of them left room for doubt. What’s your point?”
Kyoko glanced at him. “You wouldn’t know, of course. You weren’t able to enter the Bio Lab.” A fraction of a smile crossed her lips. “If you’re going to insist on my point — I’d like to hear Naegi’s explanation for how it’s possible that no one else survived when there were two missing bodies in the lab.”

**Junko.** Naegi didn’t know what his friends had seen in the Bio Lab, but he knew exactly what they hadn’t. Junko’s body would have been missing, too.

Except… would Kyoko have known that? As far as she remembered, the only “Junko Enoshima” she’d ever met had died before their first class trial. So then… what exactly was she talking about? He couldn’t be sure, not when her trains of thought always outstripped his own by far… but then again, she knew that, too. She’d dropped a trail of enigmatic questions like breadcrumbs, a trail that he could just manage to follow behind her if he gave it his all.

She didn’t know about Junko specifically… but that wasn’t quite what she was asking. He met Kyoko’s eyes again and gave her a single serious nod. “You’re right. There’s one more student who isn’t dead yet — the mastermind.”

**Junko Enoshima.**

He could hear the name ringing through his head, pulsing against his tongue — but when he tried to speak the words, his jaw clenched reflexively shut.

“What’s wrong?” Byakuya’s eyes narrowed, darting over Naegi as if he feared a new injury had appeared in the moments his attention had been elsewhere. “Did something happen?”

He would have liked to be able to say no, of course not… but… “I’m not sure.”

Naegi bit his lip and raised his eyes to the black and white robot sitting on a throne across from him. He knew he wasn’t looking at the girl he’d left in the control room… not her eyes meeting his or her mouth smiling bright and innocent… but even so, all he could see was Junko Enoshima.

“Did you do something to me?”

She laughed — her laugh, not Monokuma’s, burbling cheerily even in the bear’s robotic voice. “Aw, sweetie, you give me too much credit! What could little ol’ me do to someone like you?”

… Which definitely wasn’t an answer. Pinpricks of fear crawled across the back of his neck as he remembered how many times he’d been unconscious around her. He didn’t know everything that had happened during the Tragedy, thank God, or even most of it… but he’d heard a few whispered horror stories about what members of Ultimate Despair could do.

“Sheesh, it was just a joke! Don’t look so gloomy, you’ll get wrinkles!” She giggled again, the Ultimate Fashionista again for a moment. “Come on, sweetie, you know it’s no fun if I have to mess with your head to get anywhere! Nope, the only stuff in that little death trap is what you’ve put there yourself!”

What he’d put there? Naegi blinked, trying to understand what she meant. She wouldn’t lie, not outright, that would be cheating… so she hadn’t actually forced him not to name her as the mastermind. Which meant… he hadn’t done so because… he didn’t want to?

He didn’t want to. The moment the thought crossed his mind, he knew it was right. Of course he didn’t want to name Junko as the mastermind. How could he face the few friends he had left and tell them that one of their own had been behind this nightmare? He couldn’t.
But he had to. They had to know. He tore his eyes away from Monokuma, looking back at the four students around him —

And found them all staring at him in shock. “What the hell was that?” Byakuya demanded, his grip tightening on Naegi’s wrist.

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule Note**: Between upcoming travel and other Real Life stuff happening in the next few weeks, the next chapter will be posted on June 16. See you then!
Togami had no idea what he’d just heard come out of Monokuma’s robotic mouth, but he knew that he didn’t like it at all. That damn bear talked to all of them all the time, more than any of the students had ever wanted, but he’d never spoken like this before. It had been like it hadn’t been Monokuma talking to Makoto at all.

Which was ridiculous, because of course it hadn’t been Monokuma talking. Monokuma was a robot, Togami had proved that himself when he’d dismantled one of the machines all over the library floor. It had been someone speaking through the bear, just as it had been all along.

Except that it hadn’t been, not really. Whoever had been speaking through Monokuma, they’d always given the bear such an over-the-top personality that it was hard to remember someone else was behind him. They’d held to that illusion throughout the entire game, never breaking it even once.

Not until now… when they’d abandoned their iron grip on their character to chat with Makoto. No, Togami didn’t like this one bit, and he had to force his fingers to loosen their grip on his boyfriend’s wrist before he added another bruise to the fragile skin. “What the hell was that?”

Makoto flinched back, his eyes widening as though he’d been struck. His gaze darted around the circle, flickering towards each of the girls’ faces, even back up to the robot on its ridiculously ornate throne — looking everywhere in the room except directly into Togami’s own eyes. Only a handful of seconds, but in those brief moments the words he wasn’t saying stretched silent and empty between them.

And then Makoto’s shoulders set steady and sure, just as they had in every trial before this. His chin raised to firmness, his lips narrowed to a serious line, and his eyes landed squarely on Togami’s own. “That was her. The mastermind.”

“Her?” Togami frowned, trying to fit this new piece of information into what he knew already. Makoto had said the mastermind had saved his life for some reason… and since that had apparently included getting close enough that he could learn their gender, it hadn’t stopped there. “You saw the mastermind? And you’re sure that they — that she is one of the students in the game?”

Makoto’s head jerked down in a single nod — not much, but utterly unmistakable as anything else. And there was only one way that he could be so sure.

“Well? What are you waiting for?” Togami burst out, impatience bristling up his spine until he had to grit his teeth against it. “Who is it?”

“That is a very good question.”

Kirigiri’s words sliced through the air between them, a jolting reminder that he and Makoto weren’t the only two in the room. Togami shot her a glare, because why in the world had she felt the need to elbow her way into this conversation?

She ignored him, gaze locked on Makoto as one finger tapped a slow rhythm against the edge of her podium. “The question we’ve all been asking ever since we found ourselves in this game. Who is the mastermind?” She leaned forward. “And why don’t you want to tell us?”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Togami demanded, stepping between them before his boyfriend
could answer. He recognized this pattern, and he wasn’t about to let her get away with barking out inexplicable questions for Makoto to solve. The kind, helpful, selfless boy behind him would run himself ragged trying to do as she asked if he wasn’t prevented — and Togami had no intention of letting him do so. Not when he was already so badly injured… and not ever again after that.

Kirigiri let her gaze flicker towards him, along with a twitch of her eyebrow upwards — as if to imply that she thought he was the one behaving irrationally in this scenario! “It means that I still remember the purpose of this trial. The mastermind challenged all the other participants to solve their mysteries. Someone with first-hand knowledge of their actions would only make that goal more achievable. And that makes me wonder — why is Naegi keeping secrets from us?”

“Secrets?” The sheer absurdity of that suggestion broke through the word with an incredulous laugh. Makoto was terrible with secrets, she ought to know that as well as Togami himself did after the number of times each of them had encountered evidence of it. Even if Makoto refused to share some specific piece of information or other, his open face would proclaim it to anyone who cared to look. “Does he look like he’s keeping —”

Turning back to gesture in Makoto’s direction, Togami stopped short. Wide eyes, lines of worry creasing his brow, mouth twitching down as his teeth bit into his pale bottom lip… it all added up to one impossible conclusion. “You are keeping secrets.”

“No!” But as soon as the denial burst from his lips, hesitation flashed across Makoto’s face. “Well — sort of. I do know some things that would help, but — but it isn’t like I was hiding them! It’s just —” He shook his head, drawing in a deep breath. “It’s just hard to say it.”

Togami only realized tension had been taut across his shoulders when it eased at Makoto’s words. “Of course — talking must be difficult with your injuries.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant.” Makoto craned his head to look at the rest of the circle, so Togami sighed and stepped out of his way. “I do know who the mastermind is… and not just because of the game.” He looked around, meeting each of their eyes. “We all know who she is. We just don’t remember her.”

Togami blinked. “You mean that we met the mastermind personally during the two years we forgot?”

“Yes, we —” Makoto froze. “Wait — you know about that? How?”

“That’d be all yours truly, Big Mac!” Jill called from across the circle, as loudly as if they were several dozen yards away instead of a handful. “Took a while to work out everyone else had a bad case of memory loss, though!”

“But — you did figure it out? You have enough of your memories to tell them about — to tell them the truth?” Makoto’s wrist braced tight and harsh beneath Togami’s grip, as though suddenly developing more angles than he’d had a moment ago.

“Some of it!” Jill shrugged. “Only the parts Gloomy wasn’t around for, though. Not like I remember every little thing that happened up to 2012!”

Before Makoto could answer, Ogami’s gasp cut him off. “Wait — 2012?”

“We already established this,” Togami began, but he stopped the complaint when she shook her head.

“No, I’m aware what the true year would be. But I just realized why that year sounds so familiar.”
Ogami stared at Makoto, a frown creasing her expression. “When you woke after the incident in the library… when I questioned you to determine whether you had a concussion… you told me that the current year was 2012.”

Which was true… but Makoto shouldn’t have known that. And in fact…

“We’ve explained how we know about our missing memories,” Kirigiri said, eyebrows lifting. “So now it’s your turn, Naegi. How did you know?”
It was a good question. However much Togami might hate Kirigiri’s attitude and behavior, he had to admit that when it came to solving mysteries, she knew what she was doing. And while her question to Makoto had been rude, overbearing, and obnoxious… it hadn’t been out of line.

Because now that she pointed it out… how had Makoto known about the two-year gap in their memories? If it had just been a matter of his current knowledge, that could be explained easily enough by his time with the mastermind. Who knew what the lunatic behind this mess might have taken it into their head to say while they’d personally held Makoto captive? Knowing now made a certain kind of sense…

But knowing earlier didn’t. How could Makoto have told Ogami the correct year before he’d even had a chance to talk to the mastermind? He would have loved to write it off as a coincidence… but could they really afford to dismiss a potential clue so cavalierly?

Makoto would have asked about it, if it had been anyone else. In all the other trials, every time one of his friends had kept a secret or avoided an uncomfortable truth, he’d always asked. So with that in mind, Togami swallowed back his instinctive interruption and let Kirigiri’s question stand.

“I know about our memories because… well…” Makoto took a slow breath, and Togami knew this one was more to calm himself than from exhaustion. “Because I remember them.”

“You… remember?” Togami couldn’t quite believe he’d understood what Makoto was trying to say. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“I mean that when I woke up after the execution, I had all my memories back from the two years we lost.” Makoto met his eyes, and there wasn’t a flicker of confusion or uncertainty in his gaze. “I can remember the real first time we all met each other, and… and everything that came afterward.”

“Everything?” Togami’s mind reeled at the idea. Two years in which they’d known each other, in which anything could have happened… two years in which all kinds of horrible things had happened, according to Jill’s account of them. It had sounded bad enough from her vague, spotty descriptions… and now Makoto said that he remembered everything?

“Yes.” Makoto dredged up a smile from somewhere, though it didn’t have his usual sunshine. “We all really were friends.”

And that was what Makoto had focused on. He’d regained memories of what Jill had described as destruction beyond anything imaginable… and the first thing he told them all was that they’d all been friends with one another. Not one person in a million would react that way, and a fierce burst of warmth flooded through Togami’s heart for the boy who’d done so. It seemed impossible that so much caring and kindness could exist in the world, let alone gathered into a single human… and Togami knew he would do anything, anything, to protect this boy’s innocent soul.

But maybe he wouldn’t need to. Because if Makoto really did remember everything… if he had access to the two years that the mastermind had taken from them… “What else can you tell us, then? You must have seen clues to any number of the mastermind’s other mysteries, hints that the rest of us wouldn’t notice without the full picture. What can you remember?”

A startled frown creased Makoto’s face, though Togami couldn’t see why he wouldn’t have expected the question. “Well, I —”
“Hold on.” Kirigiri didn’t even let him finish the sentence. “You haven’t answered my question yet.”

“What are you talking about?” Togami snapped impatiently. “He just —”

“Just left us hanging before the big finish, is what he did!” Jill interrupted, rolling her eyes with undue energy. “Seriously, Makyhutie, you’re gonna have to put in a lot more effort than that if you wanna bring a girl to the endgame!”

Kirigiri didn’t even react to the crude nonsense Jill spouted, her eyes still fixed on Makoto. “You told us why you know about our missing memories now, but you haven’t explained Ogami’s point. If your memories only returned after the execution, how did you know the correct year the day before that happened?”

Makoto blinked once, then twice, until at last he slowly shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know. I don’t actually remember saying that.” He looked hastily at Ogami. “Not that I think you’re lying — I’m sure it really did happen like you said!”

“A genuine mistake wouldn’t be unreasonable after all your injuries,” Ogami said, crossing her arms as she considered it. “Are you saying that choosing the correct year was merely an unlikely coincidence?”

“Not necessarily.” Makoto’s arm shifted, like he intended to raise it to tap against his chin — but Togami tightened his grip on the other boy’s wrist to prevent such a strenuous maneuver. He glanced up to give Togami a sheepish smile before continuing. “If it were just the year, I guess it could have been a coincidence… but it wasn’t. While I was unconscious a few days ago, I thought I had a dream about all of us living normal student lives at the regular Hope’s Peak Academy — but now that I can remember everything, I know that moment actually happened. So maybe my memories have been coming back slowly for a while, without me noticing.”

“Based on a dream?” Kirigiri’s skepticism was unmistakable. “How do we know you’re not simply projecting your current memories back onto it?”

“He told me about it at the time,” Togami said at once, recalling Makoto’s wistful description of a world where they could have been happy. A world where they had been happy.

“Did he?” Kirigiri raised an eyebrow. “Then it seems very convenient for all of us that you two found the time for a dream journaling date.”

Togami’s face burned at the dig, the flare of embarrassment all the worse because he hadn’t expected such a jab from Kirigiri of all people. However much she’d gotten on his nerves out in the rest of the school, she’d never derailed a trial just to fling an insult at someone. She’d always looked down on that kind of frivolity when the other students had indulged in it. Why had she suddenly decided to do so now?

Before he had a chance to come up with a response, she was already moving on. “But in that case, why were your memories the only ones to begin returning? Why hasn’t anyone else begun to remember the past, if it’s so easy that you could do it in your sleep?”

Just as before, it was a perfectly reasonable question — but still, it struck a slightly discordant note in Togami’s mind. Was this another instance of her obnoxious habit of forcing other people to follow her deductions instead of just explaining herself… or was there something else he was missing?
Makoto didn’t hesitate to answer her, just as he always did. “No, I wasn’t the only one — don’t you remember the third trial? When we found Hifumi the second time, right before he died, he said that he’d met us all before. It didn’t make sense at the time, but now it does — somehow the attack triggered his memories, and he realized that this was actually our second time meeting!”

Togami couldn’t stop a frown at the name — since when did Makoto refer to Yamada of all people by his first name? It had to be a result of his memories… apparently he hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d called them all friends. But that didn’t make it any better to hear, not when the two of them had also been on a last name basis before this.

“Well, if attacks can bring back memories, that sure explains what happened to you!” Jill flicked the tip of her scissors in Makoto’s direction. “You’re a shoo-in for the ‘Most Likely to Get Clobbered’ vote!”

“That’s certainly true,” Ogami agreed grimly. “Not just the execution itself, but there was also the incident in the library — and before that, you were also a victim of one of Fukawa’s poisoned needles. Surely that would be enough trauma to trigger anything.”

“And that’s not even all of it,” Kirigiri added, her face as unreadable as a stone wall. “As I recall, there was one other time you were attacked, wasn’t there, Naegi?”

“You mean when you sent him to investigate the mastermind’s hidden storage room, and he got knocked unconscious?” Togami answered, cutting off whatever blander version of the truth Makoto would have given.

“That’s right.” Kirigiri didn’t show an ounce of remorse for her actions. “Which would bring Naegi’s total encounters with the mastermind up to two.” She tilted her head, one eyebrow lifting. “It almost makes it sound like you’re their favorite.”
“What the hell do you mean, ‘the mastermind’s favorite?’” Togami glared at Kirigiri. “Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?”

“This would hardly be the time for it.” Kirigiri had the nerve to look unfazed by his snarled question.

“So you’re serious?” Togami didn’t even try to hold back a scornful laugh. “Weren’t you paying attention when the mastermind nearly murdered Makoto?”

“Yes, of course. I’ve been paying attention to everything they’ve done.” Kirigiri took his question seriously, even though she must have heard the sarcasm. “In case it escaped your notice, the mastermind had already killed at least ten people by the time Naegi’s execution rolled around, but none of them got a last minute saving grace.”

“So?” Togami knew the response sounded childish, but he didn’t care. If she insisted on wasting everyone’s time with absurd questions, then why should he bother with a real answer?

Kirigiri sighed. “So that means Naegi’s execution was the only one that allowed for even a slim chance of survival. Every other method led to a guaranteed death. Why was he treated differently?”

“Why does the mastermind do anything?” Togami shot back. “It could be anything. For all we know, maybe they intended to keep him around for one of their future motives. What does it matter?”

“It matters because the mastermind always has a reason for their actions. We may not have been certain of their ultimate goal, but it’s been clear from the start that everything they’ve done has been part of some greater plan.” Her gaze slid away from him, even as one eyebrow lifted. “Isn’t that right, Naegi?”

“Oh — well, yeah, I guess so,” Makoto agreed, before Togami could warn him not to respond to a word of Kirigiri’s insanity. “I don’t think she could’ve set up this game if she did things for no reason. But — but what did you mean, I’m her favorite? Because I don’t think —”

“Then if everything so far has been a part of some overarching plan,” Kirigiri went on, as if Makoto hadn’t even said a word beyond agreeing with her, “why would the mastermind abandon their plans so late in the game to do something of benefit to us?”

Makoto hesitated, biting his lip, and for a moment Togami thought that for once he might argue with the detective he called his friend, might demand that she give his questions the same consideration he gave hers — but then Makoto sighed, and the moment passed. “She wouldn’t, that’s for sure.”

“Then if you aren’t here because the mastermind abandoned their plans,” Kirigiri pressed relentlessly on, “why? Why did you survive an execution when no one else could have? Why have you met the mastermind twice when the rest of us haven’t been able to get close?”

“He already told you he doesn’t know!” Togami snapped.

He might as well not have spoken. Kirigiri’s gaze never flickered from Makoto, as if the room had narrowed to the two of them alone. “And it’s more than just the mastermind’s most recent actions. The questions go back even further, once we start to look.”
She raised a gloved hand just beneath her chin, in the narrow beam of light shining up from her podium, and began ticking items off on her fingers as she listed them. “Why didn’t the mastermind intervene to prevent you from learning the identity of their spy among us, before they were ready for Monokuma to unmask her? Why did they let you search the headmaster’s office when they had to know our class’s student roster was hidden there? Why did they go out of their way to give you game-breaking advantages like the upgraded handbook and tickets that could circumvent doors?”

Togami opened his mouth to unleash the scathing retort she deserved — but the sight of three gloved fingers raised ink black against the shadowy room stole the words from his throat. Three questions — and no matter how sternly told himself that they didn’t matter, they were just nonsense, Kirigiri didn’t know what she was talking about — three questions he couldn’t answer.

And he wasn’t the only one. He could have sworn his fingers gripped a tense metal rod rather than a human wrist, and when he glanced down, he could see that Makoto’s normally expressive face had gone very still. Was the other boy confused… or angry… or maybe frightened…? It should have been obvious, but no matter how hard he looked, Togami couldn’t tell… and that realization dropped to the pit of his stomach in a heavy weight of ice.

“I guess if you put it like that… I guess you’re right,” Makoto said quietly, his wide eyes locked on Kirigiri as beat after beat of his heart ticked away beneath Togami’s fingers. “All of that does make it sound like —” He swallowed, and if he hadn’t been so pale from his wounds, Togami knew the blood would have drained from his face. “Like I’m her favorite.”

Togami would have given anything to be able to order Makoto to stop being ridiculous, to reassure him that the mastermind had to despise him just as much as all of the others… but he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Deeply as he loved Makoto, those feelings couldn’t drown out the logic and reason that he’d relied on throughout his life. Against his will, new arguments marshaled themselves before his eyes, supporting Kirigiri’s claim beyond even what she’d said.

Monokuma had given Makoto any number of additional hints that no one else had received. He’d been the only one to see photos of their past school life, with the exception of one time when Togami had happened to be with him. He’d been the one to learn about the reason for Kirigiri’s gloves, when they were investigating the headmaster’s office. And when they’d finally entered the data center, when they’d hooked up the television to the airwaves only to find that it was showing a security feed of themselves, Makoto had been the one to whom Monokuma had explained the truth.

And even now… even here, in the trial room… “She called you sweetie.” Togami all but spat the sour word from his throat, any endearment in the term destroyed. “Like she was pretending to be your friend.”

Makoto flinched, and the sight of it sent nausea lurching through Togami’s stomach. He’d been alone with the mastermind ever since the end of the previous trial… what had she done to him?

“I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that the mastermind does think something along those lines,” Kirigiri said, not even pausing to acknowledge the horror of her words. “After all, they even arranged a Monokuma-themed wheelchair, just for you. It must have been quite a lot of trouble to go through for that.”

Her tone didn’t change, but that last sentence made Togami narrow his eyes. “Considering that she apparently has the resources to arrange everything else we’ve seen in this game, I don’t think a single custom-made wheelchair would be too surprising.”

“Maybe.” Kirigiri gave a one-shouldered shrug, as though to suggest that it didn’t make much
difference. “But the fact that the mastermind values Naegi is undeniable. Which leads us to the next question.” She met Makoto’s eyes. “Why haven’t you told us about the mastermind?”

“Huh?” Makoto blinked, clearly taken aback. “But — I told you that already, didn’t I? Because she —”

“Used to be our friend,” Kirigiri finished. “Yes. You did say that you remember them.”

“I didn’t mean to act like I was hiding anything,” Makoto said at last, when Kirigiri didn’t appear to say more. “I wouldn’t do that! It’s just —” He stopped and took a breath, shaking his head. “Okay. The mastermind is Junko Enoshima.”

Togami blinked. Enoshima? He hadn’t expected to hear that name again, not when the overbearing fashionista had gotten herself impaled back at the start of the game. “How does that work? We all saw her killed in front of us.”

“No.” Makoto was already shaking his head. “That wasn’t really her. That was —”

“That was Mukuro Ikusaba, our resident disappointment — also known as my twin sister.”

Togami’s head jerked in the direction of the unexpected voice — and he found himself staring at an unfamiliar pink-haired girl perched on Monokuma’s throne, the robot seated on her lap. She grinned and fluttered her fingers at all of them. “Guess I should reintroduce myself, huh? I’m Junko Enoshima, Ultimate Fashionista and voice of Monokuma!”
Chapter 360

Togami stared at the strange girl who’d appeared in the circle, mind spinning as he tried to make sense of what was happening. How had he missed her approach? The darkness would have aided her, certainly, but he hadn’t heard the elevator move. Had she been hiding in the trial room — or was there another entrance that he didn’t know about?

And if so, how did she know? Who was she? The girl claimed to be Junko Enoshima, but his memories screamed that she wasn’t. Or rather — that she wasn’t the girl he’d met a few weeks ago, when all the student had introduced themselves for what they’d believed was the first time. That identification was remarkably easy to make — unlike the other shadowed podiums, a beam of light shone down on her throne to illuminate her with a bright halo. She was the only person in the room other than Makoto that he could see clearly — and he could tell that she wasn’t the girl who’d gotten herself killed at the start of the game. It almost seemed like she could be telling the truth.

Except that she couldn’t be. Even if her ridiculous claim of being Ikusaba’s twin turned out to be true, why would they have switched places? What good did it do for the mastermind if the students in the game believed they had one sister with them rather than another? It would have taken an enormous amount of effort to fake something like that — effort that would be meaningless considering that the students would have had their memories of both girls erased anyway.

No, the girl’s claim didn’t make any sense, no matter how he turned it over in his head. This lie had to mark the beginning of an elaborate new plot on the part of the mastermind, and as long as they didn’t give credence to anything she said —

“What are you doing here, Junko?”

Togami’s head jerked back towards Makoto. The other boy was looking at the girl on the throne — was she really Enoshima? — with narrowed eyes, his body pressing ever so slightly back against the wheelchair, as if to put just a little more room between the two of them. But in spite of this show of wariness, he didn’t seem inclined to call her out as a liar. No, he’d even used the name she’d claimed for herself — and considering that he of all of them had his memories back, he should certainly know.

“Aww, it almost sounds like you aren’t happy to see me!” Enoshima stuck out her bottom lip in an exaggerated pout. “Don’t tell me you’re gonna hold a grudge that I showed up ahead of schedule!”

“You — what?” Makoto blinked a couple times. Whatever he’d expected her to say, that had apparently not been it.

She seized the opportunity to continue before he had a chance to gather his thoughts. “I know what you’re thinking — who’s gonna speak up for everyone’s favorite mascot if I’m down here with you all! But it’s okay — I’ve got us covered!” She held up the robot in front of her face, its paw dangling limply in the air. “Isn’t it great that all my precious students can attend class together? Maybe it’s a sign that we’re gonna get past the remedial lessons!”

She burst into laughter — and ice shot down Togami’s spine at the sound of Monokuma’s cackle replicated in a teenage girl’s voice. That laugh — he’d know that laugh anywhere, it would haunt his nightmares until the day he died — and no matter what voice it came in, he would recognize it as Monokuma’s laugh.

And that, more than anything else, proved that she’d been telling the truth about at least one piece
of her claim — she had to be the person behind Monokuma. She was the one they’d really been
talking to every time they’d had to pretend that a stuffed bear could actually hold a conversation.

And if that much was true… what about the rest of it? Twins, switching places, everything
Enoshima and Makoto had said still seemed impossible… but maybe it was just that he didn’t have
all the information yet.

“Have you been Monokuma’s voice from the start of the game?” he demanded, interrupting
Enoshima’s attempts to contort the robot into Monokuma’s favorite innocent pose. “Have you been
here in the school with us the whole time?”

“Well, duh!” She had the nerve to roll her eyes at him, with the grating attitude of a teacher trying
to bludgeon knowledge into a difficult pupil’s head. “What, did you think I could’ve sneaked in
partway through? Don’t tell me you missed that great big lock we put on the front door!”

Apparently she really did have Monokuma’s tendency to make stupid jokes at inappropriate
moments, too. Why couldn’t that part of the bear’s persona have been an act?

“Then if you’ve been here all along, you must be the last of the sixteen students in the game,”
Kirigiri said, voicing the thought that was already running through Togami’s head.

“Mm-hm…” Enoshima flopped over against one arm of the throne, propping her head against one
hand as she stifled a yawn. “So?”

“So… wait.” Ogami blinked, her forehead creasing in thought. “Wait, if there were only sixteen
students… and Ikusaba was the one we met at the start instead of Enoshima… who was the victim
in the fifth trial?”

“Maybe they had a few extras on hand for filler!” Jill suggested, with an utterly inappropriate level
of cheer. “That set-up in the Bio Lab would’ve had the space for it!”

“And corpses don’t count as —” Ogami stopped mid-sentence, horror crossing her face as she
turned towards Kirigiri.

“Corpses don’t count as people present in the school, due to the fact that the headmaster’s body
wasn’t included,” Kirigiri finished, as disinterested as if she were reciting a grocery list rather than
referencing her father’s murder. “Yes, that’s one possibility, but I think it’s unlikely — if that were
the case, we’d have found too many bodies rather than too few. It’s far more likely that one of the
previous corpses was used in two murders.”

“Recycling is an important way of giving back to the community!” Enoshima had lifted
Monokuma to hide her face again, waving one of his paws as if to acclaim a speech. “No dead
meat should ever go to waste!”

“Don’t talk about her like that!”

Enoshima jumped at Makoto’s furious shout, losing her grip on the robot. Monokuma fell to the
ground with a clunk, the light dimming from his red lightning bolt eye as he collapsed into a heap.

Makoto didn’t even look like he’d noticed, glaring at Enoshima with the fierce anger he’d only
directed at Monokuma until now. “Mukuro was your sister — how can you say that about her?”

“I didn’t say it was —”

“Shut up!” Makoto didn’t let her finish the sentence. “She was your sister, and she loved you! How
can you talk about her that way when you killed her?”

“Um… what?” Enoshima tilted her head, blinking at Makoto like she didn’t quite follow what he was saying. “You care how I talk about her? Sheesh, could’ve fooled me!” She heaved a put-upon sigh. “Fine, fine, Mr. Tone Police, I’ll dial back the sisterly rivalry — but only cause you asked!”

The exchange made Togami’s skin crawl — but he couldn’t quite pinpoint why. Maybe it was to be expected, though — after all, she was apparently a deranged murderer, even more psychotic than the genocider. He probably shouldn’t be surprised if something about her conversation with Makoto sounded off.

Whatever it was that bothered him, the girls didn’t appear to notice it. Ogami was frowning, her attention apparently focused elsewhere. “Then you mean that it was Ikusaba’s body that was used twice?”

“Of course — hers was the only one that could have been,” Kirigiri answered, her eyes fixed on Enoshima even as she spoke to Ogami. “The spear wounds that killed her during the first trial are the only cause of death that could match up with a later victim.”

Togami nodded as he saw where she was heading. “The old wounds on the fifth victim’s body — the one who was conveniently burned to the point of being unrecognizable.” His eyes narrowed, and he spun to glare at Enoshima. “Which means that you sentenced Makoto to die as murderer of a victim who’d already been dead for weeks!”
Chapter 361

Chapter Notes

Unexpectedly short chapter due to the fact that I’ve been sick this week.

Togami could feel his fingers tensing on the one hand not attached to Makoto, coiling tightly as if they’d already wrapped around Enoshima’s throat. If everything she and Makoto were saying was true — if she really was the voice of Monokuma, the last hidden player in this horrifying game — then it had been her fault. That twisted farce of a trial, the manipulation of the vote, the false sentencing… all of it had been her doing. And even if she’d decided to save Makoto in the end, even if she’d been the one to help him… she’d been the one to send him into that execution. She’d tried her best to ensure Makoto’s death.

He’d known it already, of course. Everything had to be the mastermind’s fault in the end — all the deaths were ultimately their doing. But knowing that in the abstract was different — even thinking of Monokuma as the one running the game was different. Now he had a face, a name, a physical person who represented every nightmare he’d endured in the last few weeks. He could look Junko Enoshima in the eye and know that she was responsible for Makoto’s near-death.

And he wanted to kill her for it. He wanted to feel the crack of thin bones in her neck beneath his fingers, the desperate flutter of her windpipe against the pressure of his grip, the slow drum of her pulse coming to a halt at his hands. He wanted her dead, and the only thing stopping him from trying was the fragile weight of Makoto’s wrist in his other hand.

And then one of her delicately plucked eyebrows lifted in a perfect arch — and suddenly it was Makoto’s fingers on his wrist that kept Togami anchored in place.

“Don’t — please, don’t,” came Makoto’s whisper, too loud in the quiet room.

Enoshima snorted, an utterly unladylike sound at odds with her appearance. “Oh, come on, sweetie, it’s not like he’s gonna go off the deep end over something that minor!”

“Minor?” His voice shook with so much rage that he hardly recognized it as his own. “You think trying to kill him was something minor?”

“Well, it was — what, like two whole days ago now?” She lifted a lazy hand before her mouth in a half-hearted attempt at covering an enormous yawn. “Old news.”

“You —”

“You have a point.” Kirigiri’s calm declaration managed to drown out his furious snarl. “Naegi is alive, after all, and far better off than any of us expected after his experiences. Any anger or blame that we might have felt at his apparent death can be considered irrelevant now.”

He spun to transfer his outraged glare to her, but Kirigiri looked straight past him to fix her eyes on Makoto. And of course, of course Makoto sent her a smile back, for all the world as if he were relieved. “I knew you’d understand, Kyoko. Thank you.”

Which was absurd — what had she done to deserve Makoto’s gratitude other than be her usual
cold and stone-faced self?

Except that apparently Makoto liked her, cold and calculating as she was. Makoto appreciated her icy reaction — and he’d tried to prevent Togami from directing his rage towards Enoshima.

Togami took a slow breath, focusing on the gentle warmth of Makoto’s fingers on his wrist. As long as he could hold onto that feeling, the living proof that Makoto was here with him instead of dead and cold in the mastermind’s lair, he could force his hatred of Enoshima back ever so slightly. The barrier might be weak and fragile, trembling with every knowing smirk that crossed Enoshima’s obnoxiously made-up face, but it would be enough to hold. It would have to be.
Chapter 362

Togami could have glared at Enoshima for the rest of the trial, drowning in the dark pleasure of envisioning her death — but there would be no real victory in that. If he truly wanted to defeat her, to revenge himself on the author of every nightmare he’d had to endure, then he knew what path he had to take. They had to win the trial, save all their lives, and put an end to this game.

Determination coursed through his veins, giving him new strength to straighten his spine, set his shoulders, and lift his chin. The movement loosened Makoto’s grip on his wrist, and before the other boy’s hand could fall away, Togami caught it with his own. Twining their fingers together, he watched a smile break across Makoto’s face. Yes, this was exactly the kind of moment the mastermind had plotted to destroy… and he hoped it hit her hard to see that she’d failed to succeed. Just as he would force her to fail in every other way. No more defensive moves — no, if he truly planned to protect Makoto, it was time to take the fight on the offensive. Togami looked back up at Enoshima with a smirk. “Then it looks like we were right about the real culprit in Ikusaba’s death.”

“Hmm?” Enoshima had the nerve to blink at him, as if she hadn’t been paying attention. “Oh, you mean back when you voted for Makoto? Pretty sure I already said you got that right.”

“Not that.” She could pretend to be obtuse all she liked, but Togami wasn’t about to let her derail him into another discussion of that vote. “If Ikusaba was dead already, nothing from that trial applies any longer. The truth is that it’s just like we’ve been saying all along — the mastermind was the one who killed her.”

“Yeah?” She tilted her head. “How do you figure?”

Togami stared at her. “Seriously? You’re going to act like you’ve forgotten? You literally just said that you shot all those spears at her!”

“The spears?” She paused, tapping one blood-red nail against her lips as she thought. Even though he knew she was doing it to be obnoxious, Togami could feel his blood pressure creeping upward with every second. And of course, just before he hit his breaking point —

“Oh, right, those spears!” Enoshima giggled, bouncing up into the persona of a ditzy schoolgirl. “Yeah, I totally did shoot those, didn’t I? Man, they really did a number on her!”

“If by ‘did a number’ you mean ‘were the direct cause of her death,’ then yes,” Togami snapped. “That’s my point exactly. You shot the spears — so you’re the real culprit of that trial!”

“Really?” She braced her hands against the seat of the throne, swinging her feet freely in a way that would have been reminiscent of a little girl if it hadn’t been for the occasional too-high flip of her skirt hem. “I dunno, I just don’t see it! You’d better spell it out for me, or I just know I’ll never understand!”

Togami ground his teeth together. At this point, he would have preferred to argue with Monokuma rather than deal with his voice. What was she even trying to accomplish with these games? Had she decided that if she acted dumb enough, she’d win the trial by default? Or… was there something he was missing?

“So you’re suggesting that there’s some aspect of the situation that we don’t currently understand,” Kirigiri said, slithering her way into the brief pause before he could decide how to proceed.
“Huuuuh? Am I?” Enoshima’s eyes popped comically wide, and her jaw dropped open until her mouth was a perfect O.

“What don’t we understand?” Ogami asked, a crease forming between her eyebrows as she frowned at Kirigiri. “Were the spears not what killed her after all?”

“No, the spears wounds were definitely Ikusaba’s cause of death. And Enoshima here has admitted she launched them.”

“Then sounds like that’s a wrap! Roll credits and start the after-party!” Jill called out, when Kirigiri didn’t elaborate further.

“Awww, you’re done already?” Enoshima’s eyes welled up with sparkling tears. “Just when I finally get to join you for a trial, you want to rush off to the final vote?”

“No — we’re not done yet.” Makoto glared at her. “You aren’t going to trick us into ending the trial early. We can’t stop before we’ve solved all the mysteries.”

“No?” She tilted her head, the frivolous schoolgirl giggles evaporating like soap bubbles until all that remained was a dull monotone and empty eyes. “Too bad.”

Had that been her goal? Had she really been trying to manipulate them into ending the trial with the identification of Ikusaba’s murderer, forgetting all the other questions that were still unanswered? Were her contradictory claims of whether she had or hadn’t killed Ikusaba meant to be a decoy, taking advantage of the pattern of five trials that had ended with identifying a culprit? If they’d taken her up on her suggestion of a vote, then even if they’d named Ikusaba’s true killer, she could still go on to claim they’d forfeited the rest of the trial.

A grimace twisted his face as he contemplated it. She might have been technically within the rules with such a ploy, but still… it seemed so petty, in comparison to the other plans the mastermind had flung at them. Would someone apparently smart enough to plan out the entirety of the killing game really resort to a plan that boiled down to the class trial equivalent of “made you look!”

Well, if he was in any doubt about that, all he had to do was glance at Kirigiri to know the answer. The one steel-cold eye he could see from where the shadow split her face made it clear that she hadn’t lowered her guard in the slightest. She still felt the mastermind’s blade at their throats.

So… what was it that she’d noticed? He sent his thoughts hurtling back through the argument, trying to work out what she’d seen that he’d missed. He summoned up the memories of everything that Enoshima had said…

And everything that she hadn’t said.

She’d never denied launching the spears at Ikusaba… she’d actually said that she’d done so. She’d only objected when he’d tried to call her the culprit… when he’d said that she should have been the blackened.

And with those two opposing truths in his head, memories of the past trial flashed into his memory. First came Celeste, her gothic poise torn away as she admitted to orchestrating two murders, only one of which she’d committed with her own hands. And then there was Asahina, gunned down in the middle of the trial room because she herself had argued that Ogami’s rule-breaking had been at her instigation.

“When two people are involved in a murder, the one who comes up with the plan is the true blackened.”
He didn’t even realize he’d spoken aloud until the other students all turned to look at him.

“I don’t see how that applies in the current situation,” Ogami said slowly, eying him like she wasn’t certain what she would find if she looked too hard.

“Yes… it does sound out of place,” Kirigiri said, her gaze falling on him with all the weight of a boulder. “For that to be relevant, there would have to be someone else working behind the scenes. Someone who developed a plan that Enoshima simply carried out.”

She could see it too. There was only one way that everything would make sense… one way that the girl who’d introduced herself as Monokuma’s voice wouldn’t be the blackened.

“Wait… what are you two talking about?” Apparently Makoto hadn’t quite caught up with them yet, eyes darting between them like he was watching a tennis match. “You think there’s someone else giving orders to the mastermind?”

“Not necessarily,” Togami told him. “The mastermind could still be the one giving orders… to all of us.”

That little push was all Makoto needed. His eyes jolted wide in alarm. “No — no, I’m sure that’s wrong. Junko is the mastermind!”

“Hmm?” Enoshima met Makoto’s eyes for a startled moment —

And then flung her head back in a burst of maniacal laughter. When she straightened, hands on her hips, a tiny gold and velvet crown perched between her pigtails. “Why, that’s right! Well done — we absolutely are the mastermind!”

Togami watched her through narrowed eyes as his suspicion solidified into certainty. She was lying. Junko Enoshima was not the mastermind.
Chapter 363

Togami couldn’t believe that the idea hadn’t occurred to him sooner. Enoshima had come running into the trial to make a nuisance of herself in person, with what had really not been a great deal of provocation. Yes, Makoto had begun to explain that she was still alive, but he’d barely done more than name her when she’d popped into the room to prove him right. The mastermind would have no reason to leave her lair on the word of a single student… but a decoy would.

It even fit with sending Makoto back to them prior to her reveal. They might not have believed her if she’d simply appeared before them declaring herself to be the mastermind… but she hadn’t needed to. Instead, she’d apparently convinced him she really was the mastermind at some point while she’d held him captive — which would hardly have been difficult, since she’d pulled him out of one of the mastermind’s executions. And once he’d rejoined the trial, she’d had him as an unwittingly supporter of her lies.

Togami looked across the circle to Kirigiri, only to find that she’d focused her attention back on Makoto. No wonder she’d been watching him so closely, if she’d figured this plan out — she must have been trying to see how much Enoshima had twisted the information she’d given him.

And sure enough, Kirigiri’s next words were addressed to Makoto, rather than the grinning girl on the throne. “So even after hearing our argument, you’re taking the position that Junko Enoshima is the mastermind?”

“Well — yes?” Makoto blinked. “I mean, she told me so earlier, and…” He trailed off, nodding up at the throne where Enoshima still had her Monokuma robot sitting on her lap.

“She certainly looks the part,” Togami said, a small sneer curling across one side of his mouth as he eyed her outrageously inappropriate outfit. The school uniform look was in extremely bad taste, considering their surroundings — and the less said about those bear hair clips, the better.

“Extraordinarily so, considering that she claims to have joined us on a whim.”

“You got that right, darling!” Jill chimed in brightly. “If you’re gonna revisit crime scene, rule numero uno is to make sure you don’t get recognized!” She paused. “Or I guess you could just kill everyone you see, if you want to be really sure you don’t get caught — either works!”

“O-ho-ho! What a brilliant solution you’ve proposed!” Enoshima grinned — and mastermind or not, Togami definitely didn’t like the glint in her eye. “We don’t normally accept input from our subjects — but perhaps we should take you up on it just this once!”

“You can’t just kill us,” Togami said, before she could take that idea any further. “We haven’t lost the trial or broken any rules.”

“Oh? Is that right?” She raised her eyebrows with as much apparent doubt as if he’d told a blatant lie.

“Of course it is!” Makoto said, and Togami couldn’t help but give his boyfriend’s fingers a squeeze for how he’d immediately flung out his own arguments in defense of Togami’s logic.

“That was the whole point of having this trial — you were supposed to prove everything had been fair. Killing all the students just because you felt like it wouldn’t be fair at all!”

“Well, I guess it’s fine if you insist, sweetie.” Enoshima shrugged, letting the crown drop back off her head and roll behind the throne. “But next time one of the riffraff insults my outfit, no
promises.”

“No one is interested in your clothing.” Kirigiri didn’t give anyone a chance to argue with this pronouncement before moving briskly onward. “Since we now apparently have the opportunity to address the mastermind directly, I have a question.” She stared at Enoshima, intent enough that she could have been trying to look through the other girl. “Why did you let Makoto Naegi survive his execution?”

“This again?” Enoshima didn’t even bother to cover her mouth as she stretched it open in a jaw-cracking yawn. “Whatever. Ask your cute little buddy there for the reason, and wake me up when he’s done.” She flopped back in the throne as if she intended to take a mid-trial nap.

“So you’re refusing to answer?” Kirigiri raised a single eyebrow. “That’s interesting. Why would you expose yourself to us and join the trial if you aren’t going to speak with us directly? You could have let Naegi continue as your mouthpiece far more easily if you’d remained hidden.”

“Aww, but where’s the fun in that?” Enoshima laughed, but somehow she’d lost her gleeful confidence from mere moments earlier.

“That’s a very good question,” Kirigiri said calmly. “I’d like to hear the answer as well. After all, you’re the one who just threatened to fall asleep in the middle of your own game.”

Togami forced his face to remain still, not showing any hint of his inward smirk at Kirigiri’s words. Watching her verbally dissect someone else for once really let him appreciate just how good at it she was. Enoshima might have had an edge when she was hiding behind cameras and robots, but she should have known that the Ultimate Fashionista could never hope to out-argue the Ultimate Detective.

And sure enough, Enoshima didn’t seem to have an immediate answer to Kirigiri’s question. Her eyes flickered around the circle, so swiftly that it would have been easy to miss — easy, except that he’d been watching for a tell exactly like that one. She was hesitating, however much she might be trying to hide it — and that had to mean they were on the right track.

“What can I say — I just get bored so easily when you get off-topic like this!” Enoshima gave them the brilliant smile that must have graced the covers of a million magazines. “If you’re not going to keep my interest by trying to figure out my game, then who knows what I might have to do to keep myself entertained!”

A chill slithered down Togami’s spine at the words in spite of himself — but Kirigiri didn’t even blink. “Shouldn’t it benefit you if we aren’t discussing the right questions? Why would the mastermind want to punish us for doing something to their advantage?”

It took Enoshima just a heartbeat too long to open her mouth to reply — and by that time, Kirigiri was already smiling. “Or is the real problem that you don’t know how else to stop us from asking the right questions?”

Enoshima had to object to that, of course — they all knew it. She even put up a good show of it, tossing back her pigtails and rolling her eyes. “Oh, please — you can talk about anything you like! I just want to be sure you put up enough of a challenge!”

“Is that right?” Kirigiri asked with deceptive mildness. “Or could it be that you’re waiting for instructions about how to distract us from the truth?”

“Instructions? Hah! We take instructions from no one!” Enoshima slipped back into her imperious
attitude, one hand surreptitiously fishing around behind her for the crown she’d lost.

“Not even the mastermind?” Kirigiri asked — and just for an instant, Enoshima froze. Her gaze skittered around the circle one more time, but she didn’t seem to find whatever answers she was seeking. When her eyes found Kirigiri again, she clamped her mouth shut, the tattered remnants of her high and mighty act vanishing.

“No comeback?” Kirigiri shrugged. “That’s fine. I’d rather talk to the man behind the curtain anyway.”

“Wait — Kyoko, wait a minute!” Makoto stared at her in disbelief. “Are you serious about this? You really don’t think Junko is the mastermind?”

Kirigiri turned towards him, her expression never shifting away from the calm mask she’d shown to Enoshima. “You disagree?”

Makoto bit his lip, painfully obvious in his hesitation to contradict her directly. “Well — I guess I just don’t see how it’s possible for the mastermind to be anyone else. After all, Monokuma said that there are only the sixteen of us in the game. There isn’t anyone else left who could be the mastermind!”

“That’s not entirely true.” Kirigiri looked Makoto straight in the eyes. “You could be.”
Naegi knew he must have misunderstood what Kyoko had just said to him. There had to be some foundational link of logic he hadn’t followed, some key question that he hadn’t asked, some critical clue to the mysteries that he’d overlooked that would fit her words into a world that made sense. Because it sounded like she’d just told the whole room that *he* could be the mastermind… and that couldn’t be what she’d meant.

Except that he couldn’t see any hint that she’d been anything other than serious. The steely glint of her eyes kept all emotion locked away, and the thin line of her mouth gave away nothing. She stood ramrod-straight, facing him head-on without flinching… the way she would face any other culprit she accused.

Wind roared through his ears as the room tilted, shaking until he couldn’t remember which way was up. If it hadn’t been for the back of the wheelchair holding him upward, his body would have collapsed to the floor. The only thing he could see were iron-cold eyes, strange and unfamiliar in a face he’d thought he knew.

And then warmth shot through his fingers, sharp and anchoring. Byakuya’s hand gripped his, tight and fierce to the point of pain, fingers entangled as if he never planned to let go again.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Byakuya’s voice was low and even, not showing any of the fury that Naegi knew would be raging through his veins. “What are you trying to do?”

“I’m taking part in the class trial.” Kyoko’s eyes never so much as flickered even while she addressed Byakuya, holding Naegi firmly in her sights. “He made a flawed argument, and I pointed out a hole in it that he’d overlooked.”

Her stare bored into Naegi’s, empty of anything but ice, freezing him until he couldn’t bear another moment. He had to look away, even as the knots twisting through his stomach whispered that it was a mistake.

And Byakuya saw it all on his face, the tension in his fingers made that clear. “Oh? And what is this supposed *flaw* in his argument that convinced you to accuse him of atrocities?”

“Man, maybe we need to stop the trial for a nap break!” Specks of light skittered around the room as Jill spun her scissors through her podium’s illumination, scattering it like a splattering of blood. “You must be pretty tired if you can’t even do math in your head, darling!”

“Excuse me?” The implied insult grabbed Byakuya’s attention like nothing else could have, all the more for being so unexpected from his one-woman fan club.

“Well, you’ve gotta admit it adds up!” Jill’s teeth flashed in a momentary grin at her own pun. “Sixteen started the game, ten are out of action, so the head honcho’s gotta be one of the other six! That’s some first-grade subtraction, darling, so you’ve gotta be out of it if —”

“Shut up.” Byakuya didn’t even bother to raise his voice — Jill’s mouth snapped closed the moment he spoke. “Are you seriously agreeing with her accusation?”

“What — that sweet little Makhyutie has been the big bad boogieman behind the scenes?” Jill’s
snort of disdain sounded too loud for the room. “Come on, darling, give me credit for not being a complete idiot! Sure, Nancy Drew went for the big flashy example to point out that anyone still alive could be running the show just as easy as Double-Bubblegum up there — but no one seriously thinks your adorable little boyfriend is the one!”

She burst into laughter at the idea — but the tension quivering through the room only increased. Naegi would have loved to believe that she was right, that he’d misunderstood, that Kyoko had only meant to correct his logic rather than hurling accusations… but he couldn’t let himself slip into a comforting fantasy while his friends were in danger. Kyoko had taught him better than that.

Jill didn’t seem to notice that no one shared her amusement, though of course she’d never had a problem with being the only one laughing. Byakuya’s fingers gripped his own to the point of pain, and Naegi knew the inappropriate laughter would be like nails grating down the chalkboard of his boyfriend’s nerves.

Byakuya ought to be shushing her again right now, demanding her silence so he could dedicate his full attention to seething at Kyoko… and yet he didn’t move a muscle even in the face of so much provocation. His eyes had gone back to Kyoko, narrowing in on her as if no one else was in the room… and the look on his face turned Naegi’s blood to ice. He was going to say something — something inflammatory, something they’d all regret, something there would be no going back from — and Naegi didn’t know how to stop him —

“Wait — wait a moment.” Sakura’s voice cut through the tension of the room — not easing it, but not making it worse, either. Naegi’s eyes flew to her, and from the way she glanced round the circle, brows knit together in an anxious line, he knew she’d seen it, too. “Jill — I am not sure this is a laughing matter.”

“Yeah, cause you’re a boring stick-in-the-mud!” Jill huffed and tossed her braids. “If you can’t laugh at the idea of the fluffy puppydog of the Ultimates finding the balls to commit mass murder, you’ve got no sense of humor!”

“Naegi reminds you of a puppy?” Kyoko smiled ever so slightly, sharp as a dagger against his throat. “Full of more enthusiasm than ability, convinced every new acquaintance is his friend, so naive and trusting that you want to bundle him away from any danger — yes, I can see how you might draw that comparison, considering the way he acts.”

“Right?” Jill rolled her eyes, planting one hand on her hip. “See, even Encyclopedia-Giri gets that Big Mac wouldn’t —”

“She didn’t say that.” Byakuya’s stony face barely even shifted as he interrupted, voice a low rumble in his throat — but his fingers clutched at Naegi’s hand like he was afraid to let go. “She didn’t say anything about what he would or wouldn’t do. All she described is how he acts — or maybe I should call it the act she thinks he’s putting on.”

Breath hissed through Naegi’s teeth as if the words had slammed like a fist into his stomach. He’d caught the hidden message in Kyoko’s words, yes, but to hear it spelled out so plainly sent hot dampness pressing against the back of his eyes. He pressed his lips together, teeth biting deep into his cheek — but in spite of his best efforts, one tear broke free to trace a slow path down his cheek.

“It’d have to be a hell of an act,” Jill said at last, her skepticism plain. “It was tough enough when I had to fake Gloomy’s whole depressing schtick, and I never did that more than a day at a go! You’re saying he could he fake you all out twenty-four-seven, and no one would even guess?”
“Oh, I’m in full agreement that it’s a stupid idea,” Byakuya said grimly. “But apparently, Kirigiri is convinced otherwise. After all, this is the second time she’s brought up this accusation.”

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule note:** I will be traveling soon, so I won't have time to write or post for a couple weeks. The next chapter should be up on August 25. See you then!
Chapter 365

The second time? Naegi turned to stare up at Byakuya, trying to figure out what he’d meant by that. Kyoko had never said anything like this before — he would have remembered!

Or rather… he would have remembered if she’d said it to him. But he’d been gone, trapped in Junko’s lair, unconscious for the majority of the investigation. If Kyoko had wanted to bring up the possibility that he’d been their enemy, she would have had the opportunity. And if the bruising pressure of Byakuya’s fingers on his hand was any indication, that was exactly what Kyoko had done.

“When we met in the bathhouse, before you made your challenge to Monokuma,” Byakuya went on, his unflinching eyes leveled at Kyoko, “you told me that until his execution, you’d suspected Makoto of being the mastermind. Your entire strategy for the last trial focused on your goal of exposing him.”

“What?” The word tore itself from his throat before Naegi could stop it, ragged with an edge of a sob.

And after everything else, that was what it took to send a spasm across Byakuya’s face. He moved his thumb against Naegi’s hand, a small curve of comfort as he traced the outline of one knuckle — but even as he did so, he never looked away from Kyoko.

“You pretended that you’d come to your senses.” Any whisper of sound would have drowned Byakuya’s words into nothingness, as quiet as if Kyoko were beside him instead of at the opposite side of the circle. “You said that you didn’t think Makoto could have been the one behind everything any longer, not after everything he did during that trial.” His lip curled up in a sneer. “So the only question is whether this is a burst of insanity brought on by shock, or if you were lying to me from the start.”

Kyoko watched him for a moment, and Naegi could hear her voice murmuring from his memories. “Always give an opponent the opportunity to finish speaking before you make your argument. It’s much easier to know how to counter them after they’ve revealed their hand.”

Advice she’d given him a dozen times in the midst of class debates and friendly arguments, accompanied by wry smiles or rolled eyes. He’d been happy in those moments, he knew he must have been… but now the vicious edges of the trial left the memory cut to ribbons. He tried to focus on the memory of Kyoko with warmth in her eyes, warmth that he knew was still somewhere in her heart no matter what Junko had erased — but with the cold iron of her expression in front of him now, he couldn’t summon up any other image of the woman he’d considered his best friend.

“If you’re going to quote me, do it without twisting my words.” She crossed her arms, with only the faint tapping of one finger against her elbow to hint that she might be annoyed with them. “I told you that I no longer suspected Naegi of being the mastermind because he was executed.” One eyebrow arched upward. “It didn’t occur to me that it might not stick.”

“Then you mean… you’re conceding that Togami’s accusation is correct?” Sakura stared at Kyoko as though she’d suddenly revealed herself to be a complete stranger. “You really did believe that Naegi was the mastermind before the last trial?”

“I suspected it quite strongly,” Kyoko said, and Naegi had to remind himself that just because he couldn’t see any remorse on her face, it didn’t necessarily mean that she didn’t feel it. “I’d given
him a few tests to reveal further information, and none of what I learned painted him in a good light."

“How do you test for being an evil mastermind?” Jill asked. “What’d you do, plant a fake magazine quiz about whether you secretly want to kidnap and torture a bunch of your friends?”

“Don’t be stupid.” Byakuya didn’t even spare a glance in her direction, dismissing her attempt at humor with even less patience than usual. “She’s talking about that pack of lies she told him about Ikusaba.”

“Lies?”

Sakura’s confused voice echoed the question whirling through Naegi’s mind. He’d realized that Kyoko couldn’t really have met Mukuro, sure… but he’d thought that it was all part of some complicated plan on her part to outsmart the mastermind.

Knowing he’d been right about that much of it didn’t make him feel any better. He’d thought they were on the same side.

Sakura looked as bewildered as he felt for a moment — but then realization lit behind her eyes. “Oh, I see what you mean. Of course it must have been a lie. After all, if we just learned that Ikusaba was killed before the first trial, then Kirigiri couldn’t possibly have met with her a few days ago.”

“Obviously — though I doubt our master detective here knew that she’d based her little trick on a corpse.” The sneer Byakuya sent across the circle would have made anyone but Kyoko flinch. “She gave him information in confidence to see if the mastermind would act on it.”

“Which they did,” Kyoko broke smoothly into the conversation. “The fact that Ikusaba was already dead is irrelevant. The point is that barely a day after I’d confided in Naegi about our supposed meeting, her body turned up as victim of a murder that incriminated me.”

“And it didn’t even occur to you that the mastermind could have found out about it some other way?” Byakuya shot back. “You really just assumed that the person watching our every move wouldn’t have other ways of uncovering our secrets?”

“Such as… what, exactly?” Kyoko asked, for all the world as if she genuinely wanted to know the answer. “I’ve considered alternative explanations, and none struck me as plausible. But if you think you’ve spotted one I missed, I’m open to hearing it.”

“Of course you are.” The sarcasm dripped from Byakuya’s tone. “That’s why you waited to bring this up until the trial, when no one else would get more than a few seconds to think their arguments through — because you’re so willing to listen to anyone else.”

“I never said it would be easy to change my mind.” She shrugged. “But nevertheless, you can try if you want.” Her gaze settled on Naegi with an almost physical weight. “So, Naegi… is there anything you’d like to say?”

Any information he’d like to reveal… that was what she meant. What was his strongest defense that she would need to break down, where were the easiest weaknesses for her to target. She was assessing him like an opponent…

No. Like an enemy.

A pit opened in the bottom of Naegi’s stomach, empty and roiling. If he knew anything about logic
and debating, it was because Kyoko had taught him how to do it right. How could he hope to go up against her in a battle of wits — a real one, not the persistence-based logic he’d muddled through in the earlier trials? No matter how much he wanted to protect his friends, it was impossible.

And so he stared at Kyoko in frozen silence, all the words gone from his mouth. For the first time in one of these trials, he had nothing to say.
Chapter 366

Togami couldn’t believe that he’d been stupid enough to trust Kirigiri. Even with his mind clouded by the grief of believing Makoto was gone, he should have known better than to put any faith in her words. She’d thrown Makoto into danger too many times to count during her investigations, demanded they separate due to her unfounded suspicions, plotted against them throughout the previous trial, and eventually even voted for Makoto’s death. How could he have thought anything she said might be worthwhile?

And now — now, when it was most critical for the surviving students to work together against the mastermind — now she’d hurled yet another vicious accusation at Makoto. As bad as her other crimes had been, she’d still managed to top herself with this one. It must have taken a great deal of work to come up with an attack so terrible that not even the kindest and friendliest boy in the world could convince himself she’d meant him anything other than harm.

Because as innocent as Makoto could be at times, he was very far from stupid. That was all too obvious now, as he stared across the circle at the girl he’d still believed was his friend. He’d finally caught up with the rest of them, finally understood why Togami had been warning him about her all along… and the heartbreak in his eyes made Togami wish Kirigiri’s true colors could have stayed hidden just a little longer.

She didn’t even have the decency to look sorry about it, either. She just watched Makoto with that look she’d kept locked on her face every second of their early days here. For a while there, Togami had actually thought that she’d eased up on the mask, that he’d caught a glimpse of the person lurking behind the emotionless emptiness… but that was obviously not the case. The only thing she was hiding behind that iron mask were more lies.

And even now, she was still pretending that she thought Makoto was in any state to answer her idiotic question. Like she thought he could actually offer up a defense against her attacks while fragile, injured, and on the verge of tears. Anyone with eyes could see that Makoto was in no shape to tell her anything, and yet she still had the nerve to act like she was waiting for a response.

So he’d just have to give her one.

“Does it make you feel better to come up with convoluted conspiracy theories?”

The insult froze unspoken on Togami’s tongue as he heard the words ring out from another direction. He spun towards the unexpected voice — and found himself staring up at where Enoshima lounged on her throne.

“I mean, seriously. Could you have picked a less interesting topic to drill down on?” She tugged on one pigtail, twisting the curls around and around her finger. “Just sounds kinda boring to me.”

Togami narrowed his eyes at her. “What exactly do you think you’re doing?”

“What, disappointed you didn’t get to defend your sweet little boyfriend?” Enoshima quirked an eyebrow at him. “And here I figured that if you were gonna play knight in shining armor, you would’ve done it already. Looked to me like the poor little guy had no one left with his best interests at heart.”

Togami refused to acknowledge the brief jolt of guilt that her words sent twisting through his stomach. “Well, you were wrong. He doesn’t need your kind of help.”
“For real?” She clucked her tongue. “Well, if that’s the case, guess I should’ve left him in the wreckage, then.”

The demolished school building from Makoto’s execution flashed before Togami’s eyes, and even the sound of her mocking giggle couldn’t stop his instinctive flinch away from that terrible image.

“So now that your latest round of ‘making up dumb ideas’ is done with, I’d say it’s about time to get this trial back on track,” Enoshima declared, clapping her hands with all the artificial cheeriness of a kindergarten teacher. “You all were supposed to be figuring out what happened to my least favorite twin, remember?”

“So is this the twin you already straight up admitted to murdering?” Jill asked. “Or have you got another one stashed in a closet somewhere?”

“Wow, she’s got two twins? Any more and we might start having to call ‘em triplets!” Enoshima lifted her Monokuma robot in front of her face again, wiggling him back and forth as she spoke.

Something about that sounded off, but Togami refused to let himself get distracted down that particular rabbit hole. “You can’t hide from this one. You gave us the answer to that question yourself — so that’s one mystery we can check off our list as solved!”

“Eh? You think so?” She plopped the bear back into her lap and grinned directly at Togami, chilling as an icy finger on his spine. “That’s weird! I could’ve sworn our plucky little kid detective said she thought the mastermind did it. And huh, who was it that she was accusing again?” She tapped one perfectly painted fingernail against her lips in a gesture that Togami just knew was nowhere near as innocently thoughtful as she was pretending.

“I fail to see how that matters at this point,” Ogami said, crossing her arms. Clearly she knew a feint when she saw one, even if it was verbal rather than physical. “However we came to the answer, we have it.”

“Do you really, though? I mean, what if I was lying?” One of Enoshima’s hands flew to her chest in gasp of horror, and there was nothing subtle at all about the way she pressed into the neckline of her barely-buttoned blouse. “You might wanna be sure you have more evidence than just my word, if you wanna be safe about it!”

That definitely sounded suspicious. “You seem awfully determined to get us to talk about Ikusaba again,” Togami said, narrowing his eyes at Enoshima.

“Hey, I’m just here to keep things interesting!” She raised her hands as if in a gesture of innocence. “I mean, you know how fickle audiences can be — one lull in the action and they’ll start changing the channel!”

“But looking up at her, Togami knew that wasn’t the point at all. She was trying to distract them from something… something about that argument Kirigiri had been making about Makoto being the mastermind.

The question was why she would want to stop them from talking about that.
Togami frowned, mental cogwheels whirling furiously as he considered the implications of what he’d realized. Yes, Enoshima had revealed a potential weakness in her armor as she tried to divert them from their discussion of Makoto… but he couldn’t see how they could use it against her. Kirigiri’s theory was so ridiculous that he could hardly even bring himself to take it seriously, much less come up with a reason for one of the mastermind’s lackeys to care about it.

He needed more information if he wanted the chance to damage Enoshima with this… and there was only one way to learn more. As much as the idea made his stomach lurch with revulsion, he was going to have to ask Kirigiri to elaborate on her vicious little delusion. He’d wanted so desperately to protect Makoto from her cruelty, but now he himself would have to be the one who dragged it back into focus.

Before he could lose his nerve, Togami summoned up his most imperious scowl and directed it straight at Kirigiri. “Enoshima did have one half-decent point buried in all her idiocy. There’s still one element of the last trial that you have to explain.”

“Meaning?” She barely spared him a glance, managing to look far more disinterested than was appropriate for in a trial room.

“You were convinced that Makoto was behind the whole Ikusaba mess throughout that trial,” Togami said, “in spite of the fact that he was injured and unconscious for a good portion of the time the culprit was setting up the scene. We didn’t know Enoshima was around at the time, so you must have believed he’d been the one to do it.” He crossed his arms with the most challenging smirk he could manage. “How exactly did you think he managed it?”

Ogami frowned, considering it. “That is a good point — he could hardly have moved a body or arranged a cover-up after the injury to his arm. Even aside from the weakness and blood loss, his hand simply wouldn’t have been up to that much work.”

“What can I say — even my improv work is high quality!” Jill let out a single bark of laughter, shrill and scratchier than her usual glee. “When I take someone down, they don’t get back up easy even if I want ‘em to! If Nancy Drew decided to act like she couldn’t see the evidence in front of her eyes, well, just one more reason to ignore her stupid theories!”

In any other circumstances, Togami would have been all in favor of such a reasonable plan — but for once, he actually had a reason to hear his least favorite student out. The only trick would be figuring out how to get her to keep talking without Enoshima realizing he’d seen through her distraction attempt.

Before anyone else could respond to Jill’s rant, he shook his head decisively. “No — we’re not going to ignore her yet. Kirigiri is the Ultimate Detective — and that means she doesn’t just invent groundless fantasies. If she believed this theory, she must have had some sort of basis for it. Wrong or not, I want to know what it was.”

That got her attention. Kirigiri’s gaze finally broke away from Makoto, flicking up toward Togami’s face with piercing intensity. He’d never seen her so focused before, not even when she’d apparently thought she was trying to unmask Makoto during the previous trial. It was almost enough to start worrying him — but after a long moment, the corner of her mouth twitched upward in something that wasn’t quite a smile. “Fine, then. It’s not terribly exciting. If you really must know, I assumed he’d faked the injury.”
“Faked it? But he was hardly able to stand upright.” Ogami stared at Kirigiri, bewilderment plain. “He literally collapsed in the middle of the trial.”

“And all of that could be done by a good actor,” Kirigiri said, her counterattack as calm as ever. “None of you bothered to mention the severity of his injuries at the time, and I could see that he had actually been up and investigating for an extended time. I didn’t discover that the wounds were genuine until I was able to see the remnants of the attack in the library for myself.”

The library… Togami frowned, thinking back to their long conversation before she’d challenged Monokuma to a re-trial. They’d talked in the bathhouse, yes, but that was only after she’d insisted they go beyond the reach of the cameras. When he’d first found her, she’d been in the library, just as she claimed.

In fact… now that he thought about the timing of those moments before the trial… she must have been looking into the library right before she’d dragged him to the bathhouse and spun that bizarre story about realizing that the mastermind had tricked her. It all seemed like a nonsensical waste of time now that she was making the exact opposite argument, of course… what had she even meant to achieve by that song and dance? Was it just a way to convince him to help her demand a new trial?

Of course it had been. No matter how sincere he’d thought her to be at the time, that couldn’t have been the truth. She must have just made up a plausible story to deceive him into supporting her… even though it hadn’t worked. Even though it did seem to fit…

A sharp shake of his head sent the questions flying away to the hidden corners of his mind. He didn’t have time to try to unpick Kirigiri’s motives, not when she’d made it clear they were enemies again. He had to stay focused on her words, no matter how outrageous, if he wanted to work out what it was that Enoshima didn’t want him to know.

“So you’re saying you believed he fooled us with a fake injury?” Ogami asked, apparently not deterred from her original question. “I suppose it would be possible if we’d only seen him briefly — but we all had the chance to examine him closely. Jill and I are both familiar with genuine injuries, and —”

“I’m aware that my hypothesis was flawed,” Kirigiri cut her off. “Naegi’s injuries were real, and Enoshima set up the supposed murder using Ikusaba’s corpse. However, it’s still likely that he helped her.”

“Even though you’ve just admitted his injuries were real?” Togami demanded, hand tightening around Makoto’s in an instinctive defense of the boy he treasured. “I thought you were trying to fix the flaws, not add to them!”

“This does fix a flaw” Kirigiri didn’t look at all thrown by his burst of anger. “You’d see it, too, if you thought for a moment.” She looked up at Ogami, just out of reach beside her. “After all, it might have been reasonable enough to think the Ultimate Soldier could sneak past you to drug your coffee, but it’s much less probably that the Ultimate Fashionista would possess the same levels of stealth.”

Ogami turned to look up at the throne, grimacing when Enoshima fluttered her fingers with a coquettish smile. “It does seem unlikely.”

“But for someone already in the room, in arm’s reach of your cup, the bar would be much lower.” Kirigiri shrugged. “It isn’t a perfect theory without evidence to back it up — but since we know Ikusaba didn’t drug your coffee, there aren’t many suspects left.”
“Well… I suppose that’s true.” Ogami shifted her stance ever so slightly, as if bracing from the impact of a blow. “But it doesn’t prove anything. It isn’t a real reason to suspect Naegi of anything!”

“Not by itself, no,” Kirigiri agreed. “But I do have reasons — and so should you.”

“Me?” Ogami took a step backward, nearly out of her narrow pool of light.

“That’s right.” Kirigiri crossed her arms. “I’m sure you of all people remember just what happened when you were revealed as the mastermind’s spy.”
Kirigiri’s sudden swerve to an unrelated topic set alarm bells ringing inside Togami’s head. Why was she bringing up Ogami’s brief stint of being forced to cooperate with the mastermind? It had been a stupid mistake, yes… but during that awful time when Makoto was gone, he’d finally understood that all of them had made terrible mistakes of one sort or another during this game. At least Ogami had recognized hers and tried to correct it before it did too much damage, rather than doubling down on her poor choices — unlike certain detectives he could name.

The question had been nothing short of an attack, causing Ogami to pull back from her podium until she’d nearly left the small circle of light. With Kirigiri directly beside her, she couldn’t go far — but she’d clearly put as much distance between them as she could without actually leaving her podium. That had to be instinctive self-defense for a fighter, but with Kirigiri, the real danger wouldn’t be physical.

“I remember what happened with perfect clarity.” Ogami’s voice rumbled even deeper than usual, so low that he had to strain to hear it. “And none of it gave me any reason to suspect Naegi. In fact, the consideration and kindness he showed me, even when I least deserved it, are proof that he is one of the few truly good people who were brought to play this game.”

Togami gave her an approving nod — she wasn’t getting tangled up in Kirigiri’s arguments. “That’s exactly right. I’m sure you would have liked it if Makoto had reported to you before taking any action — but he chose to prioritize his loyalty to his friend instead.”

“Is that so?” Kirigiri raised an eyebrow at Ogami. “It’s true that he showed compassion by confronting you privately about your betrayal rather than unmasking you in front of all of us — but the real question is why he was in a position to do so in the first place.”

Ice shot down Togami’s spine as he realized where she was going with this. He had to stop her — but Ogami was already asking, “What do you mean?”

Which was exactly what Kirigiri had wanted. “Naegi was the one who discovered that you’d been working for the mastermind. Did he ever explain how he found out?”

“Yes, he said that he observed my initial attempt to fight Monokuma. That was the night after Celeste’s trial — when I decided I couldn’t work against you all any longer.”

“A fight that he was only in a position to observe due to your manipulations,” Togami added, before Kirigiri could try to twist what had happened. “You tricked him into investigating a hidden area that got him attacked by the mastermind. The only reason he was wandering around during nighttime was because he was unconscious before that.”

“So he says… although I spent much more time in that hidden room than he did, and no one attacked me for it.” Kirigiri shrugged. “But the point is that while Naegi was alone and without any corroborating witnesses, he managed to acquire key information known only to the mastermind that changed the entire dynamic of how we all interacted with one another.”

A hiss of breath drew Togami’s gaze down to the boy at his side, and his chest tightened at the misery on Makoto’s face. He’d hoped that, as upset as Makoto had been by the accusations, he
might at least be too unhappy to listen to the rest of the argument… but it seemed that wasn’t the case. He’d been listening to every word, and it was hurting him as much as Togami had feared.

And there was nothing Togami could do to prevent it — not while they were locked in the middle of a trial, fighting for their lives. Not with the mastermind’s mouthpiece waiting for them to slip up on one side, and their supposed ally taking aim at their weak spots on the other. His arms ached to wrap around Makoto in the comfort they both needed, and cold air pressed against the place on his chest where Makoto should be resting his head. Pressing their hands together wasn’t enough, nowhere near enough — but it was all he could manage before the trial tore his attention away again.

“Are you saying that you believe Naegi discovered my betrayal as part of a plot?” Ogami sounded quite appropriately skeptical of this idea, her voice all but disembodied as she still held herself beyond the reach of the light. “That seems unnecessary. The mastermind had no trouble revealing the truth about me themselves, without relying on a student’s testimony.”

“In fact, I seem to recall that at the time, you made the exact opposite accusation,” Togami added. “Or have you forgotten the especially nasty tantrum you threw because Makoto wouldn’t rat out his friend?”

Encouraging the other students to turn against them, forcing them to separate just when he’d promised to keep Makoto safe — for someone who seemed intent on calling up every one of Makoto’s errors in judgment, she had a lot to answer for herself. The mastermind might have planted the seeds of the conflict that ended with Fukawa’s poisoned needles, but Kirigiri certainly hadn’t helped.

Not that anyone could tell to look at her, an iron wall of unflinching control as she waved his words away like gnats. “If that’s what you recall, then your memory is flawed. The conflict didn’t start because of who revealed the spy’s identity — the real root of it was the fact that you didn’t tell anyone else. The two of you investigated on your own, learned the truth, and then Monokuma told us what had happened.”

“We were going to tell you that morning — it’s just that Monokuma made sure we never got the chance!”

“Maybe. It’s easy enough to say that when we’ll never know.” Her eyes slid away from his, locking back on Ogami. “Regardless of whether that’s the case, I have a question. During your fight with Monokuma, when Naegi apparently observed you — did you notice anyone approaching?”

“She doesn’t —”

“I’m talking to Ogami.” Kirigiri cut him off without even a glance in his direction. One eyebrow quirked up at the girl still standing too far from her for the light to reach. “And so?”

Ogami sighed. “I didn’t notice anyone. However, Monokuma was an extremely challenging opponent, so I did not have the attention to spare for another other than our battle.”

“And what about the person piloting Monokuma?” Kirigiri asked, before Togami could inform her that what Ogami did or didn’t see proved nothing. “Do you think that they would have found the battle equally difficult?”

“I hope that I presented some level of threat.” A shift in the set of her profile suggested she might have shrugged. “However, I imagine the difficulties would have been quite different. I had to pit
my muscles and reflexes against the strength and speed of a very well-designed robot — but the person piloting the robot would have had to respond to my attacks without being physically present. A great deal of the progress that I made was due to using those disadvantages against them.”

“Such as?”

“They could only watch the fight through their cameras, all of which are plainly visible on the walls,” Ogami replied at once, more confidence finding its way into her voice as she spoke of fighting. “I made sure to use moves that would be visible from different camera angles, whenever possible.”

“I see.” Kirigiri nodded. “So the pilot would have had to scan all the camera feeds in the area in order to keep up with you.” A cold glimmer of a smile crossed her face. “Then it seems exceptionally unlikely that they would have missed Naegi observing you — but they didn’t do anything to stop him.”

“I doubt they were concerned about maintaining her cover once she turned on them,” Togami shot across the circle.

But she shook her head. “No — the mastermind decided to reveal their spy in the most vengeful way possible. If Naegi were truly uninvolved, they would have every reason to believe he would share the information much more gently, and no reason to believe he would wait as long as he did. And yet they left him to his own devices, until his actions laid a perfect groundwork for them to exploit. Even if Naegi really did just happen to be walking past your fight at the right moment, the rest of it doesn’t make sense.”

Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: No new chapter next week, due to company descending upon me! Next chapter should be up Sunday, September 29. See you then!
An unfortunate accident or a malicious set-up… Togami couldn’t decide which was more likely. Had Makoto’s discovery of Ogami been an unexpected twist of events that the mastermind had managed to turn to their advantage, or had they orchestrated it from the start? He didn’t believe in mere coincidence, not when everything fit together too well — but on the other hand, it hardly seemed any more likely that the mastermind would have spent so long laying groundwork for an elaborate scheme to make Makoto look suspicious.

And yet one of the two must have happened, however bizarre it seemed. Unlikely or not, Makoto had found his way to the gym during a key moment of battle between Monokuma and Ogami — and his enemies were willing to take full advantage of the fact.

“All you’ve said is that the mastermind knows how to manipulate us.” Togami kept a steady grip on Makoto’s too-fragile fingers, doing his best to convey his unshaken trust through touch alone. “The only person that incriminates is her.” He waved a dismissive hand at where Enoshima had settled back against the throne, eyes closed as if she were preparing to take a nap.

“That’s true,” Kirigiri agreed, with an ease that made Togami’s eyes narrow. “If we’re going to talk about who is directly implicated by that specific action — yes, you’re correct in saying that there is no direct proof of Naegi’s involvement.”

The words she hadn’t said rang through his mind as clearly as if he’d heard them. “Then you believe you can prove it indirectly?” He curled his lip in a vicious sneer. “There must not have been much competition for Ultimate Detective if you win your cases with circumstantial evidence.”

And she didn’t even blink, damn her. Was he losing his edge with insults?

“Circumstantial evidence can still contribute to a solid case. Hints that mean little by themselves are indications about where to look for definitive proof.” She raised an eyebrow. “How many clues are you willing to write off as coincidence before you’re willing to consider them logically?”

His glare should have set her obnoxiously bland face on fire, if there was any justice in the world. “I am perfectly capable of considering events logically. Coincidences don’t prove anything no matter how you spin them. Circumstances could make any one of us look bad, if you found the right angle. The one fact you can’t make disappear is that Makoto has never once taken any actions against any of us!”

“Can’t argue with that!” Jill agreed, shooting him a disturbingly cheerful grin. “Okay, sure, I didn’t see the start of this whole deal, but I’d bet a new pair of scissors that Gloomy saw the same sugar-sweet intentions I do!”

“That’s… true.” Ogami’s voice rumbled from the darkness, speaking more to herself than the rest of them as she felt her way through the thorny facts. “That’s true. Naegi has never done anything to hurt anyone. He’s good — like Hina. Even if this game made all their actions end horribly, they never meant it. They’re both truly good.”

Togami wasn’t quite as convinced that Asahina had been so pure and good as Ogami apparently believed — but if a few rose-tinted memories of the dead could defend a living ally from Kirigiri’s
attacks, he had no intention of arguing. The straightening of her silhouette, the gleam of hair moving closer to the light, all of it told him that this had to be the right choice. Kirigiri might have found a weakness in Ogami’s guilt over her past choices, but it wasn’t enough. As long as she could hold her memories of her beloved friend, it wouldn’t be enough to break her.

“Are you sure about that?” Kirigiri’s voice sliced through that thin strand of comfort like a knife in the dark. “How can you be certain you know how anyone meant their actions to go? All we have are the actual consequences of our decisions, and the way each of us has chosen to react to them.”

“What do you mean?” Ogami asked, taking the bait before Togami even realized he needed to stop her.

“Naegi learned you were the spy, and we all ended up at one another’s throats.” Kirigiri raised a single finger. “He put Alter Ego in a position to hack the school network, and the mastermind found out.” A second finger… and finally, a third. “He was the last to speak with both Fukawa and Asahina, before each of them acted in desperation.”

Makoto’s fingers went slack in his own, and Togami could not look down at the boy beside him if he wanted to keep his mind clear enough to argue. “You can’t seriously believe he meant for any of that to happen. He’s been fighting harder than anyone to stop all of the killing!”

“And it’s remarkable how often he’s had the exact opposite effect.”

“That was not his fault! No one could have predicted Fukawa and Asahina would —”

“What did she say?”

The words screeched to a halt on Togami’s lips, and his eyes shot to the dark shadows from which Ogami’s voice came. Nothing but a silhouette, lesser darkness against the greater — but even so, he could see that she’d turned to look across the circle, straight at him.

No… no, her body angled just a little to one side, and her head tilted down too low to meet a standing person’s gaze. She wasn’t looking at him.

“What did Hina say to you, Naegi?”

Not the bladed edges of Kirigiri’s questions, not the laughing mockery of Enoshima’s, not a hint of any malice or cruelty. Those would have hurt Makoto, yes, but at least they would have been attacks. But this… all Ogami’s question held was pain, a familiar grief Togami knew he would recognize until the day he died. A grief that had so miraculously lifted from his soul… and that never would from hers.

Her question hung in the air, and Makoto didn’t answer.

Chapter End Notes

Schedule note: And unfortunately, I'm going to have to leave it there for a couple more weeks. I have two big work events coming up back to back that will leave me wiped out -- and the trial scenes take a lot of work for me to write. The next chapter will be up October 20. See you then!
Naegi knew he had to say something to Sakura. Her question should have been so simple, just a simple recitation of an event that had happened mere days ago. It ought to be easy to marshal his thoughts, open his mouth, and order the words on his tongue. Telling the truth would ensure Hina’s memory wasn’t twisted, the kindness of those last words they’d shared would bring Sakura some small comfort as she remembered her dearest friend, and participating in the trial would ease the worried lines creasing Byakuya’s forehead. There was every reason to speak, and none at all to stay silent.

But the weight of Kyoko’s eyes bore down on him, and his throat closed against any words. She was watching him, waiting for him to make another mistake, planning how she could most effectively tear him apart. Anything he said now, no matter how well-intentioned, would just place another weapon in her hands.

Not that she needed another. She had so many ways to attack already, with every one of his horrible mistakes locked vividly in her steel memory. Every time he’d overlooked what should have been obvious, every tangle of words he’d said to make bad situations worse, every stupid decision he’d made in a futile attempt to stop his friends from suffering… with all the disasters his actions had brought on his friends, it was no wonder Kyoko had decided he had to be an enemy.

“Stop asking him those questions.”

Shadows pooled over him in a wave of merciful darkness as Byakuya moved forward to scowl out across the circle, blocking the meager light that had been able to reach him. He couldn’t see clearly now either, his own vision blocked as well, but he didn’t need more than a silhouette to recognize the fierce protectiveness that would be flashing across his boyfriend’s face.

“It won’t accomplish anything. You know that he’d be more than willing to tell you at any other time — but he can’t when he’s like this.”

Like… this? Did he really seem so badly off that even in this dark room, everyone could tell? His friends had always said that they could read his thoughts right from his face… but surely, surely that couldn’t be true now. Could it? The thought that anyone who looked at him could see the mess of dread tangling through his insides sent nausea shuddering through his stomach. His imagination shied away from picturing how those thoughts might have twisted his face, his shoulders curling in to make himself as small as possible.

“He can’t?”

Naegi flinched back from Kyoko’s voice, colder and more vicious than he’d ever known she could be.

“Surely you haven’t forgotten that all of our lives are riding on the outcome of this trial. This is our only chance to solve the school’s mysteries and save our own lives. And you’re saying that even with all his beloved friends at stake, he can’t answer a simple question?”

She meant for the mocking words to illustrate that he didn’t have anyone else’s best interests in mind, he knew that… but that didn’t make it any less true. Sakura needed his help to regain her equilibrium after her memories of Hina overwhelmed her so badly. Everyone needed him to speak up and find some way to refute the false conclusion Kyoko had drawn. Sitting here in silence was selfish.
But would speaking be any better? After all the harm he’d caused by trying to follow his best judgment, how could he justify speaking up now? For all he knew, this was just another chance for everything to go wrong. Maybe telling Sakura about that last conversation with Hina would only make the situation worse. After the way all his other decisions had backfired, it would make sense.

He dropped his gaze to his lap, staring down at the shadowy outlines of his legs disappearing into darkness. There was nothing he could say, even if he found a way to force himself to speak. Nothing that wouldn’t make everything worse. He locked his jaw in place, letting the silence of the room answer for him. At least that emptiness couldn’t do anything wrong.

“Is it that terrible?” He didn’t want to hear anything else, not now… but Sakura’s quiet question pierced through to his heart. “Is what you discussed with Hina really too horrible to share?”

“Maybe he just forgot!” Jill said, with an overbearing energy that made him shrink back against his wheelchair. “Who’d remember a whole conversation from weeks ago, huh? Good memory or not, it’s not like he’s got a playback feature!”

“Oh, is that all you’re going on about?” Junko heaved a put-upon sigh, and Naegi’s blood froze in his veins. “Geez, you should’ve said so sooner. Let’s get this over with so you can all get back to the real mysteries!”

Light blazed above their heads, slamming into eyes that had adjusted to the darkness with all the force of a punch. Pain hissed through Naegi’s teeth as he shut his eyes too late, and the sound echoed back to him from his friends around the circle.

“I’m scared!”

Even with his eyes closed, Naegi could never mistake Hina’s voice.

“I’m so scared I’m going to lose her! She’s the best friend I’ve ever had — I know I haven’t known her that long, but it’s still true.”

The words she’d spoken in the laundry room rang through his memory at the same time they blared out from the speakers.

“And now — now, if everyone believes what you and Togami were saying, they’ll all hate her! We’ve lost so many people — I can’t lose Sakura on top of all that. I don’t know what I’d do!”

The pain in her voice clawed at his heart, more than he’d heard when she’d first spoken the words. He knew what she’d been feeling, now that he could remember the reality of her friendship with Sakura. She’d spoken with the grief of a two-year friendship forged from joy and tragedy, not the mere days she’d believed. She’d cared so desperately about Sakura… she’d felt so alone and helpless.

And what had he said to her, in that vulnerable state?

“You’re not going to lose her! We can get everyone to believe in Ogami, I know it! There’s still a way out of this. There has to be!”

He cringed to hear his own words now. Had he really thought that was any kind of encouragement?

“I don’t see how. She won’t even talk to me anymore, did you know that? She finally got mad at me this morning for yelling so much, and now she’s avoiding me. I wanted to apologize, but I haven’t been able to find her. I got so caught up in fighting that I didn’t even care what she wanted. I
wasn’t even listening to her.”

“No — Hina, no, that wasn’t true!

But the recording played on, and Naegi could hear his own voice drowning out Sakura’s words.

“Well, you can listen to her now. You’ve been spending so much time with her every day – you must know somewhere she always goes. And maybe if you work things out with her, you’ll be able to convince her to explain herself to everyone else. I think if she told everyone more of the truth, in her own words, it would do a lot to make them trust her more.”

Had he really said that? No… no, he couldn’t have, not really. He couldn’t have said that, not when later that night… that night…

“Yes – yeah, I think you’re right. I need to figure out a way that I can definitely talk to Sakura, before I do anything else — and then maybe I need to talk to everyone else, too.”

No, no, don’t do it, don’t listen — the words caught in his throat, demanding to be freed but impossible to say. He shouldn’t have let her go, shouldn’t have said any of it, shouldn’t have encouraged her to make the last mistake of her life.

“Thank you, Naegi.”

Kyoko was right. It had been his fault.
As soon as the recording began to play, Togami had known it would be bad. The mastermind wanted them to see this recording, and that meant it had to lead deeper into this nightmare. He’d braced himself for the worst as the conversation rang through the trial room.

But even knowing all that, it hadn’t been enough to prepare him for the scene that unfolded on the screen above their heads. Makoto had urged Asahina so kindly, so earnestly, so hopefully to work toward a reconciliation with her friend… and it was impossible to disentangle this moment from the knowledge that it had led to her death.

It hadn’t been Makoto’s fault — Togami knew it hadn’t. No one could have predicted that Asahina would take those words as encouragement for breaking and entering, or that her plan to circumvent the locked doors would fail so miserably. Makoto couldn’t possibly have intended for any of it to happen.

But that didn’t make it look any better. And if it was hard for him to keep that in mind, with his limited involvement with Asahina and his bone-deep faith in Makoto’s innocence, how would it look to the other students?

“That’s what she thought?” Ogami’s voice shook with intensity, but Togami couldn’t pinpoint whether it was grief, rage, or some other emotion entirely. “That’s what Hina thought, before she sought me out? That’s what she said?”

Even in the darkness, he could see the tension screaming through her body, her shoulders vibrating down to the fists clenched at her sides. Her weight shifted, and ice slid down his spine as he realized she’d poised herself to lunge away from the podium at any moment. And different trial room or not, he knew the guns would still be hidden somewhere, just waiting for one of the students to put a toe out of line.

“There’s no need to overreact to a simple video,” he said, flinging the words across the circle before she could try anything even stupider. “It’s no different from what we already knew must have happened. She admitted as much during that trial.”

“No — no, she never said any of that. She never said that she thought I was angry at her, or that she believed I’d misunderstood her feelings. She — she never —” Ogami’s voice broke, her head slumping down.

Was she crying? In the middle of a trial? Disbelief tightened his jaw, as he readied a barb about behavior befitting the strongest person alive in order to jolt her back to her senses.

Except… would that help? A few days ago, he wouldn’t even have taken the time to wonder. But now… now that he’d lived through the nightmare of believing Makoto was dead, now that he’d felt what it was like on the other side of that abyss… now he wasn’t sure. Challenges and taunts had their place as highly effective techniques, but perhaps they weren’t the most appropriate for every situation.

But then, what did that leave? How was he meant to approach her when kindness and gentleness were needed, rather than ferocity? Those were Makoto’s forte, the weapons he knew how to wield so effectively that they hardly even seemed to be attacks… but with his hand frozen in Togami’s own, there was no chance that he might intervene.
“Whatever Asahina did or didn’t say is irrelevant at this point.” He tried to summon up the memory of what other students had said in this kind of situation. “She hardly needed to make a specific declaration about it — her argument that she was the one behind the scheme to circumvent the locks made it obvious that she cared for you quite sincerely. If she were here, I’m certain she would assure you of her affection and insist you fight to save yourself.”

Even to his own ear, his words rang weak and hollow against the vibrant fullness of the recording. What did it matter if he invoked memories of Asahina and spun what-ifs about how she might have reacted, when the conversation they’d just heard made it all too clear what she had done?

Not that it mattered. The words barely even seemed to reach Ogami, suggesting that anything he might have said would have been equally ineffective. She seemed unable to hear any words other than whatever echoed inside her head.

Better to focus his attention elsewhere for the time being. Togami’s gaze flicked to the side, where Kirigiri watched her with the same impassive stare as always. “Now that we’ve all seen what happened, you have to admit it doesn’t prove anything. Whatever you might want to believe, you can’t point to a single instance of ill intent in that conversation.”

“And you can’t prove otherwise.” Kirigiri’s counterattack flew out so smoothly that she must have had it planned. “You don’t know the intent behind his words either, no matter confidently you believe that you do. All we can judge by are the results of their conversation — and we all saw that Naegi’s encouragement was the critical element that convinced Asahina to proceed with her plan.”

“So what? It’s not Makoto’s fault her plan was stupid. He never told her to go break down a door.”

“Maybe not in so many words — but he certainly armed her with the means to do so.” Kirigiri raised an eyebrow. “Or have you forgotten whose toolkit Asahina used? For someone who didn’t want anyone hurt, Naegi seems to be remarkably involved in making it happen.”

“He didn’t make anyone do anything!”

“Neither did Monokuma.”

The comparison slapped Togami across the face, so unexpected that it took him a moment to understand what she’d actually said. His eyes narrowed as the words sank in, and he realized that apparently she could find new ways to be cruel to the boy who’d trusted her. “You can’t be serious.”

“It’s the same argument he uses — he might provide the motivation, but we’re the ones who make the choice to kill.” She shrugged. “You can’t deny the similarity.”

“That doesn’t mean that —”

“She wouldn’t be dead.” A low rumble cut them off, more growl than human voice. The darkness shifted, and Ogami stepped back into the tendrils of light at her podium. Her eyes blazed across the circle, burning straight into Makoto. “If he hadn’t said those things to Hina, she wouldn’t be dead.”
Junko tapped her nails lightly on the side of her throne, not bothering to listen to the rest of the argument. There was no point paying attention to all the blustering, not now that Ogami’d finally caught up with the lesson. It had taken a lot more work than she’d wanted to put in, but at least her precious friend had managed to grasp that cute little Naegi’s encouragement had been the catalyst behind Asahina’s death.

Freaking *duh* he had. Junko huffed out a sigh, switching up her tapping mid-pattern. She did love her darling friends, of course, but they sure could be dense sometimes. Didn’t they *see* the way one action led into another and another and another until it all spiraled together into the inevitable destruction of anyone and anything they’d cared about? Ugh, she just didn’t understand how it took *so long* for other people to drag their brains through these connections.

And *god*, the tapping of her own nails was just the most obnoxious sound she’d ever heard, every click clacking against the throne in exactly the pattern she’d set no matter how many swerves she threw in the mix. Why did everything have to be *so boring*?

And in time with the final click, right on the cue where she’d planned for it to be, Ogami’s voice blasted into a shout.

“He *should* have known! If Naegi intended to say such dangerous words in a fraught atmosphere, he should have realized that they might cause harm! One of the most important lessons any fighter must learn is how not to injure others — and we’ve all seen the power his words can have in the trials. If he meant to urge Hina to action, he had the responsibility to consider the consequences!”

“*His* responsibility? What about *hers*?”

And there came Togami’s defense, predictable as clockwork.

“Asahina knew those toolkits came from Monokuma, and she heard him tell us that only the keys could open the locked dormitory doors. Was she really so incapable of putting those two facts together to see that there would be measures in place to prevent us from using one to circumvent the other?”

“*Don’t you dare* insult Hina!”

Junko stifled back a yawn as her friends glared across the circle at one another. She didn’t even have to look at them to know the precise extent of the angry aura crackling out from Ogami, or the minute twitches of tension through Togami’s clenched fists. Same old, same old… sheesh, it almost made her miss the days when she could interrupt the tedium with Monokuma’s tired quips!

“It’s hardly an insult to state simple facts!”

“Hina tried her best to get around the lock — just because you can see a flaw in it now, it doesn’t mean she should have! She was desperate, after I left her alone and Naegi pushed her into acting!”

“Desperate or not, Asahina chose to act without doing the work of putting the key facts together. That *happened*.”

Their glares blazed at one another again, and Junko began the mental countdown. Three… two… one…
“You’re right — that is what happened,” Kirigiri broke in, just as the numbers hit zero. “Asahina did act without thinking through all the consequences — and anyone who knew her well enough could have predicted that’s what she would do.” She narrowed her eyes, and poor Naegi flinched back against his chair again. Man, it was a good thing there was padding on the back of that thing, or he could’ve really hurt himself!

And it looked like Togami had finally spotted the point Kirigiri wanted to make, because he clamped his mouth shut instead of making the obvious counterargument. Naegi shouldn’t have known Asahina anywhere near well enough to make that kind of prediction, since they’d all had their memories wiped.

Except that Naegi’s memory wasn’t erased anymore. She could see the attack poised at the forefront of Kirigiri’s being, just waiting for an opening to launch it. Naegi had all his memories of their years at Hope’s Peak back now, and they only had his word that he hadn’t had them all along. And even if he were up to making that argument, Junko had already put a whoooole lot of work into making sure his former bestie wasn’t in any mood to listen to her number one suspect.

“So you’re saying Mahkyutie here used secret knowledge from the last two years to trick the idiot swimmer into getting herself shot into Swiss cheese?”

And there went Jill, leaping to her White Knight’s aid in defending his sweet little boyfriend — which only proved that genociders these days just couldn’t live up to the hype. What a disappointing serial killer, to let her crush live happily with someone else instead of crucifying them both in their own blood. She could have taken out the competition by flinging a pair of scissors across the circle — but instead she just planted a hand on her hip and went blithely on.

“Have you even been listening to him? Because if you haven’t, I can fill you in. Sure, we didn’t get a formal introduction till I had my big come-out here, but I still got a few sneak previews back in the day. And there’s no way the kid I saw is up to that kind of mindscrew!”

“But someone is.” One thing she could say for Kirigiri, the girl didn’t miss a beat. “Whoever is behind this game has been manipulating our every move from the start — and that requires intimate knowledge of how we all think.”

“Anyone with the resources to run this game could easily have arranged for surveillance,” Togami said, but she was shaking her head before he was through.

“No, observation wouldn’t be enough. It would be impossible without actually interacting with us, both individually and as a group — and the only time all the participants in the game were together were during those missing two years.” She raised an eyebrow at Jill. “And unless you recall someone introducing themselves as an evil mastermind plotting our eventual demise, whoever it was must have hidden their motivation and pretended to be harmless.”

“Hey, it’s not like I saw everything! I don’t know what you all got up to with Gloomy!” Anyone else watching probably thought Jill sounded confident as ever, but Junko could hear Kirigiri’s words hitting home. She’d started wondering, even if she didn’t believe it yet. And that meant it was only a matter of time.

Junko stole another peek over at her favorite new playmate, evaluating the darkness in Naegi’s eyes. Oh, he looked miserable, all hurt and broken from his friends turning on him. The silly boy might even think despair had taken hold of him.

But it hadn’t. Not yet. The shock of it had knocked him down, but she could still see the light of hope glimmering in his heart, ready to burst forth in a blaze of glory when challenged.
She couldn’t wait to see the expression on his face when that light was finally extinguished.
Togami glared at Jill, her lackluster defense of Makoto even worse than if she’d stayed silent. As the only other person left with an intact memory, she ought to have far more effective arguments to marshal for his innocence. “You seriously expect us to believe that in the entire two years we all spent together, you saw nothing to indicate someone might be plotting against us?”

Jill shrugged, with far too carefree an attitude. “What can I say, darling? As long as my magnificent White Knight takes center stage, I’m not gonna waste my time looking at the supporting cast!”

Useless — but he shouldn’t have expected any better, not really. She’d done nothing but stalk him throughout their entire time in the game, so why would he think she’d done anything differently back at Hope’s Peak? Probably she’d been even worse, since back then there would’ve been no reason for her to keep her hands clean. He shouldn’t have wasted a moment thinking that a crazed and cold-blooded serial killer would be any help with any memories other than her own disturbing fantasies about him.

Except… that wasn’t quite true, was it? His memory nudged at him when he would have dismissed her entirely, bringing up flashes of those pain-blinded moments in the garden. Even the echo of that darkness made his stomach churn with horror, and if he moved his wrist wrong, he could still feel the jagged edges of his own despair slicing through his skin. He’d given up then, done his best to tear himself out of a world that had gone so wrong — and Jill had been the one to stop him.

She’d saved his life. A serial killer who took pleasure in seeing attractive men die, a stalker who’d been unhealthily obsessed with him, the one person who should have taken the greatest joy in his demise — and she’d saved his life. He couldn’t just dismiss her as useless.

He narrowed his eyes at her, trying to see past the red eyes and leering grin. The shadows and dim beams of light changed the planes of her face if he stared, just enough that he could see a young woman not too different from the other students in the circle. She hadn’t wanted to play this game any more than the rest of them… and if he was looked at her actions instead of her attitude, she’d done more to help them resist than many of the others. He had to admit that he believed she would fight against this if she could.

“Is there anything you do remember that might help?” he asked, before she could start chattering some idiocy that would erase the minuscule seeds of goodwill. “If you were paying attention to me, you must have spent some time watching Makoto as well. Did you notice anything that would prove that Kirigiri’s theory is nonsense?”

Jill tilted her head, and for a moment he could see echoes of the Ultimate Novelist lingering in her. “Can’t prove a negative, darling!”

“I don’t need you to tell me that!” He knew how logic worked, of course he did — that was the problem with arguing for someone’s innocence. It had been far easier when he could just attack a culprit with full conviction in their guilt. “How did he act back then? You should at least be able to say that!”

“That’s an easy one — everyone knows you get the same Big Mac at any dining establishment!” Jill laughed uproariously. “Pretty sure a direct meteor hit wouldn’t change our boy!”

“So you’re saying that there was no difference between Naegi with and supposedly without his memories?” Kirigiri asked, slithering her way into a conversation that had almost been going well.
“That’s an interesting point.”

“Yes, it’s terribly strange that the same person would behave similarly over the course of two years.” Togami rolled his eyes. “You say that’s evidence now, but you’d say it proved the same thing if he’d had a major personality shift.”

“Both would be unusual behavior,” she agreed, without any shame at such a contradictory claim. “A dramatic shift in personality without a clear cause would mean that something significant had happened that no one else noticed — such as when Fukawa and Jill initially switched places before we fully understood them. But a lack of change over a two year period, during which he would have experienced a changing life far outside the realm of a normal high school student’s world, is also suspicious.”

“Then you mean… a normal person should have changed?” Ogami’s eyes locked on Makoto, even though she spoke to Kirigiri — and the narrow light of the trial room etched shadows deep into her face. “He shouldn’t have been the same, after — after everything that happened?”

Everything — meaning the whole two years they’d lost, not just that first year of a normal high school life. Icy fingers ghosted a chill down his spine as he remembered the rest of what Jill had told them. The world had fallen to ruin during those two years, lives destroyed and civilizations crumbling. Someone could plausibly remain fairly unchanged through high school — but could the same be said of the Tragedy?

Doubt gnawed through his stomach, just for a moment — a sour acid that ate through his insides to leave him mangled. When he saw the facts laid out so plainly like that, it seemed impossible. He could almost think that —

*No*. Togami gritted his teeth and clamped his fingers tight around Makoto’s hand. No, he could not almost think that Makoto really had behaved suspiciously. He refused to do so. No matter how suspiciously Makoto might have acted back in those memories they’d lost, there would be a reason for it. He would make himself believe it if he had to.

“It doesn’t seem realistic, does it?” Kirigiri went on. “Even apart from Jill’s account, think about the conditions we’re under now and all the strain the rest of us have been under. We’ve all been affected by what we’ve experienced, adopting different ways of thinking or altering our approaches to the world — but Naegi hasn’t.”

Her words snaked into his head in spite of his best efforts to ignore them, persistent enough to make him miss the trial when he’d had both ears deafened instead of just one. “You’re accusing him because he didn’t break under the pressure? That’s ridiculous!”

“Is it? Or is it ridiculous to think that someone would react to betrayals and murders by insisting that we should all be friends?” Her lips seemed to twist just a fraction at that last word, so slightly that it might have been only a trick of the dim light. “He kept talking about trust and encouraging us to work together — and that’s what let the mastermind’s motives work every time.”

He glared at her, trying to ignore how the logic resonated with the patterns of his own thoughts. He’d believed something similar during those first two trials, leading to his short-lived attempt at hiding in the library. Human interactions made the game more dangerous — and urging everyone to work together only put them all at greater risk.

“Then — then you truly believe it was on purpose?” Ogami’s fists clenched at her side as she stared at Kirigiri, but the furious aura blazing from her was directed at someone else. The pressure of it pulsed across the circle, battering to get past Togami as it aimed for the innocent boy beside
him. “That when he talked about — about friendship, and trust, and — and all of it — he only did it to get us killed?”

“No!”

But she didn’t even seem to hear Togami’s snarl, all her attention zeroing in on the tiny, fragile boy frozen in the wheelchair. “He did it on purpose?”

Was that really what she believed? After everything she’d said about believing Makoto to be good? Fury boiled up through Togami’s throat, too fierce for any coherent words to break free. If he opened his mouth, he’d scream his rage at the girls across the circle, no matter how little good it would do.

“Man, if that’s what you think, you really are going to get us all killed!”

Jill’s wild laughter ricocheted through the room, a chaotic whirl of madness that broke through even Ogami’s single-minded concentration. All eyes shot towards her — and even though she grinned back at them, no amusement at all lurked in her gaze. “Because if you all think Mahkyutie there is trying to trick you, you’re crazier than your friendly neighborhood serial killer!”

“Is that so?” Kirigiri crossed her arms and met Jill’s red gaze head-on. “I’m surprised to hear you say that, considering how many times we’ve seen him manipulate you.”
Jill’s eyes narrowed at Kirigiri’s words, silver flashing at her fingers, and for a moment Togami thought she would let the scissors fly across the circle. But in the end, she only let the blades spin in a harmless circle instead of impaling Kirigiri in the middle of the trial. He let out a breath he hadn’t even realized he was holding, not sure if it was from disappointment or relief.

“So are you solving a different mystery from the rest of us now, Nancy Drew?” she asked, her tone light and cheery enough to send chills down his spine. “Cause I’m pretty sure no one’s been manipulating me in this one!”

“You can call it something else if you like.” Kirigiri shrugged a single shoulder, as if the enraged murderer glaring at her hardly mattered. “But the fact remains that you attacked him twice without actually killing him.”

“What, you wanted to see him all opened up with a few hard blades jammed in all the right places? Didn’t think that was your thing!” Jill’s tongue flicked out in a revolting leer. “Sorry, but I can’t help you out — I’m only into my darling White Knight these days! My little fling with his personal cutie was never serious, and I’m not gonna go all the way with him unless they’re both offering a two-for-one special!”

“Absolutely not,” Togami snapped, even though Kirigiri didn’t even acknowledge his interruption. He wasn’t sure if Jill meant a double murder or some equally horrifying sexual encounter, but he was not going to let her contemplate either.

Jill flashed a quick grin at him, and that was somehow even more disturbing than when she ogled him. “No worries, darling, I know you’re not the sharing type! Which is why,” she spun back towards Kirigiri again, “I never meant to kill his boyfriend!”

“I’m aware of that,” Kirigiri said calmly, with no outward evidence that she had to be exerting considerable patience. “You’ve made it perfectly clear that you didn’t actually want him dead in either instance. However, even knowing it would annoy Togami, you attacked Naegi anyway.”

“Sure, cause he pissed me off!” Jill tossed her braids. “Of course no one’s as smart as master, but I know Big Mac’s bright enough to learn running his mouth about Gloomy just ends in pain for everyone!”

“You’d think he would have understood that after your first warning,” Kirigiri said. “When he and I met you in the garden, while we were exploring the fifth floor for the first time, you made it perfectly clear that you didn’t want to discuss Fukawa. Anyone else who had a pair of scissors thrown at his head, resulting in a deep cut to his ear, would have known that it would be dangerous to bring her up again — but from what you’ve told us about the library, that’s exactly what Naegi did.”

“He wanted to help her,” Togami interrupted, drawing Jill’s attention back to himself before she could make another stupid joke in response. “He knew she was upset — it isn’t any more complicated than that. Are you seriously surprised that his first reaction was to try to comfort her?”

“Considering the threat that it should have presented to his own personal safety? Yes.” She didn’t even have the decency to look embarrassed at such an outrageous claim, though it wasn’t like he’d expected anything better from her. “As I understand it, Jill had locked herself in the library at the time, so she wasn’t in any immediate danger. She’d made it quite clear she wanted to be alone for a
“while — isn’t that right?” She raised an eyebrow in Jill’s direction.

“I dunno, depends if you call barricading the door a mixed message!”

“No, I’d call that extremely easy to understand. After all, that kind of blockade should have been
difficult for anyone other than Ogami to get past.”

“Even I might have had some trouble, between the furniture and the door,” Ogami offered,
forehead creasing in thought. “Knowing how it was constructed now, I believe I would have been
able to manage it, but it’s a risky endeavor to break down a barricade without observing the entire
structure from the start. I would have preferred to avoid it unless we had reason to think there was
danger on the other side.”

“Plus you’d decided to take your toys and go home!” Jill flicked the point of her scissors at her for
emphasis. “You weren’t up for a play date any more than I was.”

“So as far as you were concerned, the door should have been secure,” Kirigiri said, with the air of
an unassailable conclusion. “You deliberately set up a situation where you would be alone. And the
only reason that you weren’t was because one person out of the entire group had a way to get
around a barricaded door.”

Makoto’s hand would have dropped to hang nerveless and limp at his side, if Togami hadn’t held it
firmly in his own. “That had nothing to do with Jill. Monokuma forced those tickets on Makoto
long before Jill even thought about hiding in the library!”

“That’s certainly what he told us. It might even be true.” She shrugged, as though it didn’t matter.
“Regardless of when and how he acquired those tickets, the point is that out of all of the players in
the school at that time, Naegi was the only one to have them. And he didn’t tell anyone else that he
had an edge that the rest of us didn’t even know existed.”

“Using it to get into a room another student was actually occupying at the time hardly qualifies as
keeping it secret,” Togami scoffed. “Even if he’d intended to do so, entering an apparently closed
room would be a clear giveaway that something was wrong.”

“Oh?” Kirigiri’s eyes flicked back to Jill. “Then you immediately questioned Naegi about his
unexpected appearance in the library? You demanded a full accounting of his actions and refused
to proceed until he’d explained every detail to your satisfaction?”

Jill snorted. “Sounds way more like your idea of a good time than mine! Not like I really cared
how he got it — I just figured it was that bear up to some screwy shit again!”

“And Naegi didn’t correct your assumption.”

“I imagine he had other concerns at the time,” Togami cut in. “Considering that this was about the
time he found himself face to face with a vicious scissor-wielding killer.”

“Aw, darling, keep dropping those compliments my way and you’ll make me blush!” Jill clapped
her hands to her cheeks to hide the pink tinge, giggling like a schoolgirl.

“The scissors are exactly my point,” Kirigiri said, responding directly to Togami without
acknowledging Jill’s commentary. “He used his advantage to get himself locked in a room with a
volatile killer, and then repeated the actions that had previously provoked her into an attack.”

“So not only is he the mastermind now, he’s an idiot as well?” Togami would have rolled his eyes
if he dared take them off her. “If the situation really had developed the way you described, he
would’ve been trying to get himself killed! It only makes sense for Makoto to do something so
foolish if he’s the person he appears to be, who genuinely believes the best of everyone.”

“Not quite. It also makes sense if he knew Jill didn’t want him dead. She just admitted as much,
but she’s repeated it several times — including in the trial we’d just gone through right before this
particular incident.” She shook her head. “No, it would have been a risky move, but not necessarily
foolish. Not when everyone else in the school had every reason to save his life.”

“You’re saying Mahkyutie wanted me to give his arm an air hole?” A single burst of laughter
snorted from Jill, dark and low rather than her usual high-pitched cackle. “Pretty sure that’s not his
kinda kink — and even if it was, he could’ve asked my White Knight to hold the scissors instead.
Bet master would’ve done it if he’d whipped out the puppy dog eyes! Would’ve been a way safer
way to get it done, too, without the falling furniture and head injury!”

“The attack happened as it did for a reason,” Kirigiri said, apparently deciding to proceed as if Jill
had made her counterargument in a rational manner. “Since the situation put Naegi’s life in danger
and confined him to bed, it provided him with a clear alibi for Mukuro Ikusaba’s trial.”
Togami frowned at Kirigiri, trying to follow her train of logic. “You’re saying that you believe Makoto deliberately incited Jill’s attack on him as preparation for Ikusaba’s falsified murder trial? That’s ridiculous. Even putting aside the fact that we know he didn’t kill a girl who’d been dead for weeks at that point, getting attacked didn’t accomplish anything. There would have been simpler ways to get an alibi.”

“Ways that would let the mastermind control everyone’s whereabouts while the fake murder scene was being assembled?” Kirigiri raised an eyebrow. “Considering the grim mood of the school after Fukawa’s trial, it would have taken something rather significant to convince all of you to behave in the ways they needed.”

“The frozen Monokuma robot worked well enough for that,” Togami reminded her. “In hindsight, it’s easy enough to see that someone planted it to keep us occupied, and eventually to lead us to the crime scene.”

“Which was only possible because Naegi’s injury also required someone’s presence. With two locations needing someone in attendance, you were forced to split up — creating possible opportunities as you moved, communicated, and traded places.” She crossed her arms. “Or do you imagine that the bomb you found in the robot could have gotten upstairs to mutilate the body if you hadn’t had an incredibly important reason to leave both the library and the crime scene unattended?”

His lips tightened at the implication of incompetence. “The bomb could easily have been there already. If they had access to bombs in the robots, they could have had extras on hand. If the bomb hadn’t been present when I first found the body, I could have unmasked it and exposed the entire plan.”

“No — no, you couldn’t,” Ogami said, her hands clamping down on the edges of her podium. “You wouldn’t have had a chance. The room had been filled with poison at the time. If you’d remained long enough to examine the body, you would have inhaled enough to cause serious harm.”

He recalled the overwhelming rush of dizziness, collapsing to his knees and fighting to drag himself free of the poisoned room. It had nearly taken him in spite of everything he’d done. Even if he’d done his best to hide how close a call it had been, the others knew enough to piece the truth together. He couldn’t pretend that it had happened any other way.

“The room could only be entered safely after the poison was neutralized,” Kirigiri went on, seizing control of the conversation again while he was distracted by his own thoughts. “But in order to make us believe the falsified cause of death, someone had to experience the poisoned air before it could be counteracted. This setup ensured that only one person would be available to encounter the poison initially, and that you would then have a good reason to leave the room unguarded while you checked on Naegi and Ogami.”

“One person?” Jill demanded. “Forgetting about something?”

“No, but I think you are. After all, this would have been right around the time that someone locked
you up.” Kirigiri glanced up at Enoshima, who had decided to sit cross-legged on the throne with her elbows propped on her spread knees to support her chin. “It should be clear now that the person voicing Monokuma would have been the one behind that attack, too. With Monokuma out of action to distract Togami, it would have been a perfect opportunity.”

“So I got taken down by a short-skirted big-boobed schoolgirl?” Jill jerked back, staring up at Enoshima in what Togami considered to be excessively dramatic horror. “No way! It should at least have been an adorably straight-laced detective boy who could put up a heart-thumping game of cat and mouse before letting me slip through his fingers!”

“The frozen Monokuma, the poisoned room, and the attack on Jill all had to be deliberately planned,” Kirigiri said, continuing her argument before Jill had even finished speaking. “The highly-structured plan to set up a fake murder wouldn’t have worked if even one had happened differently. But those elements only worked correctly due to everyone’s initial reactions to the attack on Naegi.” She raised an eyebrow. “If all the rest fit together so well, can you really say the first piece of the puzzle is a coincidence?”

“Yes.”

“Naegi had the trip ticket to ensure he and Jill would be trapped alone,” Kirigiri spoke over his furious objection. “He knew exactly what to say to provoke her into attacking him, and he had confirmation from her own mouth that she didn’t want to murder him. And the timing was exactly right to set up the conditions that would put the false murder plan into motion.”

“Not if I’d actually killed him, it wouldn’t’ve been!” Jill’s scissors shot out to point across the circle, glaring like she was imagining the scissors stabbing right through Kirigiri’s heart. “He and I were trapped in there all by our lonesome, remember? That bear locked us in so we couldn’t leave, or you can bet I wouldn’t have stuck around to hear him yap! And sure, I’m the best there is when it comes to cutting bodies open, but that doesn’t mean I can go both ways!”

Kirigiri raised an eyebrow. “But it didn’t stay shut. When you tried to leave the room to retrieve Ogami, you were able to do so.”

“Nope — it rattled once, then opened right up!” Jill shrugged. “Probably just broke or something.”

“If so, you would have been killed,” Kirigiri pointed out. “The rule against breaking locked doors was still in effect. So if the door was truly locked while you and Naegi were in the library, there’s only one person who could have opened it.” She looked up at Enoshima. “So? Why did you decide to unlock the library door so Jill could fetch help? Why not allow him to die and then hold a class trial for his murder?”

“Huh? Me?” Enoshima jolted up, eyes popping comically wide with all the alarm of a student caught sleeping in class. “Oh, uh… I dunno. I guess it sounded like a good idea at the time?” She gave a sheepish little giggle.

Kirigiri looked just as unimpressed with this response as Togami felt. “You’re claiming that you decided to use a flexible interpretation of the rules that favored someone’s survival — on a whim?”

“Well, it’s not like there would’ve been any fun in a trial with an obvious answer, right?” Enoshima said, just a touch too brightly. “I mean, what would the folks at home think if they were stuck watching you all twiddle your thumbs after working out whodunnit on the first try?”

“But the complexity of a murder hasn’t been a consideration of the game before this,” Kirigiri shot back without missing a beat. “We’ve been forced into the trials in order to foster distrust among us
and to make sure we would have to work against one another — not because anyone behind it actually cared whether or not we solved the cases. The mysteries were never the goal.”

“Uh, pretty sure they were, hon.” One hand on her hip, Enoshima looked down at them all with the most obnoxiously condescending expression Togami had ever seen. “Kinda went through a whole hell of a lot to make sure they went according to plan, you know?”

“No, they weren’t — you said so yourself.” Kirigiri met Enoshima’s eyes without flinching, too confident in her deductions to let the whirlwind personality shifts faze her. “When we asked you about why you were doing this, about the purpose behind the killing game, it would have been the perfect moment to refer to the mysteries — but you didn’t. You said the purpose was despair, and nothing else.”

“Well, naturally despair is the ultimate goal.” Enoshima rolled her eyes with far more drama than necessary. “We forced you to solve mysteries as a means to that end. But more intricate mysteries would breed more suspicion and doubt amongst you, which would bring you more despair in the end than if you’d found the answer right away.”

“Would it? I’m not so sure. The trials have been difficult, of course — but it’s all been the same type of challenge. Every time we’ve faced it, we’ve grown more determined to defeat the uncertainty, bound more tightly together in the face of doubt. We could prepare ourselves for those trials, as much as anyone could. But,” she raised a hand, “what would have happened if we’d been faced with another kind of trial instead? What if rather than the unknown, we had to walk knowingly into a horror that we could see coming?”

And in spite of himself, Togami could see it — what it would have been like to face the trial she’d suggested. If he’d found Makoto broken and gone, if he’d seen Jill smeared with the blood she’d used to stage his lifeless body. If he’d had to stand at a podium and stare across the circle at the girl he’d known had been the one to take away the boy he loved. The slow march towards the inevitable, the pointless arguments circling round and round what they couldn’t avoid, and the grief gnawing deep beneath it all.

“No.” The word escaped before he could stop it, his fingers fumbling back to Makoto’s pulse point with a clumsy desperation. Only when he felt a heartbeat against his fingertips did he breathe again, eyes closing in a brief moment of relief. Makoto might be frozen and afraid, too shattered by betrayal to move — but he hadn’t gone completely. “God, no.”

“That should be proof enough that it would have had quite the effect.”

His eyes snapped open again at Kirigiri’s words, and he caught the tail end of her gesture towards him. She didn’t even bother to glance in his direction, though — she’d kept her sight zeroed on Enoshima. “You had the opportunity to cause that kind of despair — but you passed it up. You opened the library door to let Jill save Naegi’s life.” Her eyes never wavered, a statue-still hunter’s waiting for her target to flinch. “Why?”

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule Note**: Since next week is Thanksgiving here in the US, I won’t be posting next Sunday or the week after. Next chapter will be up on December 15. See you then!
Chapter 376

Togami knew Enoshima wouldn’t have an answer for Kirigiri. He didn’t need to see her toss her ridiculous pigtails or roll her eyes to tell that much. If Kirigiri had any claim to her Ultimate Detective title at all, there wouldn’t be so much as a crack in her accusation. Enoshima really had behaved in a bizarre way, considering her stated motives.

Not that he would have wanted her to let Makoto die — of course not. Even knowing Kirigiri had manipulated his reaction to make a point, he couldn’t stop the shudder scraping down his spine at the thought. Whatever else Enoshima might have done, he had to be grateful that it led to her sparing Makoto’s life. But that didn’t explain why she would have wanted to do so.

“Ugh, fine. If you’re going to be all annoying about it!” Enoshima flopped back against her throne, crossing her arms tight against her chest. “He wasn’t the one I was gunning for, all right? I’d put allllll that work into finding a decent use for Mukuro’s waste of a body, and I didn’t want another corpse screwing up the plan!”

Togami frowned. It wasn’t a bad explanation exactly — she’d been the one behind the fake murder, and that plan had been too intricate to set up on the spur of the moment. If she’d gone to all the trouble of preparing a complicated and hard-to-solve crime, it made sense that she wouldn’t want it derailed at the last second by an easily guessed coincidence. But still… he couldn’t shake the feeling that a piece of the puzzle didn’t quite fit.

“Whoa, whoa, so you’re saying you weren’t aiming at Mahkyutie from the get-go?” Flashes of silver darted all around Jill as she spun her scissors in frenetic whirls. “You didn’t wanna let me off him in the library — cause it would mess up the trial to get him axed?”

“Of course not,” Kirigiri answered, before Enoshima could drag them down another rabbit hole of stupidity. “That trial was never intended to target Naegi — the available evidence made that clear from the start. It’s exactly what I thought when I first learned about it — the mastermind meant to use that trial to get rid of me.”

She’d claimed as much before, when they’d talked amid the string and paper tangle of her thoughts in the bathhouse — that when she’d first learned of Ikusaba’s death, she’d believed it to be an attack against her. That she’d responded so harshly throughout that trial because as far as she knew, she’d been fighting for her life.

Of course, in the end she hadn’t been the one who’d lost the trial. She’d escaped unscathed from the voting… and the one who’d been dragged off to a horrific execution had been Makoto. Nothing could ever erase that nightmare. But… if he thought about it… he supposed he could see how she might have come to such a conclusion about the mastermind’s intentions. Even if she was —

“Right.” Enoshima twirled a strand of her pigtails around one finger, eerily reminiscent of the way Kirigiri used to toy with her braid. “I mean, it must be pretty obvious now, huh? You were being a pest and ruining the game for everyone — of course we had to get involved!”

His eyes nearly shot wide open at those words — but years of controlling his expression and a lifetime of self-preservation intervened to lock his face into unmoving neutrality. But inside his own head where no one else could see, he could feel a grin of vicious triumph. We — that was what Enoshima had said, the word slipping in almost unnoticed. We had to get involved — meaning that the decision hadn’t been hers alone. She’d all but admitted that another mastermind had pulled her strings.
“Shame it didn’t go according to plan, though.” Enoshima didn’t even seem to realize what she’d let slip, chattering on and on without missing a beat. “I mean, I was all set to throw you into your own personalized execution chamber — but noooo, you had to screw that up, too! I mean, come on — you barely even got to see the crime scene, how’d you manage to pull any decent arguments together?” She rolled her eyes. “Man, it’s a good thing I can swap the executions at the last minute, or it would’ve been an even bigger pain!”

“Oh?” One of Kirigiri’s eyebrows flicked up, a mere fraction of a motion. “So you’re saying that you didn’t originally intend to use Naegi’s execution on me?”

“Oh, no way!” Indignant anger sparked from Enoshima’s glare, as she raised a red-nailed hand as if to claw at her opponent. “What kind of poetic parallel would there be in throwing a nosy loner detective into the collapsing school execution? Yours would’ve been way more appropriate — with a nice slow conveyor belt leading you back to a big squish of an ending!”

“What do you mean, squish?” Ogami asked, though her tone suggested that she wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to know the answer.

“Oh, you know… squish like a big ol’ hunk of metal would’ve turned her into a Kirigiri pancake.” She dropped her shoulders, looking down as if a terrible weight of grief had settled on her shoulders. “It would’ve been terrible… blood and guts and bones all smushed together on the bottom of the machine. I’d never have gotten it clean again.”

Togami grimaced at the repulsive description — if he’d still had any doubts remaining that Enoshima had been the one speaking for Monokuma, this quelled the last of them. Who else could be so grotesque and childish in the same breath?

The thought of the end she’d planned for Kirigiri made his stomach churn, in spite of the many times he’d envisioned her death himself. He might have wanted her gone for any one of a dozen reasons, from revenge for Makoto’s suffering to just keeping her out of his way — but the executions went too far beyond simple death. After seeing so many others, after Makoto’s… he couldn’t wish such a thing on anyone. Not even her.

“Sounds like a rookie mistake to me!” Jill’s cheery enthusiasm rang too bright in the dark room, especially after Enoshima’s disturbing description. “All the fancy machines might look cool fresh outta the box, but they’re way too much of a hassle long-term. But these,” she flourished multiple pairs of scissors from each hand, “are portable, easy to clean, and available in large quantities!”

“But they’re pretty impersonal, right?” Enoshima heaved a sigh, shaking her head sadly. “How could I send off my classmates using the exact same method for each of you? Like you’re all just interchangeable parts instead of precious and irreplaceable individuals who will leave a unique hole in the world when you’re gone forever?”

“Then you had executions designed for each of us?” Togami regretted the question as soon as he’d asked it. The idea that the mastermind had created an execution targeted specifically at him — that even now it sat hidden somewhere in this very building — sent chills through his veins.

“Of course — one for each of you, plus a few just in case of surprises. I mean, it’s not like anyone knew for sure who would break and start killing when. And you know, it’s a good thing all the plans were in place from the start.” Her lip trembled as if she were about to cry. “Just imagine what would’ve happened to poor Leon if his plan hadn’t been ready, and he’d gone through all the despair of his trial only for a boring and generic death.”

Kuwata’s face flashed through Togami’s memory — both the terror as he realized what was about
to happen and the battered wreck that had remained when the baseballs finally stopped. A feeling that could almost be pity snaked through the back of his mind as he considered that a so-called *boring* death might well have been a relief.

“So everyone had their own execution method prepared?” Kirigiri asked, once again drawing them all back to what she considered the important point. “You knew in advance what each of us would experience?”

Enoshima shrugged, which seemed to be as close to a confirmation as she was likely to give in her current depressed state.

“And if the trial had convicted me, I would have been crushed beneath some sort of machinery, presumably decorated to be ironically meaningful. Yes, that does fit with the other executions we saw.” She crossed her arms. “Baseballs pummeled Kuwata to death in front of a window, where all of us had to watch. Owada spun around in a metal cage, showing us the results of the inhuman pressures. Celeste had a truck fall directly on top of her, in a completely unmissable manner. And Asahina — well, the guns might not have been a planned execution so much as a punishment for rule-breaking, but nonetheless it happened here in the circle, directly in front of us all.”

Togami narrowed his eyes, running through the options of where she might be trying to go with such a recitation of the deaths so far. They all knew how the other students had died — what did she get out of repeating it?

She didn’t give him more than an instant to ponder it. “All the executions were designed to demonstrate death beyond a doubt — all of them except one. The method designed for Naegi’s execution is the only one that doesn’t show us a dead body at the end — the only one that allows for the possibility that the culprit might survive.”
“That’s not true!” Togami snapped, scowling at Kirigiri. “You know perfectly well that it isn’t. She,” he jerked a hand towards Jill, “went through an execution, and I think we can all agree she’s still breathing. Not to mention that Ogami survived her execution, even though the guns were ostensibly aimed at her.”

“Well, sure — I can’t go around killing whoever I want.” Enoshima managed to answer before Kirigiri could, in spite of her slow and dragging tone. “Only Toko Fukawa tried to kill anyone, I told you that already. I had to have a method that could take her down without anyone innocent, or it wouldn’t be fair. Same with the Ogre — if the verdict says Hina’s getting punished, I can’t exactly bust someone else for that same crime.”

“Meaning that you admit that at least two of the executions were designed to let people survive them.” Kirigiri nodded. “And both demonstrated very clearly that the purported victims hadn’t actually been killed when the execution stopped. Once again, the methods left no uncertainty regarding the outcome — only Naegi’s was different.”

“Wh-wh-whuh?” Jill tilted her head as if this statement had confused her, though Togami doubted that was actually the case. The genocider had proved several times that she was much smarter than she liked to pretend… and her eyes gleamed far too sharply for his liking. “Are you saying that we’ve been calling these things ‘executions’ all this time when there was really an option to chicken out on the real killing deal?”

“Not for everyone,” Kirigiri corrected. “Out of all of the students in the game… only Naegi had the chance to live. And our hidden sixteenth student made absolutely sure that he would.”

“I getcha, I getcha!” Jill began tossing a pair of scissors up and down, not even looking to make sure she caught them safely. “You’re talking about whatever went down after the trial — when Bubblegum up there dragged him out and took him home like a lost little puppy!”

A single nod was the only response Kirigiri gave.

The scissors flew up again in a flashing arc. “When they played a serious game of doctor to make sure he survived.”

Kirigiri dipped her head once more, and this time she didn’t raise it again. Shadows spilled across her face until her expression was completely obscured.

Up and down, up and down, the scissors spun with a wild madness. “When she saved him — while Master Byakuya thought he’d died.”

Her head snapped towards the two boys — and her blood-red eyes chilled Togami to the bone as they landed on Makoto. His instincts screamed to yank his fragile, injured boyfriend out of that glare, to pull him close and wrap him in a protective embrace that could shield him from any danger — but he forced his arms to remain still. Moving Makoto now would only hurt him further… and it wouldn’t do anything to dispel the threat aimed at him.

“All that time that my darling White Knight was falling apart, when he walked through the school like he was the one who’d become a ghost, when he tried to go where I couldn’t follow him —
Makoto Naegi was alive.”

No nickname — she hadn’t used one of her ridiculous nicknames this time. And for some reason, that sent a fresh spike of terror through Togami’s heart.

“Of course Makoto was alive,” he sneered, shoving the fear back behind a veneer of arrogant sarcasm. “He’s here now, isn’t he? So where else do you imagine he would have been a few hours ago?”

Jill shrugged a shoulder, never missing a beat with the bladed death flashing around her. “Sorry, baby, but the tough questions aren’t my thing. You want someone to figure out the past, better give Nancy Drew there a call! Only thing I know is where he wasn’t.”

Her hand snapped forward in time with her words. “He wasn’t in that elevator when that execution ended — when you couldn’t even walk out of that trial room without help.”

She snatched her scissors from the air as they fell one final time. “He wasn’t in the cafeteria when we needed help to figure out what happened during that train wreck of a vote — or when you lost it after we found out the answer.”

And she lunged out, jabbing her scissors straight at Makoto’s heart. “And he sure as hell wasn’t in that garden, when you needed his help the most.”

Togami felt Makoto’s flinch through his fingers, jolting through his entire body like a shared electric shock. “He couldn’t have —”

“I had to find you!” Jill slammed both hands against the front of her podium, leaning further out over it than she should have been able to manage without collapsing. “I had to find you broken, bleeding inside and out, ruined and hurting in a way that wasn’t beautiful at all!”

A powerful emotion trembled through her, though he couldn’t quite pinpoint what. She clutched at the podium like a lifeline, leaning out into the open air beyond it like she wanted to leap across the circle and damn the consequences. This girl didn’t act like the laughing, cheerful genocider they’d all met back in Owada’s trial, the girl who’d hardly seemed to care about anything but murder. She acted the same on the surface, yes, but now she’d gone somewhere beyond it… somewhere desperate.

But what right did she have to look at him with any kind of desperate demand, just seconds after she’d flung yet another terrible accusation at Makoto? Who did she think she was to Togami himself, that she could throw all his failures and griefs back in his face? She’d helped him in the garden, but that did not give her a free pass to join in the malicious attacks against his boyfriend.

“Nothing you’ve said adds up to a speck of real proof.” He met Jill’s blazing red eyes with a vicious glare, pointedly running his thumb across the back of Makoto’s hand in an obvious gesture of support. “It sounds to me like you’re just another delusional girl attacking the boy I picked instead of you.”

He’d expected an explosion, an attack, flinging sharp words and possibly even scissors across the circle as she lashed out against the truth he’d thrown at her. But instead… she slumped down against the podium, looking at him with eyes that on anyone else he would have called sad.

“Oh, darling… I really wish you were right this time.” She shook her head, and that simple gesture was somehow even more frightening than her cackling laughter. “I’d walk through fire if you needed me on the other side… and you know, up till now I thought he would do the same.” She
straightened slowly, curling up to her full height. “But when push came to shove, he didn’t. And I’m thinking his snooping detective friend there has nailed down the reason why.”

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule Note:** The holidays are upon us again, and I will not have time to write till we’re through the new year and all my associated travel is complete. Next chapter will be up on January 12, 2020. Merry Christmas to those of you who celebrate it, and Happy New Year!
Chapter 378

Togami stared across the circle at Jill, trying to parse out the meaning behind what she’d just said to him. She’d gone beyond just attacking Makoto, gone so far as to claim she thought Kirigiri had an actual point instead of a load of nonsense… but was she really serious about it? This was Fukawa’s alter ego, after all, born from the same mind that painted lurid fantasies that had no basis in reality and babbled out her every thought as easily as drawing breath. A girl like that, as capricious and wild as the genocider acted, would have no trouble spouting out vicious words that she didn’t really believe.

But that wasn’t the girl who looked back at him. Her eyes still burned blood red, but the laughter was gone. She didn’t wave arms or twirl scissors, didn’t cackle or dangle a lascivious tongue towards him. She stood as calmly as Fukawa ever had — or even calmer, considering that Fukawa had been a twitching bundle of neuroses even at her quietest. She hadn’t lied to inflict pain, sent the words flying across the circle that cause the greatest impact regardless of their accuracy. The girl standing still at her podium, meeting his gaze with fierce determination, meant exactly what she’d said.

He looked away first, eyes flickering around the rest of the circle. So many empty podiums, so many gray portraits loomed around them, and only two other living students remained from the group who’d begun. In the surrounding gloom, Kirigiri and Ogami stood shoulder to shoulder, pale but unflinching in the dim beams of light. It only took a glance to see they’d joined forces, working together towards an impossible goal.

And now, Jill had sided with them, too. He’d started this trial believing it would be the four of them against the mastermind, but somehow all three girls had turned away. Maybe they’d spouted pretty ideals of unity and alliance, but faced with a real challenge, they’d abandoned any attempts to work together. They’d given up on all their promises of standing together and left him and Makoto alone.

And for some reason, that seemed to fill his stomach with lead. His gaze darted around the circle once more, from fierce eyes to a steady scowl to a guarded mask of steel, and he couldn’t stop the barest hint of a quiver in his shoulders as the weight of those first few weeks settled back on him. Only now that it came back could he see that it had eased at some point. The distrust and fear of living with threats at all sides had faded, and he’d actually let himself believe that these three girls might not be enemies.

Stupid. Stupid, beyond any other mistake he’d made during this game. Didn’t he know better than to let his guard down when it came to other people? Makoto was nice, good and kind and honest, but that didn’t mean other people were anything but what he’d always known them to be.

“So that’s what you’ve decided.” His voice fell flat in his own ear, any attempt to ring out with haughty pride swallowed by the dark around them. “All of you — you’ve decided to go on with this. A few coincidences against Makoto that you couldn’t explain away, and suddenly everything he’s done till now is meaningless. You’re all going to fight us.” He straightened his shoulders, and dragged up some semblance of a smirk. “Fine, then. Think what you want. But I’m not going to let your delusions touch either of us.”

And he wouldn’t. He couldn’t, not when Makoto needed his protection so desperately. As smart as he knew Makoto could be, the injured boy clearly didn’t have that level of exertion in him now. Sitting silent and trembling in the wheelchair, there was no chance he could participate in this trial as he was. Togami had to take on the fight for the both of them. For the first time since letting
Makoto into his life, he had to face the arguments alone.

“You’re very certain that we’re the ones who are delusional.” Of course Kirigiri was the one to answer his declaration, her arms crossed and her mouth a thin line. “But I’ve told you the reasons behind my logic. I’ve laid out the pieces for anyone to put together. Drawing the obvious conclusion when faced with evidence is hardly a delusion.” She raised an eyebrow. “In fact, I’d say that delusion might be ignoring it to believe the opposite.”

His eyes narrowed at her. “I have weeks of behavior to back up my beliefs. Coincidences aside, Makoto has never once done anything to earn this kind of suspicion.”

“Weeks,” she repeated, letting the word linger in the air for a moment. “The weeks that we’ve been together in this game. Even if we all knew one another before, you don’t remember that time. You’re drawing conclusions based on knowledge of his behavior from less than two months of interactions. That’s hardly a significant amount of time to risk your life on, wouldn’t you agree?”

Her eyes locked onto his before he could look away, and he could hear exactly what she wasn’t saying. A few weeks isn’t enough time to prove sincerity. A few weeks can be acted, can be manipulated, can be false. A few weeks can be a lie, and you would never know the difference.

“Except that it isn’t just a few weeks,” he shot back, before turning towards Jill again. “Imagine whatever you like about what-ifs and could-have-beens, but you can’t deny that Makoto and I knew each other for two years before we lost our memories. When you first introduced yourself in the second trial, you thought we all had our memories as well — so as far as you knew, Makoto and I had been an item for ages. You never once suggested that our interactions had changed, or that Makoto’s personality had altered.”

“Well, excuse me if ‘memory alteration and possible backstabbing spies’ wasn’t the first thought that crossed my mind!” Jill didn’t even crack a smile. “I’m a simple girl, you know — it’s not like I expect to see lies and deceit everywhere I turn!”

“And I can’t imagine that you had all that much experience with any of us,” Kirigiri added, interrupting smoothly before the stream of chatter could continue. “After all, if none of us ever noticed that you and Fukawa were separate identities, you must have been dormant for the majority of interactions with the rest of our class.”

Jill shrugged. “Sounds about right. Once I started paying attention, I figured I might not know as much as I thought I did.”

“Then that just shows that you’ve lost sight of what’s important!” Togami snarled.

“Have we?” Kirigiri shook her head before meeting his eyes again — and just for a moment, she let him see past her iron mask of control. Knowledge jolted through him as he saw what she’d hidden.

_Fear_, bottomless and terrible in its intensity — but beyond that _determination_, a burning drive to find the truth that had been hidden from her. And more than that — _hurt_, an open wound within her that she hadn’t wanted to acknowledge — and something that almost, almost looked like _sadness_.

He recognized all of it in the flash of emotion crossing her face, each of them barely present long enough to observe before she locked them away again.

He’d meant to send another retort flying across the circle, but the unexpected rush of information
knocked it from his lips. She’d shown him what she was thinking on purpose, he knew she had too much control to make a slip like that — and he'd known what the expressions meant, even though he’d hardly seen her emote before this, even though he didn’t have any frame of reference in his conscious memories. Could she have faked a manifestation of her inner feelings, when neither of them remembered what they might recognize?

“I haven’t lost sight of anything,” she said, as he tried to process the flood of confusion. “I’ve always kept sight of the fact I told you all at the start. This trial is the four of us against the mastermind.”
The four of us against the mastermind — Togami recognized those words. Kirigiri had said the same phrase earlier, just before they all entered the elevator to the trial room. Before they’d gone, she’d been so nervous… and she’d asked them to remember that the mastermind would be their true opponent.

What else had she said? He wasn’t sure he wanted to remember, but her words echoed back through his mind in spite of himself.

“During the course of this trial, a moment is going to come when we find ourselves at odds. And when it does… no matter how reasonable it seems, no matter how separate from the mastermind’s actions it appears… when it happens, I want all of us to remember this conversation. Remember that this trial will be the four of us against the mastermind… and anything else that distracts us from that fact is going to be part of the mastermind’s plan.”

It had sounded so ridiculous at the time. With the three girls working with him to find impossible answers, with pain and grief fueling a desperate search for the truth behind this nightmare, he’d assumed that nothing could shake them enough to turn the situation as dark as she’d described.

And now that it had happened, he could see just how inevitable it had been from the start. “So even that was part of your plan. You pretended to encourage us, and all along you were plotting betrayal.”

“If that’s how you want to look at it.” She shrugged one shoulder, the barest hint of movement in the shadows. “You could just as easily say I’ve found evidence, developed a theory, and presented the information accordingly.”

He couldn’t stop the scornful laugh from twisting his mouth into an ugly sneer. “If you ignore the specifics, the consequences, or any of the rest of the context.”

“Yes.” She leaned sharply forward, eyes flashing. “Ignore them. Think for a moment. Remember what you thought before the trial began.”

“When you lied to me.”

She shook her head. “I’m not claiming that I wouldn’t lie if necessary — but in that instance, I didn’t. I told you what would happen when we started the trial — and it did.”

He couldn’t deny that, much as it grated to grant her even the smallest of concessions. Even if she’d planned out her manipulative tactics before going into the trial, she’d still kept her little speech innocuous enough that it gave nothing away. She hadn’t shown her hand until the trial had begun — until they’d gotten too far into their fight for Monokuma or the mastermind to intervene.

“You didn’t argue at the time.” Her words hammered further at his defenses, reminding him of facts that he would rather have ignored. “You thought I was worth listening to, before we got down here into the trial. I know a lot of things have changed since the trial began — but why that?”

“Because you attacked Makoto!” He left the trailing word obviously off the sentence, only present in his tone. “Why the hell would I take any of your stupid theories seriously when you based them on an attempt to drag down an injured, frightened victim?”

“Why wouldn’t you?” she shot back, as simply as if it made all the sense in the world. “I’ve given
reason after reason, logical deduction after deduction — surely that’s worthy hearing out at the very least, with all our lives on the line. This is a class trial, where we argue for the truth — and if you really intend to work towards answers, you can’t dismiss my conclusions so easily.”

“Of course I can.” His grip on Makoto’s wrist had loosened at some point during her little rant, so he forced his fingers to tighten again. “I know you’re wrong about Makoto, so nothing else you say can be worth hearing. You’re wrong, and that’s it!”

Ogami shifted her stance, leaning forward into the light. “That sounds like something Ishimaru might have said about Owada, when he defended his friend so fiercely. But I recall that he believed in Owada because of their bond, not because of sound reasoning.”

Togami flinched back at that. He recalled that trial all too clearly — how could he forget the backdrop for the errors he’d made, when it had led to the first time Makoto had out-thought him? And he knew just how ridiculous Ishimaru had been, with his blind faith in the murderer he’d called a friend. The idiot had refused to see the truth until he’d heard it from Owada’s own mouth, regardless of the facts everyone else had flung in his face. He’d given his trust whole-heartedly to his friend, and it blinded him to reality.

“The situation is not the same.” But he couldn’t muster enough certainty to give the words the iron edge that would have cut down any opposition. “I have far more reason to believe in Makoto than Ishimaru ever had for his friend.”

“Yes… much like Hina had when she defended me against your arguments.” Ogami looked down, lines of tension turning her shoulders to stone. “I’d been kind to her from the start. I’d acted as though she was the person most important to me in this school. But when it came down to the facts, I’d betrayed her trust all along.”

He glared at her. However fond Ogami had been of Asahina, even she had to admit that the aftermath of discovering the mastermind’s spy had not been the girl’s finest hour. Driven to desperation by uncontrollable emotions, rounding with fury on anyone who disagreed, determined that she and she alone knew the real situation — in those few days, she’d embodied so much of the behavior he despised.

Was that how the girls saw him now? Not as the lone voice of reason, but as the emotionally-crippled fool who couldn’t look beyond his heart? And… in the world beyond the school walls, where this conflict played out on all the television screens… was that what everyone else saw when they looked at him?

Disgust churned through his stomach, roiling nausea for such an image of himself splattered across the globe. Bad enough they’d seen the rest of the game, but this on top of it? This was the role he’d cast himself in as this drama played out for their captive audience? Sweat prickled along the palms of his hands, turning his grip on Makoto slick and unstable.

“Not like I’m a hundred percent up on what she’s on about, darling, but I know one thing.” Jill stared straight at him, red eye eerily sharp in an unflinching face. “You’re not the type to shut your eyes to facts, just like you wouldn’t let me do it when I knew Gloomy was on the hook. It sucks to be in that spot, but I know you aren’t gonna let it break you. You’re stronger than that.”

Stronger… well, he’d always thought so, anyway. She did have a point that the person he’d been before the game would have been repulsed by his current behavior. But that had been wrong, hadn’t it? That had been the mindset that led to mistakes, led to Makoto’s suffering, led to his own personal nightmare… surely it must have been wrong. Even if he’d believed it for so long.
“You don’t have to believe me if my theory doesn’t hold water.” Kirigiri braced her hands against the podium, leaning forward ever so slightly. “If you can find a hole I can’t explain, I’d take you seriously. All I’m asking is the same treatment.” She met his eyes. “Hear me out, and listen. Don’t ignore me.”

And even though he knew she was wrong, even though it went completely counter to his bone-deep belief that Makoto would never act against them… Togami couldn’t see any choice but to nod his agreement.
Togami hardly had an instant to regret the agreement he’d just made before Kirigiri seized the opportunity, launching the conversation he’d been trying to stop. “I know you’ve considered the possibility that the mastermind has been among us from the start of the game. Regardless of your opinions on my theory, you’ve thought about the possibilities it would open to the person running the game.”

And he could hardly deny that, not when the answer was so obvious. “Of course. It would give them a more direct observation method than the cameras, a way to interact with their players as the situation changed moment to moment. They could manipulate events more easily with feet on the ground.” He shook his head sharply. “Though the obvious con is the incredible risk it would be to place themselves among their murder-bent players.”

“With an accomplice to watch the cameras, getting killed themselves wouldn’t be too high a risk,” she pointed out. “They’d know who was doing what at any given time, and it would be easy enough to avoid getting caught in a killing trap.”

“But that isn’t the only risk. The greater one would be giving themselves away.” Togami frowned, trying to recall how he’d debated the question with himself before this trial brought it into the open. “It would only take one slip of knowing more than they should to start looking suspicious.”

“True enough — if they slipped. Would the person who designed every detail of this game really make such an obvious mistake?” She shook her head. “No. A person like that would have the confidence in their own skill that they could avoid any errors. For that kind of potential payoff, they would be willing to take a calculated risk.”

A calculated risk for an incredible reward… the idea hit home in far too many of his own memories. How often had he done that very thing in his own past, as he fought to win the position of Togami heir? He’d taken equivalent risks to this, risks that he’d beaten with his own hard-earned skills… so how could he call it impossible for the mastermind to have done something similar?

He could feel his thoughts skittering down a dangerous path with those ideas… but even so, he couldn’t see a point where the logic didn’t make sense. This much did fit together, no matter how much he might want to disagree with Kirigiri just on principle.

“But just because they could have been among us, it doesn’t follow that they were.” It almost hurt to drag the words out, his chest heavy and tight with a tension he couldn’t quite understand. “I may have considered the possibility that one of the students could be the mastermind, but I never found any definitive evidence. It’s not as though anything happened that could only have occurred through direct manipulation.”

“Evidence of manipulation?” She raised an eyebrow. “And what would you count as proof,
considering that effective manipulation would be all but invisible?”

“The act might be invisible, but the effects wouldn’t be,” he said. “If someone were manipulated, it might be visible in their altered behavior.” He shook his head. “But since none of us have a baseline understanding of one another’s behavior, we can’t exactly make a valid comparison in how anyone has changed.”

“Not quite. Someone would be able to tell if the behavior they observed was their own.”

“You think your behavior has changed?” The idea sounded vaguely plausible, except… “You said your memories were completely erased. That sounds like reason enough to explain any other alterations.”

“I wasn’t talking about my behavior,” Kirigiri said, her words calm and deliberate enough to send a chill down his spine. “I meant yours.”
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His own behavior? Togami’s eyes narrowed to sharp slits at Kirigiri’s statement, his every instinct clamoring to refute the obvious insult. How dare she suggest that his actions might be influenced by a force outside of his control? He’d made mistakes recently, he’d admitted as much to himself during these last terrible days, but it was a far cry between an error and outright manipulation. Who could possibly have so much power over him —

The warm weight of Makoto’s hand pressed against his fingers, and for the briefest moment, the rest of Togami’s body went cold.

“You’re the only one who would know for sure,” Kirigiri said, her voice low and intense. “The rest of us only saw what it looked like from the outside, when you were with us. We don’t know what happened behind closed doors — and even if we saw the security camera feeds of those moments, we can’t know what was going on in your head. None of us know why you made your decisions. But we do know that you changed.”

“That hardly begins to describe it.” The dark rumble of Ogami’s words picked up seamlessly from where Kirigiri left off. “During the first two trials, you made your position clear — you let everyone know that you intended to play the game and win. And then suddenly, without any warning, Monokuma revealed that you’d fallen for Naegi, and you took back all your earlier claims.”

That was true — he could remember the moment he’d made the decision. After realizing how deeply entangled he’d become with Makoto, he’d utterly reversed course in regards to the game rather than act in a way that would cause Makoto’s death. And relief had rushed through him when he’d decided it, knowing that he wouldn’t have to harm the boy he loved.

Except he hadn’t loved Makoto then. Or… was it that he couldn’t remember it? Had some part of his consciousness loved Makoto all along, and just waited for the rest of him to catch up? He couldn’t remember any longer — his emotions for his boyfriend bled backward through his memories, coloring the past until he couldn’t sort out then from now. Was it possible that he’d acted on feelings he hadn’t known were lurking in his heart?

“No. That can’t be right.”

He only realized that he’d spoken the denial aloud when he saw the answering flick of Kirigiri’s eyebrow upward. But the skepticism in her eyes reminded him that he couldn’t waste time arguing with himself — not with the three girls standing against him.

“It isn’t right,” he repeated, forcing a certainty he didn’t feel into the words. “It wasn’t as though I changed my mind out of the blue. This game is kill or be killed, murderer against the innocent — no one can play both sides. Of course I distanced myself from the rest of you when I was considering murder — if I’d gone through with it, winning would lead directly to all of your deaths as surely as if I’d slit your throats myself. And after I decided allowing everyone to die was no longer a viable option, I changed my behavior in accordance with my decision. It’s not bizarre at all.”

“Isn’t it?” Kirigiri studied him, for all the world as if her question had been genuine. “Yes, it’s true that the actions you just described make sense in terms of how you would react to changing priorities. But how did that come about? Regardless of what you think now, at the start of the game you were perfectly willing to sacrifice all of us to win. How did you decide, in a handful of
“days, that you cared enough about Naegi to gamble your life on him?”

Another memory flashed through his mind — tangled with Makoto in the other boy’s bed, urge to **survive** the killing game snarling against his strange new feelings. He’d approached Makoto with every intention of ending their fledgling relationship — and the memory of his own whispered threat of murder crawled like filth on his skin. Had he really said such cold, vicious words, a cruel and unwarranted attack on an innocent boy who’d opened his heart without hesitation?

Except that the attack hadn’t landed. Makoto hadn’t even taken the threat seriously, looking back at him with unflinching confidence that it had been a bluff. In that moment, he’d seen straight through all the lies that Togami had told, even the ones he himself had believed… and **known** that there was no way Togami was going to kill him.

What had he seen to make him so sure? Togami had no idea… and now, the question wouldn’t stop whispering through the back of his mind.

“It doesn’t matter.” He shook his head, trying to silence the inner voice as well as the girls around him. “The reason I started caring for him in the first place doesn’t change anything. It happened, and I responded.”

“It just **happened**?” Jill pounced on the word, eyes narrowing in an expression that looked more like Fukawa’s than her own. “That sounds like you didn’t get a say in it.”

“It was hardly a conscious decision!” He sent her a brief glare, not letting his gaze linger long enough to be unsettled by the way she was watching him. It was almost enough to make him miss the leering. “I didn’t realize what was changing. If I’d seen it in time, I —” He stopped short.

“You would have stopped it.” Kirigiri nodded, as though he’d confirmed something for her. She didn’t look away, but he could see the emotions shifting behind her eyes from ferocity… to something much sadder. “But in those days when you could have prevented it, you didn’t know what to look for. You didn’t know what was happening, because he managed to say and do all the right things to get you to care.”

All the right things — well, that was true enough. Makoto always knew just what to say, that was one of the first things about him that had caught Togami’s attention. He’d said the right words in the trials, in the library, and in the bedroom…

“You trust me.”

Makoto had been right… but how had he known?

Limp fingers slipped from Togami’s nerveless grip, and his hand fell back to his side. He stared at Makoto’s pale wrist against the black and white wheelchair, and didn’t reach for him again.
Togami stood frozen at his podium, the world spinning in dizzying circles around him. Remembered words and forgotten feelings clamored for his attention, each fighting to overwhelm the other until he couldn’t tell any individual thought apart from the whole. He could only stand still and alone in the madness, eyes locked on the line of Makoto’s fingers against the shadow of the wheelchair.

“You trust me.”

The words Makoto had said to him, the breaking point that destroyed the last of his resolve to kill — they echoed through his head again, woven throughout the rest of his tangled mind. Makoto had eviscerated him with those words, torn his layers of armor away to leave his heart unprotected and vulnerable. Could an ordinary high school boy, a commoner with nothing more than luck on his side, have come up with such an effective attack?

But he’d realized already that Makoto had never been as ordinary as he first appeared. Not really. He’d known how to argue in the trials. Yes, Kirigiri had coached him in piecing together his logic — but that was all she’d done. The rhetoric, the timing, the force behind it all had been his own. None of the other students had been able to argue their cases so effectively, spinning the trials to end as they’d wanted. Everyone had listened to Makoto.

They’d all listened… and not just during the trials, either. Time and again, Makoto had urged them all to work together and to fight against the mastermind. He’d asked them all to avoid killing, in a situation designed to have them at one another’s throats. No one could be so kind and selfless in this kind of situation, Togami had understood that as soon as the rules had been announced. The students would turn on one another sooner rather than later, and any attempts at a ridiculous friendship would only lead to death. After the first death proved it, the other students should have treated Makoto as a fool. His word should have been less than meaningless.

Except that the exact opposite had occurred. The more time passed, the more murders occurred… the more trustworthy Makoto had seemed to be. Even when the pair of them had been under suspicion of some sort of conspiracy involving their discovery of Ogami’s blackmail, it had only taken a few days for the students to begin to listen to Makoto again.

How much power would that be, to be the only person whose words could be trusted?

Togami couldn’t raise his gaze from Makoto’s hand as the questions whirled through him. What would he see on the other boy’s face if he looked? He didn’t know — he didn’t know — and ice snaked through his chest to grip a frozen heart as horrific possibilities whispered through his head. The thoughts squirmed deep into the recesses of his head, under the control of some force other than his own mind —

Or rather, the force of his mind as he’d been, before he’d met Makoto.

He recognized the pattern of calculation, the paranoia and the suspicion, the what-if scenarios he’d had to evaluate to survive life in his ruthless family. He knew what his mind had begun to do, as clearly as if he’d seen it written out, even as he choked at the thought of applying that suspicion to Makoto.

And what did that mean, that he didn’t want to do it? Because there would be nothing to worry
about, nothing to find, if he were looking at someone innocent. So why did he want so desperately to look away? Was it proof that something had gone terribly wrong with him?

Or was it possible that the person who'd gone wrong was —

No. Impossible. Makoto had been kind when he could have been cruel, brought happiness and warmth when he could just as easily have caused pain. He’d had power, yes, but he’d used it for good. He’d cared for the people around him, even when they’d been enemies. Even when it caused him pain.

He’d been exactly the sort of person that Togami had never believed could exist. And every moment he’d been there, been real, acting on beliefs that no sane person could hold, Togami had felt his walls slip down a little further.

Staring at pale fingers lying still on the dark wheelchair, Togami felt his throat muscles tighten, clenching back a scream of bottled fury. Do something — do anything! Look at me, talk to me, smile at me, do whatever you need to make me listen! Tell me it isn’t true!

But Makoto didn’t move, and in the silence Togami could feel his own heartbeat thrumming too loud in his ears. What was he supposed to do? With even his own mind turning against him and joining in the chorus of accusations, with a thousand little moments reminding him that they looked just a little too perfect, with the resounding nothing coming from the boy at his side — how could he possibly figure out what to do?

As slow and inevitable as the tide creeping up the shore, he turned away from the wheelchair, lifting his head to look back across the circle. Four sets of wary eyes stared back at him, even Enoshima from her throne. Had any of them been talking? He thought that perhaps they had, but he hadn’t been able to hear them over the argument screaming in his head.

He didn’t want to hear it, either. Whatever words they’d meant to inflict on him, he was not going to sit back and let them add damage on top of pain. “It wasn’t just here, during this game. I might not remember it, but our relationship started long before the game ever did. Whatever you think might have happened here, you can’t say the same about when we first met.”

The other girls blinked, but Kirigiri was already shaking her head before he’d even finished speaking. “You don’t know, either. Unless you’re going to tell us your memory has conveniently returned, as well.” A skeptical lift of her eyebrow warned against any attempt to derail the trial with such a lie.

Not that he wanted to. Not that he could, when the need for truth beat through him with all the drive of a second heartbeat. “Don’t be stupid. I don’t have to remember, not when someone,” he gestured at Jill, “already told us that much.”

Jill shrugged. “Sure, I knew you two were a thing back in the day, but it’s not like I got to read every word of that story. It looked pretty much the same, all sugar and sweetness — but what the hell, I look like your basic boring schoolgirl. Looking sweet doesn’t mean much.”

Which was true, damn her. He knew not to put much stock in superficial appearances. But even so… he shook his head. “Then — what? You’re saying Makoto was manipulating me from the start? For two whole years? That’s ridiculous! He’d have to be brilliant, at a level no one else could even conceptualize. He’d have to be —”

Smarter than me.
Anyone who could do that would have to be smarter than Togami knew himself to be.

And as he realized that much, a shadow of admiration began to spark in the darkest part of his soul.
Chapter 383

For all the time and energy Togami had poured into consideration of the mastermind, he’d never quite made the connection of how smart they had to be. He’d known they had to be intelligent, of course — one look at the devious game they’d created, and that much went without saying. Anyone who could get the drop on the sixteen participating students, with their wide range of talents and resources, had to have one of the best minds around.

But even so, he’d never gone so far as to attribute their success directly to their mind before. They had the element of surprise, access to better information, powerful allies to support them, any number of superficial advantages that could give one opponent an edge over an otherwise well-matched enemy. If he’d been the one in the mastermind’s shoes, he could have done the same.

But now… envisioning the person who could pull off the scheme Kirigiri had described… the conviction he’d taken for granted faltered, his certainty slipping from his grasp. Could he have pulled off such an in-depth deception? Could he have lived a lie day in and day out for years as he manipulated friends, knowing all the while that he’d eventually intended to torture and kill them?

Revulsion churned through his stomach as he forced himself to consider the idea, what it would take and how it would feel. He knew the answer, whether he wanted to admit it or not — he couldn’t have done it.

But someone had. The mastermind, whoever that truly was, had done it. All the students here had been thrust into this nightmare of a game, and dead body after horribly dead body piled up the ghoulish evidence that the mastermind had gone through with exactly the plan he’d just recoiled from. And the genius, the planning, the sheer nerve that it would have taken —

“Ugh, mastermind this, mastermind that — don’t you all have any other questions to talk about?”

A bright, bubbly voice bounced through his thoughts, scattering ideas with all the force of a wrecking ball. His eyes shot up to the throne, where Enoshima sat with one hand perched on her hip in a posture of injured annoyance.

“I mean, seriously — I already told you all that I’m the mastermind. What more is there? There are a lot of other more important questions you’re gonna need to answer before we’re done — better hurry up and get on with those!”

Did she honestly think she’d fooled anyone with that act? Togami narrowed his eyes at the purported mastermind, watching the subtle shifts of Enoshima’s body language.

The ever-so-hesitant flicker of her eyes around the circle, the hint of plastic stretching in her too-bright smile… no, she couldn’t be as confident as she’d acted. She was good, with a model’s knack for disguising her thoughts, and no doubt she could fool anyone who didn’t look too closely — but he could see what her mannerisms concealed. She didn’t think they were fooled. She was worried.

Which was strange, wasn’t it? What did she have to worry about, if they’d really gotten derailed onto a topic that wouldn’t help the solve the mysteries of the game? After all, if they guessed wrong, it ought to mean her victory. The only way it would be a problem for her would be… if they were right.

“There are other questions more important than the identity of the mastermind?” Kirigiri finally looked away from Makoto, one eyebrow arching up as she examined Enoshima like a corpse she
planned to autopsy. “So then, if we aren’t able to agree on the person behind the game, would we still be able to win the trial?”

“Huuuuh?” Enoshima tugged a long strand of her pigtails out, twirling it away from her head like a long twist of gum. “What are you talking about? You can’t get it wrong when I already told you the answer!”

“Oh, no.” Kirigiri shook her head. “This game has been built on rules from the start — you can’t avoid them now. So, to be absolutely clear — if we name the wrong person as the mastermind, what happens?”

“Well, that’s easy!” She jerked the Monokuma doll in front of her head again, wiggling it around as she spoke. “You said you could solve each and every one of the mysteries during this trial. So if it turns out you couldn’t live up to the hype — you lose!” She giggled, flicking Monokuma’s paws up into a pose of screaming anger. “But no way that’ll happen with an easy win like this one. So why worry?”

She sounded so earnest, so sincere as she said it — she had to be manipulating them. Otherwise, why intervene in the trial at all? He shook his head in annoyance. “So you’re just giving us one of the answers? What, should we think you’re feeling merciful all of a sudden?”

“Hardly.” She dropped the bear and frowned at him, straightening back into a condescending lecture. “After everything else you’ve worked out, the identity of the mastermind is just too boringly obvious. There are only sixteen students in the game, the person writing the rules is one of the students, and I’m the only one you haven’t met.” She shrugged. “I’d say it’s elementary, but even grade schoolers wouldn’t have had this much trouble with it.”

Togami blinked, her words catching at his mind. He hadn’t asked the question with any expectation of a genuine answer, but — something she’d said had sounded like one. There was a hint in those words, a reminder of something he’d forgotten during the course of the trial… he just couldn’t spot what. After all, it wasn’t as though she’d said anything unexpected. Claiming she was the mastermind yet again, tossing in a few insults for camouflage, repeating Monokuma’s explanation of the sixteen students in the game —

The sixteen students in the game — and the fact that the mastermind had to be one of them.

Kirigiri had made the same point earlier, reminding them all that the mastermind had to be among them. He’d dismissed it then, just another attack among so many others… but he couldn’t do that so easily any longer. Not when the possible options for the mastermind were narrowing all too sharply.

One of sixteen. How many choices could there be?

Slowly, he turned away from the circle of girls, looking back to the wheelchair at his side. Down, down, into dark shadows of black and smears of bloody red, he looked at the pale boy sitting still and alone.

Is it you?

He couldn’t bring himself to ask the question, not out loud… but he couldn’t stop it from ringing through his ears.

Did you plan this game?

He shouldn’t need to ask. After all the time he’d spent with Makoto, after every moment they’d
shared, he should already know the answer.

*Did you send your friends to die? Did you pretend to mourn the murders that you set in motion?*

It could have worked. That was the frightening part. If the mastermind had the courage, the brains, and the sheer *luck* to pull off such a plan, then it could have worked exactly like the game he’d just endured. And if anyone could really be that skilled…

*Did you use me as one more cog to spin through your plan? Did you pretend to care so purely, just to trap me further?*

Impossible. He couldn’t believe it. Not of the sweet, innocent boy in front of him, who’d so miraculously come back into his life. And yet… he knew the most successful lies would be the ones people wanted to believe.

*Did you make me love you just so you could betray me?*

He let his gaze lock on to the clear hazel of Makoto’s eyes, and felt himself plummeting forward into darkness.
Chapter 384

The shadows of the trial room crept close around Togami, as he stood with Makoto in their own narrow pool of light. He could see the lines of the other boy’s face, hollow bruises beneath his eyes that demonstrated the suffering he’d endured. Twisting scrapes of injuries and ugly gashes across pale skin told of the execution he’d so miraculously survived, and just how narrowly tragedy had been avoided. Physical evidence of wounds couldn’t be faked, surely it had to be real.

But as he looked, searching desperately for some proof he didn’t understand… the darkness pressed closer still, wrapping round and round them to drown out the rest of the circle. He knew, far in the back of his mind, that the girls still stood around him, watching with cold, judgmental eyes… but his awareness couldn’t stretch across that infinite distance to comprehend them. And if there were other observers further beyond, in another world past the dark camera lenses… they didn’t matter. They couldn’t reach him.

The only other person in the world sat in front of him, small and fragile and still. Makoto Naegi, the boy he’d so unexpectedly come to care for, the innocent light in the darkness that he thought he’d lost forever… Makoto’s sheer existence seemed to spread and fill the world around him until nothing else remained.

Had this boy hurt him? Could kind, gentle Makoto really be the one who’d put so much despair into motion?

And if he had… did it change anything?

Makoto had brought warmth into his life, smiles and brightness and hope for a different kind of future than he’d ever imagined. He’d done that, no matter what else had happened. That warmth existed inside him, living along with his every breath. Darkness might have swallowed the rest of existence beyond the narrow span of space they shared, but here and now, Makoto’s light was real.

And maybe… maybe his light could only find its way in the midst of the darkness. Maybe the nightmarish game had been as much of his feelings for Makoto as the blissful dream of their stolen moments together. Maybe it had all been tangled together from the start.

And if so… how could he not be grateful for it all? He could still feel the brilliant joy that burst through him moments ago, when he’d realized that Makoto really had returned so wonderfully alive… and he would never have been so happy without the misery he’d lived through first.

He would never have clung so fiercely to Makoto’s gentle kindness, if they hadn’t been in a situation where that kindness seemed so out of place. The impossible beauty he’d found in the other boy’s soul would never have shone so brightly to his jaded eyes without the glaring contrast of selfish cruelty that the killing game brought to the surface. Without both the light and the dark, who could say if he would have found his way to Makoto?

How could he not be happy with all that had happened, if it led him to stand here with the only person in the world who mattered?

Maybe that was the point. Maybe he’d had to endure that soul-crushing day of believing that Makoto was gone, so that he could really understand how important it was that he stay alive. Maybe this experience, as horrifying as it had seemed at the time, had been what he needed to see… if he wanted to be with Makoto.
Because he did. Even now, even with so many questions running through his head, even with doubts and fears snaking deep into his heart, that one certainty never altered. He wanted to be with Makoto. No matter what that meant.

One of his hands stretched out, slow but steady, never trembling even once as it crossed the space between them to settle against Makoto’s cheek. Even with his fingers bandaged, Togami could feel the faint warmth of skin, marred by jagged edges of scratches and wounds. Good and bad, he could feel them both… and he could embrace them both, as long as that meant he could stay here at Makoto’s side.

He looked down again, letting himself drown in the bottomless hazel eyes before him. Makoto hadn’t said anything this entire time, even when everyone spoke against him. He’d let his boyfriend fight on his behalf, never once stepping in no matter what he’d heard. What had he been waiting to hear?

He had only one promise left to offer.

“I love you. No matter what.”

And Makoto looked back up at him, eyes focusing on his face for the first time in far too long. Togami stared into that face, and it felt like he was really seeing the boy who’d stolen his heart for the first time. He’d thought that he’d known Makoto had shown him the extent of emotion that existed in the world… but until now, he hadn’t grasped just how far the lesson went. He hadn’t understood what Makoto really wanted from him. But now… now he did.

Life blazed back into those bright clear eyes. Fingers curled into a fist at the edge of the chair’s armrest. Lips parted in a gasp of breath and cried –

“No!”
Any other moment of his life, those words would warmed Naegi’s heart with joy. Knowing he was loved, knowing that his own deep well of feelings were returned, knowing just how much Byakuya cared for him… no matter how dark the past had been, it had never failed to brighten his world. Naegi would have sworn that there could never be a time when he wouldn’t smile to hear it.

Until now. Until Byakuya looked down at him with empty eyes, and mouthed the broken shells of words that represented something far more terrible than their literal meaning. Naegi didn’t know what was happening in his boyfriend’s head… but he recognized the darkness that stared out through his eyes. He’d seen it time and time again in the faces of people in the world outside as they finally lost their battle with despair.

Was Byakuya walking the same path as the other people who’d been hurt by the Tragedy? Was he racing headlong into the same nightmarish end that had already claimed too many others? Was he going to slip away, right here and now in front of Naegi’s eyes, just moments after they’d found one another again?

“No!”

The shock of his own voice jolted through his ears before he even knew he’d meant to speak. He’d wanted to interrupt so many times, wanted to object, to argue, to plead for his beloved friends to see the truth — and even so, he hadn’t been able to bring himself to even part his lips. The arguments with himself had swirled round and round in his head, swallowing any speech before it could start.

But now, staring up at the emptiness in Byakuya’s eyes, any self-blaming arguments fell away. Byakuya needed him.

And his baffled, mind-wiped boyfriend didn’t even know it. Byakuya jerked back from the wheelchair, wide-eyed with as much shock as if he’d been slapped. Naegi wasn’t entirely sure what twisted distortion of devotion Byakuya had been trying to promise him — but he clearly hadn’t so much as considered that Naegi might reject it.

“No,” he said again, softer but no less determined. Guilt twinged in the back of his mind at the hurt he could see he’d caused, but he couldn’t let that stop him. He had to speak now, before Byakuya could gather his thoughts enough to argue back. “I don’t want you to say that. I don’t want you to think like that.”

Byakuya watched him with more caution than he should ever need, just to look at his boyfriend. He shouldn’t look that way, not if he’d understood what Naegi had been trying to say.

“I mean that if…” Naegi groped for words, trying to figure out how to explain a belief he’d never thought too hard about. “If you think you love someone no matter what… and if nothing they do can change it… then that just means nothing about them matters to you. None of their thoughts or decisions or words can touch you. I don’t want that.”

Was it working? Were his words reaching their mark? He couldn’t tell, staring up into Byakuya’s eyes and willing some spark of life to show that his meaning had gotten through whatever darkness had ensnared him. “I… I’m glad you love me. I am. But… I want you to love me because of me.”
Pale eyebrows knit together, though little more than gleaming threads showed in the dark trial room. But that hint told him enough — Naegi knew his boyfriend’s expressions well enough to see the look on his face even when it was hidden. “You’re saying… that what I told you… wasn’t what you wanted.”

A faint sigh of relief escaped, and some of the tension eased from Naegi’s shoulders. He’d tried to be as clear as he could, but even so, he hadn’t been sure that Byakuya in this state could understand him. “That’s right.”

“You… don’t want me to say I love you… no matter what you do.” Byakuya stumbled over the words, concentrating as though he were trying to sound out a foreign language that he’d only seen written.

Naegi’s heart ached to see his confident, brilliant love reduced to such uncertainty, but he forced the pain aside to give Byakuya a reassuring nod. “Yes. If I really were pretending to be someone else, and you said ‘no matter what’ like that, then you wouldn’t be saying that you loved me at all.”

Creases gouged their way across Byakuya’s forehead, dark trenches of shadows on top of shadows as he tried to pick apart the words. “You want me to love you… because of what you’ve done.”

Naegi frowned, not quite sure why Byakuya kept asking the same question. He’d answered it twice now, and it seemed like Byakuya had heard enough of the meaning to be able to repeat it back to him… so why wasn’t it sinking in? Should the idea really be that complicated for his quick-witted boyfriend to grasp?

No — that wasn’t fair to think that way. Not when he could see Byakuya struggling so hard with the concepts. He ignored the twist of nerves in his stomach, certain they only came from an unwarranted impatience, and gave the softest smile he could muster. “Right, Byakuya. You understand. You wouldn’t want me to claim I loved you because of something that wasn’t real, right?”

And Byakuya had already begun to shake his head, even before Naegi finished that sentence. “No. Not if…” His voice dropped, low enough that Naegi could barely hear it. “Not if you really do.”

Shock dropped Naegi’s jaw, and he could only stare at his boyfriend in horror. “Of course I really love you! I would never lie to you about that!”

“All right.” Byakuya closed his eyes as he took a deep breath, exhaling so slowly it almost looked painful. “All right… then I’ll do it. If that’s what you need from me, I’ll do it.”

He opened his eyes again… and fathomless emptiness stared back from his face. “I’ll love you because you’re the mastermind.”
Naegi stared up into Byakuya’s empty eyes, searching for some hint of meaning hidden beyond the darkness. Because there had to be some other meaning there, one that he’d missed somehow. There had to be another way to interpret what Byakuya had just said… because it couldn’t be what it had sounded like he’d said.

But no matter how hard he looked, he couldn’t see any deception in his boyfriend’s face. No tricks, no lies, no confusion… just an endless abyss, deep and terrible enough that it would drown him if he looked too long.

“I don’t understand,” he said at last, when he couldn’t bear to look another second. The huge room swallowed his voice, leaving only the thinnest tendrils of sound between them. “What do you mean, you love me because —” His throat closed against the words, tight and aching at the thought of repeating something so terrible.

“Because you’re the mastermind,” Byakuya said again, without even flinching. He could have been simply commenting on the shade of Naegi’s hair, rather than accusing him of murdering ten of their friends. “It will take a little time for me to figure out how to do it — but since you’ve asked, I promise that I will.”

“I — what?” Naegi felt as though he’d suddenly been dropped in the middle of a different conversation entirely. “No — that isn’t what I meant!”

“I know you didn’t want to ask.” It was like Byakuya couldn’t even hear his protests. “And it’s true — you shouldn’t have had to. I should have seen the truth sooner, especially after so many people tried to tell me.” He leaned forward to lay one hand on top of Naegi’s, and everywhere they touched felt like their fingers were sheathed in ice. “But I won’t close my eyes any longer. I’ll see you for who you really are.”

“No — you’re not doing that!” Naegi clenched his fingers into a fist beneath the cold weight of Byakuya’s hand. “I don’t know what you think I said, or what you thought you heard, but — but it’s not true. I’m not the mastermind!”

And a faint mist of disappointment settled across Byakuya’s face. “You don’t have to keep hiding it from me now. I know I don’t understand everything, but —”

“You don’t understand anything!” Naegi could hear the desperation flooding his voice, overwhelming him in a way that it hadn’t since that terrible first trial. That moment seemed so long ago, now, when he’d realized that his friendship with Sayaka had meant something to him that it hadn’t to her… but it wasn’t gone at all. He could feel it again here, in this trial room… and the revelation that he’d been on a different wavelength from Byakuya struck so much deeper into his heart.

“Maybe you’re right.” Byakuya shrugged — like it didn’t even matter who was right. Like he didn’t care. It was nothing like Byakuya ought to be at all, and cold chills snaked down Naegi’s spine. “But I want to understand. Whatever you want to tell me, I’ll listen. You can trust me.”

Naegi jerked backwards, hand shuddering beneath Byakuya’s heavy grip. If he’d had the strength
to shake the frigid weight away, he would have done it without a second thought. He’d never pull away from a chance to hold his beloved boyfriend’s hand… but this wasn’t Byakuya. Not in the ways that mattered. Holding his hand when he was like this would be like saying it didn’t matter that Byakuya had gone so horribly wrong somewhere along the way. Like the man standing there in front of him didn’t matter.

Like Byakuya was saying about him.

Cold sank through him, chilling deep into his bones, seeping into every cranny of his being. How could the man he loved believe him capable of such atrocities… and still stand there pledging his love? How could the same man who’d fallen to his knees and cried at their reunion so easily exchange the one he’d mourned for someone else entirely? How could the one person who’d known Naegi better than anyone else in the world, who’d seen every truth of Naegi’s soul and found something to love, see another person when he looked into Naegi’s eyes?

He couldn’t.

Of course he couldn’t.

Air flooded deep into Naegi’s lungs, as though he’d just resurfaced from drowning. Byakuya couldn’t think any of that, not really. He loved Naegi, both before they’d lost their memories and after — his actions had proclaimed it as much as his words. He couldn’t really act the way he seemed to be now.

Naegi tore his eyes from the emptiness of Byakuya’s face, turning to look across the circle to where Junko grinned at him from her throne. “Looks like your boytoy has you dead to rights, sweetie!”

The world snapped into clarity around him, as if he’d been engulfed in fog until that moment. This was why she’d done it — why she’d let him return to his friends, why she’d joined them in person when they’d really had no way to compel her, why she’d claimed to be the mastermind with so much enthusiasm. She’d been aiming for this from the moment he’d woken up in the data center. Maybe even earlier.

But that should have been impossible. How could she have known what would happen in the trial? Even if she’d known that Kyoko believed the worst of him after finding no body in the morgue, she couldn’t really have predicted every move the other students would make. No one could have figured out so far in advance that all four of his surviving friends could be convinced that he’d been the one behind their nightmares.

Except… how many times had the mastermind manipulated them all? The motives, trained on their hearts with laser precision… the hints Monokuma dropped, nudging them ever so slightly in the right direction to encounter the most suffering… even the data Chihiro and Alter Ego had worked so hard to uncover, only to learn that it had been a plant from the very beginning. With all the other accurate predictions Junko had made, he couldn’t say for sure that this one had to be impossible.

He narrowed his eyes at Junko, and she beamed back at him like he’d just given her an elaborate compliment. “Aww, it’s so nice to have all my hard work appreciated!”

Appreciated — like she’d been doing all that work for him. Like she’d only ever been acting on his orders, and he really had been the one behind the game. “Stop saying that!”

“How?” She tilted her head, eyes wide with a sickening innocence. “But they’ve all figured it out. Seems kinda dumb to keep fighting back when every single person here is on the same page.”
And in spite of himself, knowing she wanted him to do exactly this, Naegi couldn’t stop his eyes from darting around the circle of his dearest friends. Sakura and Jill stared back with hate in their eyes and any shred of friendship destroyed. Kyoko could have been a steel-cold statue, frozen beyond any touch of emotion. And Byakuya… one glance, and Naegi couldn’t bear to look his way again.

There was only one conclusion… they all believed it. No matter how many arguments he ran through in his head, he couldn’t see how to break through their conviction. How could he prove he wasn’t the mastermind, when they thought they knew he had to be?

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule Note:** Real life is demanding my attention for the next couple weeks, so the next chapter won't be posted until March 29, 2020. See you then!
For the first time since he’d set foot in this school, Togami finally felt as though everything made sense. The game, the romance, the heartache, the deaths, all of it fit together in one long logical line, point after point adding together to lead him to this last inevitable truth. Makoto had been the one behind it all… and he’d swept Byakuya along with his plans from the start.

There was something freeing in the knowledge that he’d been so thoroughly played. If it had been anyone other than Makoto, the boy he’d fallen in love with twice, he would have been furious. How dare some common riffraff try to manipulate him, heir to the Togami family and key figure in the world’s future? His outrage ought to boil through his veins with the need for vengeance.

But he couldn’t even find a spark of indignation. There was no room left in him for something so useless, with Makoto’s brilliant plans eclipsing his past and consuming his future. A boy skilled and smart enough to accomplish what he had deserved to win.

The only question left was how to explain this revelation so that the other boy would understand. Because as long as Makoto kept denying the truth, staring up from his wheelchair with wide, hurt eyes as a facade of charming innocence masked his plans, then he still didn’t think Togami would stay with him. In spite of all the ways that Togami had tried to reassure him, verbally and otherwise, Makoto didn’t believe that he could trust his boyfriend with his plan.

“You don’t really believe that I did all this,” Makoto said, with all the certainty he’d displayed when he’d let them think he was arguing during so many other class trials. “You know me better than that.”

Which — hurt, actually, because mere minutes ago Togami would have agreed that he knew Makoto better than anyone. But right from the start he’d missed so much, only seeing the nice and gentle person that Makoto had wanted him to know. Had he hurt Makoto, every time that he’d failed to notice the true mastermind right in front of him?

“I should have known you better,” Togami agreed, ignoring the irrelevant spoken words so he could respond to the more important question he knew Makoto had actually meant. “I should have paid more attention and understood you sooner. You must have waited so long for me to make the connections.” He had to glance away at that, shame twisting his mouth into a dark grimace. “I — I’m sorry that I couldn’t.”

“Don’t apologize!” Frustration snapped through Makoto’s voice, too violent to repress. “That’s not something to say you’re sorry about!”

He wouldn’t accept an apology, even knowing how the words soured on Togami’s tongue? That was almost insulting — until he remembered just how terribly his oblivious ignorance must have hurt Makoto.

“All right, then — I understand. An apology isn’t enough.” Togami straightened, taking a deep breath. “So tell me what is. Tell me what you need from me to make this right.”

It wasn’t the right thing to say to wipe away the defensive shield of lies from Makoto’s face — but at least it wasn’t the worst. Pleading hazel eyes bored into his, asking for an indefinable something
that Togami couldn’t quite reach.

“Trust me.” Little more than a whisper, just enough for the two of them. Makoto’s eyes never
flickered, holding his with all the warmth of an embrace. “Please, if you love me at all, try to trust
what I’m saying to you.”

Trust him…? Togami’s eyebrows drew together, the uncomfortable lines of confusion creasing his
face. He did trust Makoto, that was exactly what he’d been trying to explain. So why… why would
Makoto ask that of him, when he’d already offered it freely?

He’d missed a part of this conversation… an important element that would shed light on all the
others. He grimaced, shoulders flinching back with involuntary revulsion at the thought of learning
he’d failed to grasp yet another key aspect of the game… but no other reasonable explanation
presented itself. Makoto was asking something incomprehensible of him… and he needed to
understand before he could respond.

“What do you — what —”

The words vanished as a rush of unexpected pain seared across the back of the hand he’d left
resting on Makoto’s, silver flashing at the edges of his vision. Yanking his hand back in instinctive
self-defense, he saw the line of fresh blood welling up just behind his fingers, reopening some of
the other wounds and staining his bandages anew.

He spun in place, tracking the direction the weapon had come back to its origin — and wasn’t
surprised at all to find himself staring at Jill.

She scowled, a fresh pair of scissors materializing in fingers poised to throw again. “Gotta say,
darling, I am not a fan of being ignored.”

Togami glared back, pressing his opposite arm’s sleeve against his newly injured hand to try to
staunch the bleeding. “So you decided to throw scissors at us, instead of simply talking?”

“Been there, done that — didn’t work.” Without her usual breezy tone, the almost lighthearted
words sounded much more sinister. “It’s like you two over there are off in your own little world —
and I wouldn’t wanna be left alone with the mastermind.”

That spurred Makoto to straighten and send a glare of his own her way. “I’m not the mastermind!”

“Yeah, whatever. You’re not fooling any of us anymore.” Her eyes narrowed, and her grip on the
scissors changed ever so slightly.

Togami launched himself in front of the wheelchair before she could make another move, the
awful possibilities of scissors plunging into Makoto’s already-injured body screaming through his
head. “Don’t touch him!”

“Darling —”

The eye — the throat — the chest — how many kill shots could she make, if he gave her half a
chance? With her precise aim, those vicious blades, and an open field — what couldn’t she do?

His head jerked towards the throne, and he glared at the useless girl lounging up there without a
care in the world. “You’re the one who’s been enforcing the rules, right? Do something!”

“Huh? Me?” Enoshima blinked, and her eyes opened into wide and innocent circles as her hands
curled up towards her chin. “Aw, I dunno what you think I can do. It’s not like anyone’s breaking
any rules.” She shook her head in overdone sadness. “I’m not s’posed to get involved just cause someone might do something naughty. That would be denying you all your free will, and that’s a big no no!”

“So you’re just going to sit there and watch? Without even trying to protect him?”

Enoshima shrugged. “Rules are rules, and I pinky-swore to follow them! I can’t break them no matter what” She tilted her head, as though struck by a sudden idea. “But you didn’t make any promises like that, right? So there’s still something you can do!”

Chapter End Notes

**Schedule Note:** Due to limited time and emotional bandwidth to write, I'm going to be posting every other week from this point on. I may have to readjust again in the future, but hopefully not. Next chapter will be posted April 12. I hope you're all staying safe, healthy, and whole.
Chapter 388

Togami rolled his eyes in disgust — he’d thought Enoshima could think faster than that. She’d been piloting Monokuma, after all, so she had to have at least a few functional braincells rattling around in her head. But if so, she certainly hadn’t decided to use them yet. “If I could do anything to stop them from attacking Makoto, I would have done it already!”

She tilted her head innocently, and he could almost see a cartoon question mark pop into the air above her head. “Huh? But that’s weird — it looks to me like there are lots of things you can do.” She tapped a finger against her chin in a cloying show of calculated cuteness. “Three is lots, right? Seems like a lot to me!”

“Three? Three what?” He glowered at her as she let out a childish giggle. “Can’t you be serious for two minutes? This is no time for acting ridiculous?”

“Acting? You think I’m acting?” And in a flash the cuteness vanished, leaving a grim young woman staring into the distance with empty eyes. “I wish it were that simple.” She looked up into his eyes, and a chill whispered along all of his exposed skin. “No one is taking this more seriously than me.”

All the hairs on the back of his neck prickled, a primitive instinct hissing through his brain to retreat, retreat, retreat — but he refused to show weakness to the mastermind’s mouthpiece, no matter how clever she could act. When all was said and done, she only ranked second in command — the real mastermind would never let her touch him. With that firmly in mind, he forced back the unnecessary fear and glared at her. “If you’re genuinely attempting to be of assistance, then explain yourself.”

She glanced over at Makoto, probably believing that she’d hidden the debate warring through her head — and let out a cheerful schoolgirl giggle as she bounced to another personality. “Well, okay — I guess I can humor you, if you’re going to insist!”

“No!”

A whir of motion, and Makoto’s wheelchair zipped up to him. “No, don’t — don’t listen to her! You can’t believe her, she’s trying to trick you!”

Trick him? Enoshima, a girl who didn’t seem capable of holding the same thought in her head for more than thirty seconds together? Togami rolled his eyes at the idea. She couldn’t be a complete idiot, not if she’d been left to administrate so much of the game herself — but he couldn’t believe that she was in his league.

“You’re still trying to convince us of your story?”

Sharp tension shot through Togami’s shoulders at the sharp sound of Kirigiri’s voice. He refused to give her the satisfaction of looking her way, but he didn’t need to see her. After five trials with her, he knew how she stood at her podium with arms crossed and one eyebrow raised, studying Makoto like a specimen she planned to dissect.

“Are you trying to maintain a veneer of plausible deniability by refusing to acknowledge it?” She paused, presumably in the hopes of some kind of reaction — but of course Makoto didn’t break at such an obvious attempt. She sighed, a huff of frustrated breath faintly audible even across the circle. “I don’t understand what you’re trying to accomplish.”
No, of course she didn’t. How could she, when the mastermind had already proved himself smarter than all of them put together? They should have seen this so much earlier — who other than Makoto deserved to run rings around them all?

These continued objections couldn’t be serious attempts to deceive them, not really. No… they were just more proof that Makoto couldn’t trust him enough yet.

And that… that hurt, a knife twisting deep into the emptiness of his chest. Makoto still thought that Togami would try to interfere and ruin the careful plans he’d set in motion, given the opportunity. In spite of all the promises and explanations Togami had tried to offer, Makoto still feared that he would reject the ultimate goal of the game and side with those who stood against him.

Clearly words wouldn’t be enough — and Enoshima must have realized it already, too. His eyes darted back to her, and she met his gaze with a bright smile ever so slightly reminiscent of a shark’s wide grin. “Soooo…?”

She really wanted to make him say it? The childish insistence on spelling it all out brought a faint sneer to his lips, but nevertheless he gave her a curt nod. “If you have any useful advice, get on with it.”

“No —”

“Glad to hear it!” Enoshima drowned out Makoto’s attempt at another protest, but even the knowledge that he’d tried again gave the knife another twist into Togami’s heart. “But I mean, it really ought to be pretty obvious.” She toyed with a loose curl, tugging it away from the rest of her pigtail before letting it spring back to the place where she’d wanted it. “After all, it’s not like the game has actually stopped or anything.”

After so many shocks and shifts in his world, he had to blink for a few seconds before grasping what she meant. “You’re talking about the killing game?”

“Well, duh, it’s the only game on these days — unless you guys have started up a Monopoly marathon while I wasn’t looking!” And just like Monokuma, she paused to giggle at her own joke, in spite of her audience’s cold silence. “You know, I think there might be a copy stashed in the rec room somewhere. Maybe the winners can take it on for round two!”

Brushing aside the stupid fluff of her nonsense, Togami zeroed in on the key point she’d talked around. “What does it matter if the killing game is still on? We’re in the middle of a trial!”

“So?” She held up her Monokuma again, wiggling him in front of her face so his head bobbed slightly. “There’s no actual rule saying we can’t make it two for the price of one!”

She dropped the robot with a clatter, letting it roll into the darkness just beyond the halo of light illuminating her throne. “So like I said — if you really wanna prove you can help out Team Mastermind —” She waved a hand in a grand gesture around the circle at the other three girls. “You’ve got a choice of three!”
A choice of three… if you want to help the mastermind.

Enoshima’s words spun round and round through Togami’s head, a dizzying whirl of repetitions. She’d given him the answer he’d wanted, shown him the choice he could make to prove he would help Makoto… the choice of how to participate in the game that he’d promised to abandon.

The unexpected idea made his shoulders tense with discomfort, as if trying to force himself back into a jacket he’d long since outgrown. He’d let go of any thoughts of winning the game long ago, when he’d realized that he couldn’t bring himself to cause Makoto’s death. Winning could never have been worth the pain that such a result would cost him.

But of course, now that he knew the truth about the game’s origins, he didn’t need to worry about that particular nightmare any longer. The game couldn’t pose a serious threat to the mastermind running it, not unless they stupidly allowed it to do so… and Makoto’s skilled plotting proved him to be anything but stupid. So if he could trust that Makoto would be safe… if he didn’t have to fear hurting the boy he wanted to protect…

“You can’t be serious.”

Ogami’s voice cut through the whirl of confusion. He looked up, back into the darkness of the circle, and his eyes ached in protest as they tried again to trace out the other students’ features in the narrow beams of light. He’d spent so long staring at Makoto, close enough to touch, and Enoshima, in her own bright spotlight, that he’d lost the knack of seeing others. Little more than the dark outline of Ogami’s silhouette made it across the circle — but even with so little, he could still see that she’d braced herself in a fighting stance.

“None of us will stand still and allow you to make such threats,” Ogami went on, tension crackling from her in an almost physical aura. “If you mean to attack us, then we will certainly —”

“Leave your podiums?” Enoshima interrupted, propping her head on one hand, elbow braced on the throne’s armrest. “Before the trial is over?”

Metal whirred overhead, and Togami froze at the familiar sound. He couldn’t see what was happening above him, but he didn’t need to — not after the fourth trial. The sound of machine guns lowering from the ceiling couldn’t be mistaken for anything else.

“So it’s die if we do or die if we don’t?” Jill’s hands flew up, scissors poised in each one. “What if we take a third option?”

“Huh? I thought you were tired of the killing game — but you want to play another round?” Enoshima conjured up a ditzy, empty-headed smile. “Man, it’s too bad you couldn’t get this fired up a few days ago! But hey, who am I to stop you if you’re that pumped?” She tilted her head. “Might kinda suck for you if there’s no one left to deactivate the automatic trigger on the guns to take down anyone who gets too far from their podiums, though.”

A chill snaked down Togami’s spine at the thought of all the times he’d considered flouting Monokuma’s order to stay put at his podium through the entire trial. But it did make sense that security in the trial room had to be automated… why else would Makoto and Enoshima have felt
safe enough to enter in person with all their victims?

“So you believe we are cornered and defenseless?” Ogami shook her head. “Surely that applies to you as well, does it not? If no one may leave their podiums till the trial ends, then Togami would have no opportunity to commit a murder.”

She had a point — without some sort of projectile weapon, he couldn’t do much to the others. For a moment, he considered trying to locate the scissors that Jill had flung at Makoto — but throwing weapons had never been his specialty. He knew that he could hit a practice target at this distance with a knife — but a kill shot in these conditions was something else entirely. Between the unfamiliar heft of scissors and the heavy darkness blanketing the room, it would be a waste of time to chance it.

“Oh, you’re right!” Enoshima snapped her fingers in overacted frustration. “Too bad I didn’t think of that sooner!” She heaved a sigh, as if all the cares of the world weighed her down. “I guess there’s only one thing left for me to try!”

Her hand shot out, whip-fast, tapping a pattern against a piece of the throne hidden by the ornate curve of embellishments. It had to be a control panel of some kind, but he barely had a moment to consider what it might do before another mechanical whirring filled the room.

Where was it coming from? His eyes shot around the room, staring into the shadows around them — but the darkness remained as impenetrable as ever. He couldn’t even pinpoint the specific spot something was moving — every time he thought it might be in one corner, it came from another. It wasn’t above him, so at least he could eliminate the guns — but that was all he could tell. For all he knew, whatever Enoshima had set in motion was creeping up on them from all directions at once.

The thought raised all the hairs on his neck, and before he could think the better of it, he spun to check the room behind him. It should have been empty air, nothing but darkness upon darkness —

Until a jagged red lightning bolt burst into being, illuminating just enough to identify a terrifying black and white face.

Togami jerked back from the Monokuma robot advancing from the gloom, spine cracking against the podium as he instinctively sought to put as much space as possible between them. As bad as Monokuma’s disgustingly cute expressions had been, the lifeless face on this one was somehow even more unsettling. What was it doing? What would it do if it reached him?

But it didn’t. Its shuffle slowed to a halt a few feet away from him, too far to touch but still too close for any peace of mind.

Fighting to slow his racing heart, he forced himself to turn his head enough to address Enoshima. “What is this supposed — supposed to —” His angry demand fell away from his lips as he caught sight of the rest of the circle. Red lightning bolts slashed across the air behind the podiums of every student, alive or dead, their eerie glow encircling the students like chains.

“Nice, huh?” Enoshima beamed like she expected everyone to praise her. “Now, I know your first time can be rough, so I figured I’d make it as easy as possible.”

Light gleamed on the podium, and Togami glanced down to see the familiar sight of voting buttons that they’d used to select the blackened in previous trials.

“Shouldn’t be a tough choice, if you really want to show the mastermind how you feel.”
Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for your patience as I continue at this every other week rate. My writing speed has really been impacted by the stress, the change in activity, and the inability to get to my usual writing locations. I hope you're all staying safe and well!
Naegi watched Byakuya’s eyes flicker across the voting buttons and then out around the circle of their friends, and icy fingers clutched his heart at the emptiness he saw there. He wanted to believe that his beloved boyfriend would never kill one of the others, not after they’d all gone through so much together to get this far… but he’d wanted to believe the same thing about each of his other friends. He couldn’t deny that they could be hurt and broken enough to turn to murder… and now, at Byakuya’s expression, he found his faith slipping out of reach.

“Don’t hurt them.” He’d meant to shout, to fling the words out with enough force to strike for what he wanted — but they came out as little more than a whisper, fragile and small in the vast darkness around them.

And he might as well not have bothered. Byakuya ignored the words, just like he’d ignored everything Naegi had said about the truth. His hand crept upward, inching closer to the buttons as slowly as if struggling against the tide. But did that mean that Byakuya was fighting to stop himself from making a terrible mistake… or to overcome his subconscious resistance?

“Huh? What’s taking so long?” Junko’s voice scraped across his already-raw nerves, tightening his shoulders till a warning jolt of pain shot down his arm. “I thought you were gonna help, not drag us down. Are you not ready to commit after all?”

Every word hit home, slamming into Byakuya’s body with flinch after visible flinch. Naegi clenched his jaw, eyes burning furiously until the sight of his wavering boyfriend blurred. Why was he listening to her? She was just talking, no matter how smart she was. Naegi had poured everything he had into his pleas to stop, calling on every bond he and Byakuya shared — why hadn’t it been enough?

“Wait a moment.”

A scream would only have inflamed his panic further — but Kyoko’s controlled, even voice cut through the roiling tangle of thoughts. He glanced her way just as she leaned forward, just a breath further into the narrow band of light. He’d thought he knew what her expression would be, all iron masks and cold determination — but something about the woman in front of him didn’t quite match what his memory said she should be.

“This is still a trial, not an execution,” she said, bracing her hands against the edges of the podium. “You agreed to give us a chance to uncover all the school’s secrets, and we haven’t failed yet.” She smiled, without a trace of humor. “What will your audience think if you stop the show before it’s over?”

“Who’s stopping?” Junko giggled, and the every Monokuma surrounding the circle threw back its head in silent laughter. “Looks to me like our heart-throbbing battle between hope and despair is still on!”

Kyoko frowned. “But —” She stopped short, lips pressing into a thin line as her gaze flicked from the throne to the Monokumas. For a moment he thought that maybe she would keep talking, would come up with some brilliant idea that could stop everything from playing out according to Junko’s plan — but she didn’t say anything else after that. Of course she didn’t — how could she, when she didn’t even know whose plan this really was?

“It’s not like fighting for despair is so bad, you know.” All the emotion drained from Junko’s body
in an instant, and she slumped back against her throne with empty eyes. “When you look out at the world, it’s the only side that makes sense. Not like there’s anything else left to fight for — not for anyone here, at least.” Her eyes shifted towards him, though the rest of her face never even twitched. “The mastermind made sure of that.”

Nothing left to fight for — no matter how much he wanted to argue, it was hard to find the words to oppose her with knowledge of the Tragedy in his head. Against his will, Naegi recalled images of his ruined childhood home — not the brief glimpse from his video, but memories of tearing through the rubble in a desperate, futile search for any clue about his family’s whereabouts.

And it wasn’t just his own past that he’d seen shattered to pieces. When he looked across the circle toward Sakura, he recalled the wreck of her family’s cherished dojo — toward Jill, the smashed bedroom with shredded manuscripts and scissors laid bare for anyone to find. He’d seen the Kirigiri family’s closely-guarded secrecy torn away, faces and addresses plastered across the news broadcasts, and he’d heard about what happened as prison systems failed in nation after nation. And Byakuya — he would never forget the look on Byakuya’s face when he learned what had happened to every other member of the Togami family.

Naegi’s hand trembled against the wheelchair controls, and he couldn’t have operated it even if he’d known where to go from here. With those memories in his head, how could he possibly tell his friends that they had a reason to keep fighting? He’d seen with his own eyes that none of them did.

How could he expect his friends to fight against despair, when he knew their hope for the world outside was just a cruel lie? He could he tell them that they ought to go on resisting, when he knew what was waiting for them if they succeeded? Not wanting them to die — not wanting them to kill each other — was that just his own selfishness talking?

No. No, he knew that wasn’t true. It couldn’t be. As long as they were still alive, that was enough. But — he couldn’t think fast enough, couldn’t move fast enough, couldn’t reach across the darkness to make the others understand. The mastermind’s darkness wrapped around them all in this pitch-black trial room, and he didn’t have time to figure out how to break it. There were seconds, or even less than that, as Byakuya’s hand moved forward, forward, shadows pressing all around them.

And then the room blazed.

He yelped, eyes slamming defensively closed against the sudden surge of harsh light. Beside him, Byakuya’s startled breath hissed through his teeth, and three gasps of surprise came from around the rest of the circle.

No — four gasps. Including one from Junko’s elaborate throne.

“If you’re going to fight, you should do it fair and square!”

Naegi froze as Monokuma’s voice rang out through the trial room. How could he be talking if Junko was here? The control room was empty, there was no one left to operate the robot. He forced his eyes open, cringing in the stark light that burned down through the trial room.

Another Monokuma stood in the center of the circle — the one Junko had been holding, until she’d lost interest and tossed away. But unlike the robots surrounding the circle, whose red eyes seemed much less bright with the room alight around them — this robot’s lightning eye burned brilliant green.
Green — like Alter Ego’s computer screen.

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