Extra Life

by The_Apocryphal_One

Summary

Izuru knew he couldn't let her die, not like this, not while he had the power to save her.
Chiaki survives her execution—but the fate of the world is still sealed. The road to recovery is a hard one, and a reunion is far off.

TvTropes page is here, including links to all translations (Russian, French, and Spanish), the infomercial, and the audio reading!
http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Fanfic/ExtraLife
My brain: Hey, you know what’d be a good idea?
Me: No.
My brain: Starting a multi-chapter fic to fix Chiaki’s death while you have other fics going :) :) :)  
Me: Nooooooooooo let’s do it she deserves it.

At least Lost King is close to being done. And I don’t expect this to be super long either. But then again I thought Invisible Princess would be five chapters and it ended up double that, so... For people awaiting an Aftermath update—one’s coming out soon-ish, promise.

This has Hajime/Izuru x Chiaki in it, but it’s not a shipping fic per se; rather, it’s more about Chiaki’s survival and recovery. Hajime/Izuru and his relationship with her do play a part in that, but it isn’t the main focus. The first few chapters will be from his POV by necessity, and after that it’ll be Chiaki’s. We’ll also have some switching.

Also, this is canon-compliant, in that the events that happen in the games and franchise aren’t changed. Junko still brings despair to the world, sorry. This is mostly my attempt at having Chiaki survive in canon despite what happened to her, react to the events, and maybe, hopefully, eventually reunite with her loved ones.

Disclaimer: I don’t own Dangan Ronpa! If I did there would be a lot of differences, namely in regards to certain survivors...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tears...?

Kamukura Izuru’s fingers brushed the warm liquid running down his cheeks, surprise coloring the motion. He half-expected them to disappear at his touch, foreign as they were. But they remained, blurring his vision, obscuring the hairpin and the blood and the body of Nanami Chiaki.

As he thought her name, snippets of conversations—“...Gala Omega, right?” “...new game came out...” “...talent...” “...more than the Ultimate Gamer...”—flooded his brain so fast it left him dizzy. Flashes of a fountain, and a gaming console, and the same girl before him. Memories? Impossible. His past self was dead. But he was remembering things that hadn’t happened to him, seeing Nanami’s smiling face and feeling his chest flood with warmth, and now he was looking at her body, and he was—he was—

His breath hitched sharply. Someone had taken a knife and carved a hole in his chest, while someone else had taken a hammer and driven a nail into his head. That was what these feelings were. Grief, hysteria, confusion, Logic supplied, and Izuru felt his hands tremble. He’d known what they were called, but he’d never experienced anything like them before, and it was throwing him off guard. There was too much happening, too many things spinning around, and for once in his life he couldn’t begin to make heads or tails of it.
But even while part of his mind was distraught, overwhelmed by emotions and trying to understand what was happening to him, the other part was coolly analyzing the situation, examining Nanami’s body with clinical efficiency. As if in a trance, he crouched, ignoring the blood seeping into his pants, and reached for her wrist. He noted her fading pulse, clammy skin, and bluing fingertips. Combined with her earlier pale complexion, dizzy confusion, and of course heavy blood loss, the diagnosis was most likely...

*Class 4 hypovolemic shock, caused by massive exsanguination. Patient has lost consciousness and will be dead in minutes without treatment. Necessary steps: establishing airway to breathe. Applying pressure to wounds to stem further blood flow. Replenishing intravascular volume. Administering antibiotics to prevent septic shock and infection.*

*Patient will be dead in minutes without treatment.*

*Nanami Chiaki will be dead in minutes without treatment.*

*Nanami Chiaki will be—*

Before he could comprehend why he was doing so, Izuru found himself yanking off his blazer. His eyes ran over Nanami’s still form, pinpointing the most serious injuries as his hands tore the material into strips. *Three penetrating wounds in her abdominal area, multiple penetrating wounds and cuts on her arms and legs, one penetrating wound in her foot, one laceration on her forehead…*

It only took a few seconds to establish a patient airway by rolling her over, lifting her chin and opening her mouth. Then Izuru tore off her jacket, blouse and bra in one clean motion, paying no heed to her bare breasts. Mindlessly, he wrapped the makeshift bandages tightly around her injuries, hands moving at a blur. Only one thought, one he couldn’t even understand the reason behind, rang through his mind:

*He could not allow her to die.*

Hypovolemic shock was reversible, if treated swiftly enough. Contrary to popular belief, one’s brain did not shut down immediately upon experiencing traumatic injuries of this manner. There was a small window, the span of minutes, where it sluggishly slowed due to lack of oxygen as blood failed to travel to it. Slowed, but not stopped, and if quick enough medical action was taken, death could be warded off.

Three minutes. He had three minutes to treat her shock before her organs started taking damage. Each minute after that steadily increased the odds of permanent organic or neurological damage; with the amount of blood she’d lost, he suspected she would last no longer than ten minutes before dying. No—he probably had less than three minutes. How much time had he wasted, lost in his confused daze? No more than seconds, he suspected, but every one counted.

Unknown to most, Hope’s Peak Academy had an extensive underground complex that ran beneath the entire campus. Izuru had spent most of his existence down here, first by order of the Steering Committee, then by order of Enoshima, to keep himself a secret from the academy. He’d long since memorized the web of tunnels and rooms. The one they were currently in wasn’t too far from the rooms he’d been kept in as the Steering Committee tested him—the rooms that had the equipment that just might permit him to save her.

He bent and scooped Nanami into his arms in a macabre parody of a bridal carry. In normal circumstances, someone in her condition should either be moved via flat surface like a stretcher or not moved at all, but Izuru didn’t have a stretcher on hand, and it would be far too time-consuming
to fetch the apparatus to save her and bring them back. Trying to jostle her as little as possible, he set off down the hall at a sprint.

The part of the complex he’d been held in was spartan, made up of just the lab where he’d been “born”, a storage room that held food and other necessities, a clinic, and the room he’d stayed in when he wasn’t being tested—he could scarcely call it a bedroom. The clinic was there mostly in case something happened to him during his transformation or during testing, and was stocked with anything related to medical care, from Band-Aids to vaccines to surgical equipment. It was here Izuru arrived at seconds later, kicking the door open and laying Nanami down on the first cot he saw.

Izuru’s hand snapped over to the thermostat on the wall, raising it to warm Nanami before she experienced hypothermia. Now: assess and prioritize. He slipped an oxygen mask on her, not trusting her shallow breaths. Then he slid several pillows under her legs to elevate them, so blood would have an easier time flowing back to her heart.

Replenishing her blood volume was the next step. Izuru reached into a cabinet and began pulling down the equipment for a blood transfusion. *With the amount she lost, she’ll need multiple transfusions…what’s her blood type?*

His hands paused for a few seconds as he realized he didn’t know.

He could have transfused some of his own blood into her body, but his blood type was A—not O, the universal donor. If she were an A or an AB, she would be fine if she took his blood. If she were a B or an O, she would definitely die.

Fifty percent odds were unacceptable. So Izuru went for the second option: blood substitutes. An academy full of as many talented people as Hope’s Peak would naturally lead many fields, including science, and over the years had created successful solutions that simulated the properties of real blood. They were no long-term replacement, but they were suitable for usage in emergency trauma situations, such as this one. There were several packets also in this lab, and Izuru grabbed one and returned to Nanami’s side. Swiftly, he attached it to an IV and injected it into a vein along her elbow. As the IV fed the artificial blood into her body, he quickly fetched a crystalloid solution that would increase circulatory volume, helping the precious oxygen flow. This too was intravenously inserted into Nanami’s unconscious form.

Next, Izuru checked pulse and blood pressure again, swiftly hooking up her to a digital monitor. His eyes narrowed minutely when he noted they were fluttering, fading. He administered a dose of norepinephrine to increase blood pressure and aid her heart’s pumping. Almost impatiently, he stared at the monitor, waiting for the readings. Only when it informed him her vitals were weak, but holding, did he relax. He’d just barely clocked in under three minutes; good. There was always the risk of complications creating brain damage, but this gave her the highest chance of full cognitive recovery.

He paused long enough to catch his breath and run over what needed to be done next. Internal bleeding. He needed to check for internal bleeding and perform surgery if there was. *With the location and approximate severity of her injuries…a supine chest x-ray and FAST ultrasound on the abdomen are the first priorities.* The black-haired man hurried to fetch the appropriate equipment.

The radiography revealed three punctured organs—lung, spleen, and intestines. Izuru paused only as long as necessary to put on the proper surgical equipment, and then he went to work.

Between treating the pneumothorax in her right lung, suturing her intestines and spleen, performing
a head CT scan, monitoring her vitals, swapping her IVs when they ran out, changing her dressings when blood soaked through, and washing and stitching her wounds, it was more than six hours before the artificial Ultimate Hope was done. He was out of breath and up to his elbows in blood. His blazer was torn to shreds, the rest of his clothing was terribly bloodstained, and he looked more rumpled than he could remember ever possibly being. But he was successful, and his stitches as he closed the final incisions were neat and precise.

He felt drained as he went through the final stages of the treatment, giving Nanami a dosage of antibiotics to prevent septic shock and checking her vitals one final time. They were within acceptable parameters. And that was that—he was now gazing down at a weak but alive Nanami Chiaki.

Exhaling, he dragged a hand across his face, leaving a red smear on his forehead. Miraculously, the spears had just barely missed anything that would have instantly killed Nanami, and she hadn’t sustained any wounds beyond his abilities. To escape fatal injury, with as many wounds as she had...she was incredibly lucky.

Or maybe it wasn’t that she was lucky, but that he was? That his luck had somehow worked in advance, before he’d even known he wanted to save her, to spare her from injuries not even he could have pulled her back from?

Could his luck do that?

He very carefully removed her remaining clothing—it was beyond saving anyway—and draped a thick blanket over her. He could dress her in a gown once her stitches weren’t so fresh. Then Izuru set about cleaning up the area, letting the brainless work keep his body busy as his recently-freed mind examined what had just occurred. Sorting and compartmentalizing, as it had been built to do. Making sense of the senseless.

Fact: Nanami Chiaki had come within a hairs’ breadth of being executed by Enoshima Junko, and would have died without outside intervention.

Fact: He had been that outside intervention, saving her life.

Fact: He didn’t understand his motive for doing so.

That was the crux of it. Izuru was not a doer. He was an observer. He succeeded at whatever he did—even this, narrow as it had been, was a success—and thus had no motivation to act. Constant success became tiring, boring, and he had no connections to the world, no investments, nothing and no one to care about. Observing others at least allowed him to occasionally derive a spark of emotion beyond apathy, before it too faded away.

But for reasons he couldn’t comprehend, he hadn’t wanted Nanami to die. It was illogical. He’d only met her twice. There was no reason to care about her or her fate.

And yet there was something there, he thought as he attempted to work out why he cared so much. Some familiarity, some spark, something that drew him to her from that first meeting. Interested him in a way he’d only felt when Enoshima cooed about the promises of despair. But he’d only been curious about the concept, not Enoshima herself. Not like he had been curious about Nanami.

Maybe that was why he’d saved her. Because she was fascinating, complex, the only bright object in his world of monotonous gray.

But no. That was too clinical, too distant. Reminiscent of a scientist observing an insect in a glass
box—which was an accurate description for him, most of the time. But not this time. Mere curiosity didn’t account for the whirlwind of emotions that had descended upon him as he watched her bleed out, nor the tears he’d shed without realizing.

An emotional response to an emotional event. Which implied an emotional investment, an emotional connection. One that likely tied into his immediate fascination with her.

Izuru frowned as his mind came to the only logical explanation left. A logical explanation that was most definitely illogical.

Logically, it was Hinata Hajime’s memories and emotions influencing him. Nanami’s reaction to seeing him implied she had known his past self, been close to him. If the sentiment had been returned, those feelings would be sufficient for Izuru to feel like he should recognize her, become distressed upon her near death, and invest time and energy into saving her.

Just as logically, Hinata Hajime’s memories and emotions no longer existed. His personality had been erased and suppressed. Any feelings he might have had for Nanami Chiaki were gone. But they were the only things that could have motivated him to help her.

Ergo, the memories and emotions that had been destroyed somehow still lingered, at least in regards to Nanami.

Izuru sighed uncharacteristically, turning off the faucet as he finished washing his hands. All this pondering and the only conclusion he’d arrived at was a paradox.

*Paradoxes do exist in the world, though. Enoshima’s orgasmic love for despair—the most self-destructive of emotions—proves that.*

Tired red eyes looked over Nanami. She’d fallen into a coma and would need to be watched carefully, her wounds constantly checked for infection. After her spleen’s rupture, her white blood cell count would be low, making her more vulnerable to illness, so he would have to sanitize everything. And he would need to monitor her blood pressure. It would be a round-the-clock supervision, a difficult task no doubt, but not a particularly problematic one. Enoshima didn’t particularly care much what he did with his time, so long as he showed up when she called for him, and Izuru knew that once Nanami stabilized he’d be able to leave her alone for brief periods.

As if his thoughts had summoned her, his cell phone—which Enoshima had given him for ease of communication after the slaughter of the student council—buzzed in his pocket. Izuru pulled it out and examined it to see a text from the penultimate woman.

*Kamukura-senpai! Meet me in the trial room in an hour—I have something veeeerrrrry despairful and veeeerrrry important to tell you! The end of the message was littered with smiley emoticons.*

Well, that hadn’t taken long. He was a bit perplexed she hadn’t checked on him earlier, but replaying the events of today helped him arrive at a conclusion. *Ah, that's right—the purpose of Nanami’s execution was to drive her classmates into despair. Enoshima was likely occupied by finishing the process of breaking them. Possibly celebrating her victory as well.*

He eyed Nanami. He was loathe to leave her side now—this was the time she’d be most vulnerable, the most prone to relapsing. If there were post-surgery complications, such as her blood pressure suddenly spiking or dipping, she would need assistance immediately. But not showing up to meet Enoshima was dangerous. Her sister was already suspicious of him and would take any chance she could to justify it. Having them investigate his whereabouts could potentially lead them to the girl he’d just battled to save, and if they found her, they'd make sure they succeeded in killing her.
Izuru glanced at the machines Nanami was hooked up to. He was certain the academy had some state-of-the-art electrocardiography machines that could send signals to cell phones. In the time Enoshima had given him, it wouldn't be difficult to locate them and connect them to his phone. That way, if Nanami’s vitals fluctuated abnormally, he would receive a text alert. And the trial room wasn't too far. If he had to, he could utilize his ultimate stealth, break away from the meeting, and make it back here quickly. Enoshima wouldn't be too happy with him afterwards, but he was confident he could think of a good enough excuse.

Yes, that was an acceptable plan. And there were still a multitude of other tasks that needed doing. He would have to search the security feeds and wipe them if they'd caught what he'd done, dispose of Nanami's clothing, set up defensive measures around the room...

As he pocketed his phone, his fingers brushed against something else. Small, metallic, hard, oddly shaped. Izuru paused mid-stride and withdrew the object. It was Nanami’s hairpin, which had somehow made its way into his pocket during his mad rush to save her.

He stared at it, feeling a strange emotion swell within him. Contemplated throwing it away, then slide it back in.

Nanami would probably want it back when she woke up, but until then, there was no reason not to keep it with him.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Izuru never actually addresses anyone by name, so I had to decide for myself how he would. His usage of keigo (a formal style of Japanese speech) and boku suggests he’s pretty polite, but he’s so removed from the world I can’t see him using honorifics. So he calls people by just their surnames.

I did a lot of research on proper medical procedures and the locations of organs for this chapter, but as always there’s the chance I may have missed something or gotten it wrong, so if you see anything incorrect let me know!

From the screenshots I took of Chiaki’s death (watching that again sucked), she had three wounds in her abdomen, two low, one high. I drew up a medical chart to see if they’d hit anything—the lower wounds lined up approximately with her spleen and intestines. The upper one was dangerously close to her heart and lungs, but if she’d been hit in the former, she would have been out too fast to talk to Izuru, and a single punctured lung is survivable for a time. So it was blood loss that killed her.

Admittedly I’m milking Izuru’s ultimate luck for contributing to her survival, but you know what, if Nagito’s luck can influence Chiaki into grabbing the wrong bottle out of sixteen, the stars can align enough for Izuru’s luck to influence Chiaki into being just savable. Especially with assistance from the Ultimate Everything.

EDIT: Revised this and the next two chapters to be much smoother and more accurate~
A/N: Thanks to everyone who commented, Kudos or Bookmark'd this fic! It makes me so happy to know people are interested in it! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It took Izuru most of his allotted hour to prepare everything and then cover his tracks, but there was still just enough time for him to fetch a clean set of clothes and wash the blood off his body. He was careful to ensure no traces of what he'd just done remained—Enoshima's analytical abilities rivaled his own, and she was sure to notice if even a strand of hair was out of place. Once he was properly attired, Izuru made his way to the meeting with the Ultimate Despair.

Ikusaba was pacing below the base of the throne in the trial room, and when he entered her gaze snapped to him hawkishly—she'd never liked or trusted him after his thorough beatdown of her and her sister. A natural reaction, all humans would be wary of someone they couldn’t defend themselves against. Above her was Enoshima, reclining on the throne, legs crossed and smiling broadly as she played with the stuffed black-and-white bear on her lap.

When his eyes fell upon the strawberry blonde, another emotion built in his chest. Hot and cold, at the same time. Hostility, and a desire to inflict pain. *Anger*, he realized, the satisfying image of himself strangling Enoshima flashing through his mind’s eye, *this is anger.*

He’d always had a slight dislike of her, after the way she’d manipulated and pinned the blame of the student council’s murders on him, but not enough to actually want to kill her. Not enough to jeopardize the promise of an unpredictable future. So what changed? *Nanami’s execution,* he realized. He was angry—furious—with her for what she’d done to Nanami.

Interesting as this development was, it was unexpected and now he had to account for it. Working to hide the anger before it touched his face, Izuru continued his approach with barely a pause in his steps.

“Kamukura-senpai~!” Enoshima tossed the bear aside and bounced down the stairs when she saw him. “So glad you could make it!”

He came to a halt, one hand clutching Nanami’s hairpin, hiding it from her view. “What is the purpose of this meeting?” Izuru asked, carefully keeping his voice toneless.

She waved a finger teasingly. “Ah-ah-ah! Before we get started, I have a little something to ask you. See, on my way back I made a little detour to grab Nanami-senpai's body, and it was gone! Did you have anything to do with that?”

It was asked lightly, innocently, but her eyes were sharp and focused. Izuru kept his face exactly as blank as it usually was—no more, no less. Lying was just another of his many abilities, and she would get no tells from him.

“I removed it for disposal,” he said calmly. “Then I cleaned myself up and returned to my room.”
She studied his face a moment longer. He stared back at her evenly.

Then, with a little laugh, Enoshima rocked back on her heels, buying the lie. “Aw, that’s so considerate of you! Don’t you wish all guys were as considerate as him, sis?”

Ikusaba shrugged, and Enoshima whipped around, glaring at her. “Hey, I asked you a question!”

“If he were so considerate, he could have cleaned the blood off the floor too,” Ikusaba grumbled, contrite solely because it was Izuru involved.

“You’re a soldier, you’re used to it. Suck it up and shut up, you flat-chested good-for-nothing pig.” As Ikusaba flushed from her sister’s words, seemingly pleased in that strange way of hers, Enoshima turned back to Izuru. “Now, I’m sure you’re just dying of curiosity to know why I called you here, so prepare yourself, because the answer’s going to knock you off your feet!”

She spun in a circle, arms spread wide. “I’m getting my memories erased!”

He blinked, slowly. “For what purpose?”

Coming to a halt, Enoshima tapped a finger against her chin. “Hmmmm, let’s call it…an experiment. And a safeguard. You see, that Sakakura wasn’t the only one the school asked to poke his nose in my business. You know Matsuda Yasuke, right? Well, a little while ago I got word from him that the board asked him to interrogate me—with his talent it’d be a cinch. Such a pity his loyalty to his lover outweighs his loyalty to them. So he’ll be helping me hide in my own mind for a little while.”

Matsuda Yasuke, the Ultimate Neurologist. Izuru was indeed familiar with him; the doctor’s work had played a part in his own memory erasure. Though apparently the procedure wasn’t perfect if flashes were resurfacing. He contemplated telling Enoshima this and decided against it—it was more interesting this way. “I see. And how long will this experiment last?”

“Eh? You’re asking how long I’ll be gone? Could it be…you’d miss me?” She gave an exaggerated gasp. Switching into her shy kouhai persona, Enoshima brought her hands to her cheeks and lowered her head, peering up at him through her eyelashes. “Wah, for Kamukura-senpai to notice my absence…it’s such an honor! But wait, what am I supposed to do about Yasuke? I-I don’t want break either of your hearts!”

Rather than dignify that with a response, Izuru narrowed his eyes at her.

“Wah, from hot to cold so suddenly? Could Kamukura-senpai be what they call a tsundere?” As suddenly as her coquettish behavior started, it stopped, and Enoshima flipped back to what passed as her normal. “I’m not really sure how long this will take—I don’t expect it to be more than a few weeks.”

A few weeks. Enoshima and her sister would be occupied for a few weeks, affording him the time necessary to watch over the most critical parts of Nanami’s recovery and plan for the long term. That was perfect. His luck was once again coming through for him.

Though speaking in the long term, simply killing Enoshima and Ikusaba was the best way to ensure Nanami’s safety from them, and part of him was tempted to do exactly that. But doing so would destroy the only chance he had of having his boredom relieved. Enoshima had promised him an unpredictable future, and he wanted to see if she could carry it out.

Though Nanami’s actions, first in the trap and then with me, were quite unpredictable as well, even though she wasn’t acting in despair. She was acting in hope. What could that mean?
Pinning the thought for another day—another time when he could philosophize—Izuru returned his attention to Enoshima. Between the facts that she was going undercover for a while and that he had no plans to leave Nanami during her recovery, the Ultimate Gamer was in no immediate danger from the strawberry blonde. Nothing would be able to hurt her as long as he was by her side—that wasn’t arrogance, just plain fact. If Enoshima did try to attack Nanami again, then he would be there, and he would stop her. Kill her, even. But that was a last resort.

Killing her permanently closed off a door. He didn’t want to be trapped in a boring world. Speaking of which… “And this is supposed to be interesting?”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ve left this trashy dumbass plenty of instructions on how to make this experiment entertaining!” Enoshima clapped her hands gleefully. “And my precious new despairs will be keeping up the masquerade of high school students during the day, but for a few hours each night they’ll be practicing, improving their skills in the art of despair-spreading. You can watch, or you could always jump in and lend a—hey, where are you going?!?”

“We’re done,” he called over his shoulder as he began heading for the door, “You have informed me of your plans. I will be watching; try not to bore me.”

“Awww, I made Kamukura-senpai mad at me. What’s a girl to do, sis? I try and I try and he just doesn’t care…”

He ignored her ramblings as he walked away, hands in his pockets to hide how they were clenched into fists.

Enoshima lived solely because she was still of use to him. That didn’t mean he had to like it, or her. Even Izuru wasn’t certain he was fully human anymore, after what the Steering Committee had done to him, but he knew he shared the same functions as one. He still needed food and sleep, albeit perhaps a little less than average. So rather than tend to his survival separately, Izuru migrated to what he had unconsciously deemed “Nanami’s room”. He would spend nearly all his time in there watching over her anyway; it was simply logical to bring all the necessities he needed as well.

He left his bed behind, simply dragging one of the spare cots next to Nanami’s. He carried in two portable fridges, one stocked with food, the other with extra blood (O—he’d looked up Nanami’s blood type as soon as he could, and found she was an O). Changes of clothes, and a laptop that allowed him to continue his observations of the school in his spare time—their security was so lax that even if he hadn’t had talent, he could probably have hacked into their system. That was all he brought, but that was all he needed.

As for where he got everything…well, Hope’s Peak was so busy in the wake of the murders, they wouldn’t notice a few stolen amenities here and there.

Over the next three weeks, he watched Enoshima wandering about with her muddied memory and false life. He watched as the Reserve Course students’ Parade grew steadily worse outside the gates. As the Main Course blissfully pretended nothing was wrong, as the board lied and covered up their corruption, as the media started sniffing around.

The world outside was slowly succumbing to chaos and despair, but inside the hidden room with Nanami, that world didn’t seem to exist.

He’d expected that caring for her would soon grow boring, like everything else. Possibly even
faster than normal—she was comatose, unresponsive, unable to provide the answers he so desperately wanted. And while the routine quickly did become boring, it didn’t become a chore. Each action had so much weight for her survival, and that made each action precious.

Every day he swapped her IVs—at first giving nutrients in addition to blood and crystalloid solution, then solely nutrients when her intravascular volume was within acceptable parameters—, washed her body with a sponge, cleaned her wounds, changed her bandages, and disinfected everything that entered her proximity. Once her stitches weren’t at risk of tearing open, he adjusted her body every four hours to prevent her from getting bedsores. He eventually removed the chest tube and ventilator. He monitored her body temperature, blood pressure, respiration rate, and pulse rate, marking even the most minuscule of changes in a log. The constant surveillance gave him very little time for prolonged hours of sleep, so he sustained himself through multiple cat naps, nodding off lightly in his cot.

It was good that things were uneventful. It meant that her body was healing smoothly, even if her mind remained unresponsive. A combination of the oxygen deprivation, blood loss and general emotional trauma had sent it fleeing to the depths of unresponsiveness. But by his estimate, she should move from her coma to a persistent vegetative state in a week or two; from there, it was simply a matter of waiting for her to “wake up”.

When he wasn’t treating her, monitoring the school, or tending to his own needs, Izuru would stare at Nanami for long periods of time, one hand playing with her hairpin as he watched her chest rise and fall. He often pondered the mystery of her and her behavior. Even unconscious, she fascinated him. Despite being in the midst of what had to be terrible despair—betrayed by her teacher, locked in a death maze, tortured and left to slowly bleed to death—she hadn’t succumbed. She had pushed through unfathomable odds, all based on a hope to see her friends again, with a shocking kind of fortitude.

And then there were his own actions. Never once in his existence had he been pushed to act in anything other than self-defense, but with Nanami, it hadn’t even been a question. He’d wanted to save her, and he had. Could that be classified as hope, in a way?

Could hope be as driving as despair?

He sighed, pulling himself out of his musings so he could start his daily examination of Nanami’s injuries. They were healing well, he noticed as he swapped out the bandages; the laceration on her forehead was the shallowest and faring the best. It had scabbed over, the skin around it pink and puffy. A few stray hairs were sticking to the edges of the wound, and Izuru brushed them away.

Once he’d done so, though, he inexplicably found his fingers lingering, stroking her pink strands. Red eyes examined them curiously; this was something he found himself doing occasionally, his touches turning to caresses without his permission. It confused him why, but he found the actions soothing—grounding, in a way. So he permitted himself these irregularities.

Philosophy aside…there was still that pull to her. That bone-deep need to ensure she was alright. This…tenderness that welled up, from out of nowhere, when he gazed at her sleeping, fragile-looking form. The tightness in his chest whenever he thought of how she’d almost died, not just by Enoshima's hands but by his own inaction. It was maddening in its unfamiliarity, and at the same time, fascinating.

She was an unknown variable, one he wanted to solve. To analyze. Why she cared, why she struggled, why she so strongly believed in hope…these things piqued his curiosity. For once, he was curious about an individual, and about the feelings she could stir in him. Not the ones she was showing him, like Enoshima, but actively making him feel, for either no logical or a highly
improbable reason.

He had questions, and for once no answers.

*But no,* Izuru thought suddenly, inspiration dawning as he recalled a flash of red hair, fed from the security footage, *perhaps that isn’t entirely true.*

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It was perhaps the only time he’d left the complex since he’d started watching over Nanami. Izuru didn’t intend to be away long—he knew where the amnesiac Enoshima was going, and he knew the fastest way to get there before she did. So when she arrived at corridor leading to Matsuda’s office for her appointment, flipping through her notebook, he was there, waiting, a black shadow on a white wall.

The girl faltered when she saw him. “Eh…can I help you?” She attempted a brave smile, even as she took a step or two away. All the nerves in her body were buzzing uncertainly, even if she didn’t know why.

All she knew was that this young man had a certain presence…a presence that scared her.

He studied her with unnervingly piercing red eyes. “Does the name Kamukura Izuru mean anything to you?”

She shook her head slowly, frightful eyes darting around as she clutched her notebook to her chest.

“Ikusaba Mukuro?”

Shake.

“…Enoshima Junko?”

Shake. She peered up at him, a bit fearful at his reaction to her lack of knowledge on these people she should, apparently, know. His face was completely blank, unreadable, and it only made her more agitated. “L-Look,” she stammered, “if we’ve met before, d-don’t take offense that I don’t remember! I have a really bad memory, so—I’ll just look through my notebook—”

The stranger snatched it out of her hands, crossing the distance between them in the time it took her to blink.

“No, wait, please give that back, I need—eh? Eh?”

The redhead looked around wildly. He was *gone,* completely *gone,* how could anyone just *disappear* like that? And he’d taken her memory journal! She could feel panic starting to swell in her—she was already starting to forget what he’d looked like, and then she’d forget he was there at all, and then she’d never get her journal back, and then—

“Why are you standing about with your mouth gaping like a fish? It makes you look dumber than usual.”

She wheeled around and *oh,* the heavens were parting, the sun was smiling, Matsuda-kun was standing before her. His handsome face was scowling, as usual, and her journal was still gone, but he was here and that was all that mattered. Everything would be fine now that he was with her.

Everything was *always* fine when he was with her.

“M-Matsuda-kun! It—it was terrible! There was some guy—I can’t remember what he looked like,
but I know he was here—and he took my memory journal! It’s gone, we have to find it, he stole it—"

He scoffed. “Or you just dropped it, you idiot.”

“Eh?” She turned to see it lying on the floor behind her. She blinked. “How did you get there?”

*Wasn’t someone else here?*

But when she picked it up and flipped to the latest entry, there was no mention of another person. She frowned, feeling a vague sense of uncertainty. As if somehow, that shadowy person was important. But if it wasn’t in her journal, it wasn’t important to her. And if it wasn’t important to her, it didn’t have anything to do with her, and so she allowed the last vestiges of memory to slip away. She clutched her journal to her chest, bouncing on the balls of her feet, blissful to have it back even as she forgot why.

Matsuda-kun was turning back to the door, holding it open for her. “Maybe your brain’s finally breaking down and now you’re hallucinating as well as forgetting.”

Hallucinating? Hallucinating what? “Eh?! That sounds scary! I-I don’t want to start hallucinating!”

As the two entered the examination room, Izuru emerged from his hiding place in the shadows, head cocked.

So that was Enoshima without her despair.

It was fascinating how…*similar* she was, to the Enoshima he’d known. Still vapid and peppy, but much less sadistic. He’d already seen how despair could warp a personality—first with the student council, then with Class 77—but it was something else to meet a person twisted by despair, then meet their original self. It offered a different perspective, and he valued perspective.

And there was something else interesting, too, the very thing he’d come here to test. The confusion in her eyes when he’d recited those names hadn’t been fake, and neither had the panic she’d shown when he’d taken her journal. She genuinely didn’t remember anything of him, her sister, or even herself, and she genuinely believed the lie she was living.

But he’d recognized the emotions in her eyes when she’d beheld Matsuda. They’d been full of admiration and happiness and love. She couldn’t remember whatever past she had with him, probably couldn’t even remember why she loved Matsuda, but she still did. Every single memory she had, had been stripped away, yet that emotion survived.

…*just like me…*

If the memory erasure had failed to take those emotions from her, then it was logical to conclude it had failed to take them from him as well. The paradox he’d hypothesized was true after all: he retained Hinata Hajime’s feelings for Nanami Chiaki. And judging by some of the patterns and connotations of his behavior around her, they were romantic in nature. He retained Hinata Hajime’s *romantic* feelings for Nanami Chiaki.

Izuru turned the sentences over in his mind, a bit of uncertainty prickling at him. He had the root of his actions, now, but what was he supposed to do with this newfound knowledge? What did it change?

Nothing, he finally concluded. Knowing that he was romantically attached to Nanami surprised him, certainly, but nothing had really changed. He still wanted the gamer to survive, he still wanted
to get the chance to talk to her, and he was still willing to look after her. His goals were the same as before. All he’d done was put a label on his motivations.

So quietly, he melted away to return to Nanami’s side, leaving no sign he’d ever been there except for a slight scuff on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A persistent vegetative state is actually what most people think of when they hear the word “coma”—a coma patient is completely unaware of what’s around them. A patient in a persistent vegetative state is aware of their surroundings; they can hear you talking to them, for example, but they’re still unresponsive. Comas rarely last more than a month, but a persistent vegetative state can last years.

Izuru strikes me as the kind of guy who wouldn’t deny any emotions he feels—he’s driven by logic, and denying something’s existence in the face of supporting evidence isn’t very logical. That doesn’t mean he has any idea how to handle them, however, or that he’d ever be ruled by them.

If you’re wondering who the characters in the last section are, they are Ryouko Otonashi and Yasuke Matsuda, the protagonists of DR0! If you haven’t read it I recommend you find a translation and do so, it’s very good. Though if you haven’t read it…well, I just spoiled the big twist for you, sorry. But I couldn’t resist giving them the cameo they didn’t get in the anime (one look at Yasuke through a window doesn’t count), and I wanted to draw comparisons between Ryouko’s situation and Izuru’s.
Nanami’s pupil was small, contracted so as to not be blinded by the light shining into it. But when Izuru waved his hand in front of her eye, it did not track the motion. He gently released her eyelid, turning off the pointer light and setting it aside; his daily examination was finished.

He hadn’t left the gamer’s side again since his encounter with the amnesiac Enoshima two weeks ago. Physically, her injuries were mostly healed by now; the scabs had fallen off, leaving healthy scar tissue in their wake. He massaged the muscles in her limbs to keep them from atrophying, but she would still be very weak, and unfortunately there was no way for Izuru to test whether she’d suffered any neurological damage. Not until she regained consciousness.

As he’d predicted, Nanami’s brain had slowly started showing signs of activity shortly after his trip outside. She experienced a somewhat irregular sleep-wake cycle, and her face would sometimes twist and grimace without cause. But she did not respond to outside stimuli; verbal commands were ignored, and any movements she made were instinctive, involuntary, not purposeful. She couldn’t eat or speak. She was neither fully aware nor fully unconscious, but halfway between.

Logically, Izuru knew there was no pattern to someone in a persistent vegetative state waking, and that all things considered her recovery was progressing well enough. But he still couldn’t help feeling slightly impatient. That itch inside him, that need to know her, to see her fully recovered, was becoming difficult to ignore. Mentally, he rifled through his archive of knowledge and talent for any possibility he might have overlooked.

Ah, here. Medical studies reported that speaking to vegetative patients sometimes helped them leave the state; the sound of voices stimulated certain nerves in the brain, making it more alert and active. Theoretically, that helped spur it to wake up faster, and apparently offered some modicum of comfort besides.

…well, he supposed he could try just to see what would happen.

“Nanami,” he began, and halted. Interesting—attempting to speak now was making him feel foolish. Was it because of the person he was speaking to? No, he hadn’t been struck by this emotion either of the times he’d spoken to her before. Then it had to be because of the situation. Understandable; for all his talent, idle conversation was not his forte. He spoke only when he saw reason to, which was rarely, and couldn’t recall ever speaking casually with anyone in his existence. His teachers had only spoken to him to test him, in questions and answers and riddles, and Enoshima was perfectly content to just talk over his silences. What was he supposed to say to someone unable to respond?

Play to his strengths. State the facts. It was in man’s nature to find the unknown frightening; logically speaking, then, facts were reassuring. “…You are safe,” Izuru continued, fingers of discomfort crawling like spiders up his spine, “your body has healed well, and the one who wished
you ill does not know you are alive. I have been tending to your recovery for the past five weeks.”

She did not respond. Of course she didn’t, it was foolish and illogical to assume she would magically awaken at the mere sound of his voice. This was real life, not a romance novel.

He searched for something else to say, and remembered what he’d watched only a few days ago: Enoshima, stabbing Matsuda and then stomping on his corpse until it was nothing but pulp. “…You have nothing to fear from me. I am not going to harm you.”

Her brow crinkled, then smoothed over. An automated response caused by the irregularities in her brainwaves, nothing more.

Izuru rose, fingers automatically curling around her hairpin in what had quickly become a habit. “…Take as much time as you need to recover. I will not leave you.”

He spoke to Nanami’s body a few more times after that, but before long stopped—he simply ran out of things to say, and the embarrassment that came with it became boring. It was months before Enoshima called on him again, months since her experiment had come to an end. He’d watched it all with boredom, seen the panic of the school board and the bloody corpses of the Steering Committee left in Ikusaba’s wake. The Despair Sisters were back in action; the Ultimate Soldier was currently out doing dirty work for her sister, but he still locked and trapped Nanami’s door before leaving.

Enoshima was waiting for him in the room she’d held Mitarai in, spinning around in a chair and still dressed in the outfit she’d adorned during her amnesiac phase. He came to a halt inside the doorway, waiting until she slowed enough to see him. A large grin spread across her face, and she stuck a foot out, stopping the motion of the chair.

“Kamukura-senpai!” the strawberry blonde gushed, leaping up. “Ohmygod, it’s been so long! Tell me how you’ve been! Did you miss me?”

Flatly, coldly, he answered, “No.”

He’d barely thought of her when he wasn’t monitoring the school, truth be told. He’d quickly grown bored of being angry at Enoshima—he was not going to act on it, and without some form of catharsis the state became stale and dull—but to his vague interest, that anger was resurfacing just by looking at her. Additionally, it had fundamentally altered his perception of her. Rather than slight dislike combined with tolerance, as he had previously felt, he now held just dislike, which he had to forcibly reign in.

She sniffed, crocodile tears welling in her eyes and…mushrooms somehow appearing on her head. “How could you be so cruel? We’re supposed to be partners, you know! It’s been months since my loss and you’re only just now visiting—and then you say something like that! Don’t you know it’s appropriate to comfort a girl when she loses her lover, not scorn her? My poor Yasuke…” She wiped away a calculated tear.

“If you did not want him dead, perhaps you should not have killed him.”

Enoshima tossed her head back and barked out a laugh; the mushrooms went flying away. “Oh, but where would the despair in that be? Love is pain and pain is despair, so love is despair! I loved my beloved Yasuke so much. I loved him right ‘til death do us part, and it hurts so much that he’s gone…” Her arms wrapped around her body, red painted fingernails digging into her skin as she let out a noise halfway between a laugh and a sob. Interesting—for once, Izuru couldn’t tell whether
she was feigning it or not.

But if the emotion was genuine, it vanished in the next second as, with a definitely fake wail, Enoshima buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders heaved with overdramatic sobs. He stared at her with apathy, watching as she wept theatrically, occasionally peeking up at him through her fingers.

“Y’know,” she finally cooed, lowering her hands, “this is the part where you’re supposed to hold me close as I cry into your chest about my lost love.”

Izuru let his scornful silence and minute narrowing of his eyes be his answer. Enoshima laughed again, abandoning her weeping widow act. “You really are completely dead inside, aren't you? I wonder, were you born that way, or did my despair do that to you?”

Her last idle comment reminded Izuru of one of the conversations he’d eavesdropped between her and Ikusaba, amidst his monitoring of the school. The soldier had asked why she didn’t just hand him over to the Reserve Course; Enoshima had laughed, condescendingly explaining how if she did, their anger would dissipate. Letting the storm build was much more profitable. She’d finished up with a statement that he was definitely in despair now because of her, so it wasn’t as though he were a real threat anymore, which had been almost amusing to him.

It meant one of two things. Either she was lying to placate her sister—doubtful, given what Izuru had observed of Enoshima’s past treatment of her—or else she was greatly deluded about how much impact she had on him. Even before he’d discovered Nanami and her hope, he hadn’t been in despair. Just bored and curious. So for Enoshima to think she was that influential over his mental and emotional state…it was almost amusing.

Still, while the woman herself was boring and predictable, the ideas and experiences she brought were not, and that was what prompted him to ask, “What does it feel like? Not just losing the man you loved, but knowing you are the reason he is dead.”

A manic grin overcame her face, even more crazed than her usual ones. “Eh?! Kamukura-senpai’s asking me to share my feelings with him?! Oh, how I’ve awaited this moment! How could I refuse such an offer?”

She began roaming her hands across her body, eyes half-lidded as she began, “It’s like someone’s ripped my chest open and stomped on my heart. Like the sky’s falling down around me and the ground’s swallowing me whole. It’s been months now, and this despair is still so despairingly strong…so despairingly beautiful…so despairingly orgasmic!” A deep blush spread on her cheeks, and she moaned, long and drawn out. “It’s hard to imagine I could ever feel a despair more despairful than this! And maybe that’s the greatest despair of all!”

Killing the ones you loved was supposed to be the peak of despair…? Izuru tried to imagine killing Nanami, and the image it brought did make his stomach roil—but not at all in the pleasant way Enoshima described.

If the end goal of despair was murdering your loved ones…wasn’t that…predictable? Simply all roads leading to the same point in the end? But the actions taken on the way weren’t predictable at all.

Did unpredictable actions outweigh the fact that they led to a predictable future? Or would the apparently unpredictable actions prove to have patterns in them as well, ones he hadn’t yet discerned but eventually would? Or would he find that more than one variation of the future was available through despair?
While he’d been musing, Enoshima had shifted into her teacher guise, adjusting a pair of glasses as she propped up a comically large corkboard. “Now, to what’s next on our itinerary as Ultimate Despairs.” There were several printed out photos, charts and graphs on the board, and she tapped a pointer against a photograph of herself and five children. “Direct your attention here, if you would.”

Izuru’s eyes drifted over the children in the photo—three boys and two girls, about ten or so in age. All had brightly-colored hair, except for one whose appearance was hidden beneath a handmade leather mask. The model tapped the pointer against the photo again, as if for emphasis.

“While you’ve been ignoring me for the past few months, I’ve been out making more connections. Meet Towa Monaca-chan and her little friends, the self-proclaimed ‘Warriors of Hope’.” Enoshima scoffed and tossed the glasses aside. “Ugh, isn’t that just the most disgusting title you’ve ever heard? But hey, they’re kids. Give ‘em even the slightest bit of affection and they’ll lap it right up. They can call themselves whatever they want, as long as they call themselves mine in the end.”

The name she’d mentioned triggered a flash of recollection, information fed into him by his teachers. “Towa…as in Towa Takuichi? She is related to him?”

“Bingo! Little Monaca-chan’s his brilliant but unwanted bastard. She’s actually the chief executive of the Towa Group’s robotics branch—at such a young age! That means she’s got access to all their materials…all their resources…all their robots.” Enoshima rubbed her hands together gleefully. “And since I’ve been such a great friend to her, she’s agreed to take a commission for me. Soon, I’ll have enough robo-bears to cover the world…I’m thinking ‘Monokuma’ sounds like a good name for them.

And that’s not even the best part, oh no! See, there’s this kid in my class, Fujisaki Chihiro, the Ultimate Programmer, who was invited to work on this rather fascinating project at the start of the school year with Yasuke and some other chick. After lots of talking to Fujisaki-kun and looking through Yasuke’s now-available notes, I’ve finally analyzed just exactly what it is. And lemme tell you, it holds some rather delightfully despairful possibilities!”

She tapped a large sheet of paper giddily. Izuru examined the information there, a spark of interest flickering in his chest. A *therapeutic program intended to help those suffering from PTSD and other traumatic events; technology and techniques that, theoretically, could cure mental manipulation; a peaceful, unassailable virtual reality as the stage...*

“You want to get a leg inside this program somehow,” he theorized, “and corrupt it so it will further spread your despair. A virus of some sort, inserted beforehand, is the logical conclusion. Then you will test the program via a proxy to see how well it works.”

“Someone give the man a prize!” Enoshima cheered. “You got it in one! I took the liberty of making it already—a nice little Junko 2.0, who will infect everyone in that program with my loveable personality. Even if I die, I will live on…ah, how wonderful.

“Now, this is only a last resort, in case something happens to me—which means something happened to my sister too. The ugly little pig wouldn’t know how to live without me. And with the way my brainwashing works, most of my despairs would also fall apart. So that leaves only you to fetch my AI and upload it in the event of my untimely and tragically despairful death. Would you do that for me, Kamukura-senpai?” She fluttered her eyelashes.

An AI. A mind-altering program. A virtual reality with no outside interference or influence, only what existed within.
A way to see which was truly stronger, truly more unpredictable, hope or despair.

The first fragments of a plan began forming inside Kamukura Izuru’s mind.

“"I shall,” he said, and Enoshima squealed in girlish delight. “Ah, I knew I could rely on you! My AI’s going to be in Towa City, so if you ever need to pick it up just mosey on over there!”

She locked her hands behind her back and smiled, rocking back on her heels. “All the pieces have fallen into place, and soon the show’s going to start! Graduation day… that’s when it all goes down. You can wait for just a few more weeks, can’t you, Kamukura-senpai? I promise it’ll all be worth it…”

Sure enough, only a few weeks later, at the end of the school year, Enoshima launched her plan. The fall of Hope’s Peak Academy had been a senseless slaughter, buildings set alight and both students and faculty cut down in a variety of creatively painful ways. Then the mass suicide, the talentless Reserve Course students leaping out of buildings or running into flames, their purpose served. It was both boringly predictable—everything went exactly according to Enoshima’s plan—and unpredictably chaotic. The behavior of the Main Course students was interesting to watch, to try and see which of them would break down and cry; which would try to fight back; which would run; which would stay with their friends; which would abandon them to save their own lives…

Truly…the final confrontation between hope and despair will be a sight to see. One that would hopefully—finally—provide him with the answer he sought. Provide him with freedom from this monotonous existence.

He’d entertained Enoshima and her sister for the final time, listened to her monologue, double-checked that she’d erased the 77th class’s memories of him, and then come back down to the complex to finish preparations for his departure. First, he did as he said he would and removed his memories of the 77th class. He predicted that Nanami would want to know about their fate, so he’d only erased his knowledge of their personalities, not what they had become. This also allowed him to retain his ability to deduce which areas they would flock to, and avoid them—while he wished to make his next encounter with them more interesting, he also wished it to be on his terms, and those terms did not include having an unconscious Nanami in harm’s way.

No sooner had Izuru finished erasing his memory before he was off to fetch her and take her away from this place. Transporting her presented a slight conundrum—the stairs leading up and out meant he could not simply push her around on the cot. Proper medical procedure was for her to be moved to a stretcher, which would be carried by a team of at least two. For all his talent, he was still only one person. However, he was one person with a far greater amount of strength than normal.

He’d long ago determined through x-rays that her spine was uninjured, and enough time had passed that the rest of her wounds had scarred over. Thus, carrying her without fear of further injury was plausible. He unplugged the girl from her IVs, carefully picked her up, draped her over his shoulder, and left the complex. He emerged into the aftermath of a battle; bodies of the Reserve Course students littered the ground around him, red slowly seeping into the pavement and grass. The mass suicide had put an end to all the fighting on the Academy grounds; all was deathly silent, except for the sounds of a chopper’s whirring blades. His eyes slid up, to where he could see the news helicopters hovering in the air above, spotlights shining down and highlighting the gruesome carnage.

Avoiding them was child’s play—he simply calculated the areas the reporters would be most
focused on (the areas with the most death and destruction, in addition to anything largely symbolic), as well as the angles, sizes, and speeds of the beams, to deduce where and when the lights would be sweeping. Using that he navigated a quick, easy and unseen path to the gates, which had been torn down by the Reserve Course; Izuru deftly maneuvered over the twisted metal and headed to the ambulance he’d stolen the day beforehand and parked further down the road, hidden from view.

He quickly hooked Nanami back onto the IVs awaiting her. She had neighbors in piles of other supplies, necessities for her survival and his that he’d moved here the day before. His laptop was safely in its bag, sharing space with the consoles and games Izuru had, after a bit of thought, packed for the Ultimate Gamer. Everything was tied down securely so it wouldn’t go flying and hit Nanami—or so she wouldn’t go flying. Then he slid into the driver’s seat and turned the key in the ignition, one hand already pulling up the GPS on his phone.

Staying at the academy was an option he’d considered, but discarded—Enoshima had gleefully confessed plans for another killing game before they’d parted, telling him to stay tuned to the news. He didn’t know when Enoshima would start it, but when she did the entire area was going to become a battlefield as people predictably tried to break the doors down to rescue the students. One misplaced bomb or landmine could cause part of the complex’s ceiling to collapse, potentially on top of them. Furthermore, food and supplies would eventually run out, which meant he would have to leave to fetch more, and everything the school had had been repurposed inside the shelter for the 78th class. Stealing it from them would be more trouble than it was worth.

So no, this time the most logical thing to do was seek out civilization. He had no intention of mingling with those within any more than what was necessary to restock, but the choice of location mattered. It had to be large enough to provide easy access to the supplies he and Nanami needed, but small enough to avoid catching the Ultimate Despairs’ eyes. Izuru had scouted out several locations that would suit his purposes just fine, and made his decision based off his analyses of where despair would be slowest to strike, how populous each place was, what supplies it offered, natural location, distance, and other factors. He was confident in his selection; there, he would wait out both her recovery and the time to finalize the details on his plan.

And so they drove off, leaving the dying academy behind.

Time passed.

Despair continued to spread across the world. Enoshima Junko bided her time in the shelter of Hope’s Peak Academy, waiting for the chance to spring her game. The Ultimate Despairs, among them the 77th class, committed unspeakable horrors in her name, their minds broken and twisted into believing they were doing good. The Future Foundation was born in the face of this conflict, struggling to fight back. Miles away from it all, Kamukura Izuru arrived at a quiet little town and quickly set up a place to live. Occasionally he left to travel to large cities and observe the chaos there, but for the most part he was a ghost on the fringes, a shadowy protector for the girl within their sanctuary.

Until one day, Nanami Chiaki’s eyes fluttered open and met his.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Izuru just did not want to cooperate with me this chapter. It’s going to be so nice writing Chiaki’s POV.

Screw the Neo World Program and screw trying to figure out when it was created. The best I could deduce was that it probably wasn’t made specifically for the Remnants of Despair, because all the equipment and that whole lab on Jabberwock Island would probably have taken months to build. So production probably started in advance. And it sounded like the sort of extracurricular work a student might take on, so…

Also, Junko’s using male pronouns for Chihiro because, given her Ultimate Analysis, she’s probably already figured out his secret—assuming he hasn’t told the class by now.
A/N: Hello again, everyone! This chapter’s more an interlude connecting last chapter and next chapter. Not a lot of plot. But we do get the reunion (meeting?) you’ve all been waiting for! So without further ado…

The world was timeless, and dark, and warm. It was like a dream, all slow and syrup-y. There was someone else with her, she could tell, but they were just beyond her reach. A few times she thought she heard their voice. She never felt particularly harried to go seek them out; they weren’t going anywhere. She could stay cocooned in this forever, and so she drifted.

What could have been seconds or years later, she realized there was something nagging at her head. A persistent little thought that, once she became aware of, she couldn’t ignore, no matter how much she tried. She grimaced and tried to turn away from it, but it pursued her.

*I need to get up. Class starts soon, Yukizome-sensei won’t like it if I’m late…*

Once the words rang through her head, they dominated her world, *get up* echoing around her. She felt herself get snagged by an invisible hand and dragged backwards through the darkness. It seemed to narrow around her, becoming a tunnel, and she was fast approaching a light—

As soon as she passed through it, she snapped to a halt. She was in the darkness again, but it was different from before. Heavier and more tangible.

Awareness came in the form of touch first. Her limbs felt like lead. There was something pricking at her elbows and wrists, like a needle? And her pajamas seemed really thin against her skin. The air was unusually warm; had the academy finally fixed her room’s broken heating machine? She would remember someone coming in and doing that, wouldn’t she?

The silence struck her next. Their rooms were soundproof, so no outside noise wasn’t unusual, but she was sure her good old SNES had come down with a case of coil whine. She’d planned to ask Soda-kun to take a look at it so it would stop humming at night. Or had she done that already, and he’d fixed it?

*Class,* her sluggish brain reminded her. Reluctantly, Chiaki cracked her eyes open and was almost blinded by the lights overhead. She grimaced and squeezed them shut, seeing spots on the back of her eyelids. After a few tense seconds, she dared to open them again by a narrow slit. Through her eyelashes she couldn’t see much, but the ceiling above her was definitely *not* from her room.

*What…?*

Opening her eyes a little more proved safe. With her clearer vision, she could tell that the ceiling was tile. White, and utterly uninteresting. She stared at it blearily for a few moments, then turned her head to her right, feeling her neck crick.

Red. Red was the first thing she saw. Red eyes boring into hers, set in a face partially obscured by
the thick black hair that cascaded long past his shoulders. But she still recognized that face; it was a face she’d waited months to see again. Her heart jumped.

_Hinata-kun_—no. She knew he was Hinata-kun, but wasn’t at the same time. She knew that somehow, knew _him_ from somewhere. How? She grasped for memory, but it slipped through her fingers like water. All she had was the vague sensation of running.

With that realization, her heart began to pound fists against her ribcage, and the air was suddenly gone from her lungs. Where was she, what was happening, why didn’t she remember—

“Be calm.” The voice was almost exactly like Hinata-kun’s, but a little deeper, a little softer. It compelled her to immediately obey. She’d heard that exact same voice before; it was _familiar_, and she clung to it. “You are in no danger here. You are likely experiencing disorientation and short-term memory loss. That is normal for someone emerging from a deep period of unconsciousness.”

A deep period of what? “Wh…” Her voice sounded thin and reedy to her ears. It faltered, cracked, and emerged as a harsh cough. Chiaki licked her lips, newly aware of how dry her mouth and throat were. The young man set aside the laptop he’d been using and rose from his chair. He left her field of vision, returning moments later with a cup in his hand. His other cradled the back of her head, lifting it up.

“Do not attempt to speak. Your voice has grown weak from disuse; you will need a few minutes to regain control over your vocal functions.”

He lifted the cup to her mouth, and she tasted water against her lips. Slowly, she parted them, and the liquid poured down her throat. For a brief, terrifying moment she forgot how to swallow, and almost gagged; but then instinct took over, and it went down. She coughed again.

Not-Quite-Hinata-kun retrieved a tissue from somewhere and wiped away the excess water that had dribbled down her chin. For the next few minutes he went about checking something near her bed—a machine, maybe? Chiaki relaxed backwards, wanting to talk but suddenly feeling too exhausted to try. She yawned, and his head turned.

“It seems you will be falling asleep,” he observed, studying her face closely. “Do not fight it. Your body knows what it needs.”

She wanted to protest—she had so many questions to ask—but her eyes were already sliding shut, and before she knew it the world was once again swallowed by black.

Chiaki had no idea how much time passed before she woke again. It was a bit easier than before, less unnatural, and she actually felt a bit refreshed. Like the first time she was a little disoriented upon seeing the foreign ceiling, but regained her bearings faster. She looked around for the man from earlier and quickly saw him sitting in the same chair as before, one leg drawn up with his arm resting across the knee, his eyes still on her.

Despite clearly seeing that she was awake, he made no move to approach her, and Chiaki took the opportunity to investigate the room a little more. The IVs were no longer injected into her arms, was the first thing she noticed. The second was that she was just in a cheap, thin hospital gown, which contrasted the very comfy bed she was lying on. The room looked about the size of a regular bedroom, though devoid of any personal customization. A single door lay at the far end of the room, next to a dresser, and the solitary window behind the man was closed, curtains shut.

This time when she tried to speak, her voice obeyed. “Hinata…kun…?”
“No.” His voice wasn’t particularly kind or unkind. Just monotone. “This is his body, but Hinata Hajime’s mind and personality are dead.”

What? His mind and personality are—dead? What? How? Her heart pinched. Did that mean Hinata-kun was dead? That…that couldn’t be true. And yet, somehow it didn’t ring false.

She—She needed to think. Just from the way this person talked, she could tell he was different from Hinata-kun. That didn’t mean Hinata-kun was dead, right? Just—not here. Maybe amnesiac, or a clone, or…something.

…It would be rude not to ask his name, though. “What should…I call you then?”

“Kamukura Izuru is the name I was given.”

What an odd name…don’t I know it from somewhere? “Kamukura-kun…” She paused, giving him time to protest at the honorific; he didn’t, and so she continued, “what happened?”

“Specify. Are you asking what happened to Hinata Hajime? What happened to you?”

“Both. Either. I don’t…” Chiaki squeezed her eyes shut; her head was pounding. “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

With the nonchalance of one talking about the weather, he said, “There was an attempt to kill you. I found you shortly after and preserved your life. You have been in a coma for one month and a persistent vegetative state for seven.”

What? The sheer shock of his statements jolted her eyes open, the migraine flying out of her head. Someone had tried to kill her? Eight months had passed? None of that was possible. That just…couldn’t be possible. She remembered yesterday perfectly; she’d gotten up, gone to class, worried about the Parade, and then… and then…

Okay, so there was that blank spot. But eight months couldn’t have passed in that time. She told him so.

Kamukura-kun stared at her flatly, then dropped his leg and rose. He pulled out a cellphone and stepped towards the bed. Flicking it on, he turned the screen towards her. She peered at the displayed date.

The words May 28 winked up at her. Last she remembered, it had been September. Chiaki’s shoulders slumped. She still couldn’t believe it, but right there was irrefutable proof that eight months of her life were gone just like that. She’d missed New Year’s celebration—she’d made plans to visit the festival with her friends—she’d missed graduation—her class was going to throw a huge party—she’d missed—god. She’d missed her own birthday. She was a year older now. She didn’t feel it.

If that was true, then…then could the part about someone trying to murder her be true as well? She wouldn’t have thought someone could have snuck into the Academy, but—but it had happened before, right? Someone had snuck in and murdered Kuzuryu-kun’s sister, all that time ago. Had some psychopath really attempted to do the same to her? She reached for that missing memory again. All she pulled up was a laugh ringing in her ears and a too-wide grin stretching before her eyes, and she instinctively recoiled. A shiver shook her body.

“Do not worry,” Kamukura-kun’s voice cut in, and she glanced up at him, “I kept your survival secret. Your attacker thinks you dead and will not be coming after you again.”
That was a bit of a relief, she supposed, especially since she couldn’t even remember what her attacker looked like. Her tense body relaxed. Then the rest of his words sunk in, and a jolt shot through her.

“You kept it secret? So—my friends and family—”

“Think you dead as well. It was necessary to keep you safe.”

Oh god, what had they gone through? Eight months. She’d been assumed dead for eight months. How badly were her friends grieving? What about her parents? They’d never been close, but still—

“We…we can tell them now, though, right?” His flat, blank stare was a very clear no, and she frowned. “Why not?”

Cryptically, he said, “The world has changed much as you slept, Nanami.”

“What does that mean?” As soon as that one question came out, it was followed by an onslaught of others, all the bottled-up emotions coming loose. “What happened to the world? What happened to Hinata-kun? Where did you come from? Who tried to kill me? How’d you—”

Kamukura-kun raised a hand, halting her stream of words. “I will explain everything later. Continuing to do so now will only overwhelm you. Learning of your coma and attempted murder is already a great deal for your brain to process.”

Chiaki puffed her cheeks out, suddenly feeling a great deal of empathy for every video game protagonist ever who’d had to deal with vague “I’ll explain later”’s from mysterious figures. She wanted to know now. But the worst part was, she knew he wasn’t wrong; just what he’d told her already made her brain feel like it was going to explode. She took a deep breath and tried to organize the information he’d given her like in a quest log.

I woke up in an unfamiliar bed. There’s a strangely-familiar stranger. He told me I barely survived a murder attempt. I’ve been out for months, and everyone I know thinks I’m dead.

Sounds like the prologue of an RPG.

Attempting to be surreptitious, she stole a glance at Kamukura-kun, who had returned to his seat, trying to get a feel for his character. Long black hair, red eyes that almost seemed to glow, attractive but stoic face. No doubt about it: if this were an RPG, he’d be the aloof, all-knowing, mysterious character, the one your party encountered multiple times but wasn’t sure whose side they were on. Like Asch in Tales of the Abyss.

What else? He said he’d tended to her recovery, so maybe he was a doctor? But he wasn’t dressed like one. But if it wasn’t his job, why had he looked after her? Eight months was a long time to commit to something like this.

He said his body used to be Hinata-kun’s, whatever that means…maybe there’s something left of Hinata-kun in there? That was a nice thought, though maybe she was just being wistful. Hinata-kun had been her first friend, her first best friend. He’d been…special to her. She didn’t want to believe he was completely dead.

But…was it unfair to think like that? Kamukura-kun had saved her life, he deserved the dignity of being addressed as himself, not as a shadow of her best friend… So then, wouldn’t using ‘Kamukura-kun’ but secretly projecting ‘Hinata-kun’ be rude too? Even in this short interaction, she could clearly see how different they were. Hinata-kun was always so uncertain, anxious even, but he was so alive in comparison to the glacial, formal Kamukura-kun.
And...he didn’t make her feel the same way Hinata-kun had. Talking to him didn’t make her feel light and floaty. Her heart hadn’t jumped into staccato when their eyes had met. The face was the same, but the differences—in expression, in posture, in hair, in eyes—were just so great...

It reminded her of that first thought when she saw him: even if he was Hinata-kun, he wasn't. Even if Hinata-kun still existed, he wasn't here right now.

In the end, there was really only one question that mattered, one only she could answer: did she believe in Kamukura-kun? Did she believe what he’d told her, and did she believe that he had her best interests at heart?

Listening to what her heart was telling her, she quickly found the answer. “...Okay. I’ll hold you to that.”

He blinked at her. “You are not afraid? I just informed you that you are completely defenseless and weak, in an unknown location with an unknown man as your only company. No one knows where you are, nor do they believe you to even be alive. Any other in your place would find that a frightening position to be in.”

Chiaki shook her head. “No. If you wanted to hurt me, you’ve had plenty of time to do it. And more than that…” She paused, trying to figure out how to verbalize her thoughts. “I just know I can trust you.”

“…You know you can trust me.”

“I don’t know how to explain it.” She pursed her lips. “It’s like...I know I’ve felt your presence and heard your voice before. It’s...safe.”

If she hadn’t been looking at him in that exact instance, she would have missed the fractional widening of his eyes entirely. As is, it was such a small movement she wasn’t sure she hadn’t imagined it.

“...Such a decision is most illogical. You are indeed a curious person, Nanami Chiaki,” he finally said.

“Well, not everything has to be about logic. The world would be boring if it were...I think.”

He wanted to test her for any lingering neurological or mental damage immediately, and he tested practically everything. How well she could track him across a room, how far she could see clearly, how much of her past she remembered, how much basic knowledge she had, whether she could feel his hand's grip on her thigh, her knee, her arm. By the end of it Chiaki was exhausted and ready to go back to sleep, but she tried to keep her eyes open at least long enough to finish hearing him out.

“You retain sensation in all your limbs,” he surmised as he released her forearm. “That is fortuitous. It means you will still be able to use them. It will take time to return them to the shape they used to be in, but a full recovery is not out of the realm of possibility.”

“That’s good to know... though really, I’m just glad my hands are safe. I’d be devastated if I couldn’t play my games anymore.” What had happened to her games, she wondered with a pang? An odd thing to worry about, given the circumstances, but they were so important to her. They defined her, like it or not. The thought of her friends slowly boxing them up, thinking she would never need them again, brought a lump to her throat.

That risked sending her down a road she didn’t particularly want to travel, so she pushed it to the
back of her mind to pay attention to what Kamukura-kun was currently saying. “Mentally, you also appear to be fine. You do not appear to have anterograde amnesia or retrograde amnesia, though further testing will be required to solidify that.”

“Alright.” Despite her efforts, her mood had swung down a bit, and it must have shown. Kamukura-kun studied her for a long moment, seemingly considering something, then said, “There is one more thing.”

The raven-haired man reached into his pocket and pulled something out. Chiaki blinked. “Is that… my Gala Omega hairpin?”

Kamukura-kun’s face was completely unreadable as he answered. “It fell out of your hair. I predicted you would want it back, so I held onto it.”

He placed the pin in her hand, and she managed to curl her fingers around it, a bit of happiness flickering back in her chest. She could barely lift her arm, but it was still nice to have it again, nice to have an anchor to her life eight months ago. “Ah, you were right. Thank you for that. It was really thoughtful of you.” She smiled at him.

He looked away. “From here on out I will be tending to your recovery and return to peak health. I predict it will be a long process; I will draw up a rehabilitation program and have it ready by tomorrow.”

_Tomorrow_? That seemed awfully quick, and Chiaki wondered yet again just who Kamukura-kun was. But he’d said he’d explain later, so she smiled again and dipped her head gratefully. “I’m in your care.”

Chapter End Notes

_A/N: Yes, I know Izuru has the hairpin in canon. Don’t worry, I know what I’m doing. All will be explained in time._

_Reason for the dates! I…actually had to go back and edit the amount of time Izuru spent watching over Chiaki because I miscalculated the date of her execution._

_Whoops. So here’s the fruit of that labor:_

_Chisa’s return from the Reserve Course is in March. Six months before that is September, so that’s the month Komaeda was suspended in. That’s important because Episode 7 has “the first anniversary of Komaeda’s death”, or suspension. Episodes 7-10 occur very closely to each other, within a few days…so Chiaki’s execution was in September._

_Assuming Hope’s Peak has the normal term length as a Japanese high school, their graduation date would have been in March, and that would have been when the fall of Hope’s Peak happened. So Chiaki spent six months unconscious at the academy; the Tragedy happened; and it’s been another two._

_Also, most people wake up without any memory of what put them in the coma in the first place. That’s convenient for me, since I don’t have to tackle the issue of the failed rescue mission right away. There’s already a lot Izuru needs to explain to Chiaki, a lot for her to process, without having to acknowledge the mess that came with that._
The next morning, Chiaki woke up with her stomach loudly making complaints about how empty it was. Attempting to push herself up so she could get out of bed proved fruitless; her arms quaked beneath her, then collapsed. Her second and third tries were no more successful and left her back at square zero—lying on her bed hungry and unable to do a thing about it.

As she was pondering how to solve this, the door opened and Kamukura-kun stepped inside, a plate of food in his hands. Chiaki’s stomach gurgled longingly as the appetizing smell wafted towards her. Unable to lift her upper body, she settled for craning her neck to try and see what was on it.

“You will not be able to stand or walk for a while,” he stated as he took the chair next to her bed, somehow guessing exactly what she’d been trying to do. He set the plate down on his knees, and the Ultimate Gamer’s mouth watered as the food entered view. He’d brought her the traditional Japanese breakfast of grilled fish, miso soup and rice. It looked as divine as it smelled. “Weeks, at least.”

At that moment Chiaki wouldn’t have cared if she never walked again. She just wanted that food, and she eagerly reached for it, forgetting that nothing was working like she was used to. Her arm lifted barely a few inches before thumping against the bed. Her fingers twitched, the digits useless, and she let out a frustrated noise.

“Your muscles have atrophied during your coma,” Kamukura-kun explained as he started slicing the fish. “I did what I could to lessen the effects, but some decay was inevitable. You lack the muscular strength, mobility, and fine motor control for even the most basic of activities. So I will be assisting you.”

“Ah, you really don’t have to—”

He cut her off by bringing a piece of salmon to her mouth, clearly expectant. Looking at the chopsticks as they hovered in the air, Chiaki thought about trying to take them, but quickly rejected the idea; it took everything she had to keep her fingers around her hairpin. She’d never manage to hold the utensils. Slowly, trying not to feel guilty about being so helpless he had to do things for her, she murmured her thanks and parted her lips.

Her eyes popped open in surprise as the flavors exploded onto her tongue. Oh my god he’s got maxed out cooking. The salmon was grilled to perfection, drizzled in soy sauce and garnished with daikon. It was as incredible as Hanamura-kun’s food, maybe even better. “Did you make this?” she exclaimed, shame forgotten, eagerly opening her mouth and leaning forward for another bite.

He placed the next morsel in her mouth, barely withdrawing the chopsticks before she snapped it shut and chewed. “Yes.”

“It’s delicious!”

The rice and soup were equally as exquisite, and at the end of the meal she leaned back against the pillows with a content sigh. Trying to sit up caused her entire body to tremble, but it felt good to be even a little vertical. She watched Kamukura-kun eat his own portion; unlike her, he didn’t seem to
relish the food, mechanically moving it towards his mouth without a change in expression.

Minutes ticked by in silence. Now that her belly was satisfied, Chiaki became aware of another pressing need. Fidgeting slightly, she glanced at Kamukura-kun, who had just finished his breakfast. “Um…could you help me get to the bathroom?”

She’d been expecting him to offer his shoulder to lean on as she tried to stumble around. What she wasn’t prepared for was for him to scoop her up effortlessly and set off down the hall. Chiaki gasped in alarm, fingers automatically trying to dig into his shirt for purchase. She could feel the warmth of his skin through his clothes; with his demeanor, she’d almost expected him to be cold.

They went down a flight of stairs. He somehow opened what must have been the bathroom door without dropping her. The pink-haired girl barely caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror—frightfully thin and pale—before Kamukura-kun carried her past it and set her down on the toilet. She shifted uncomfortably, waiting for him to leave. He did not, and with a hot surge of mortification she realized why: he was going to have to help her.

Chiaki refused to look anywhere near Kamukura-kun throughout the process, face burning as she kept her eyes on the ceiling and tried to play *Gala Omega* in her head.

When that embarrassing set of business was over, he brought her back to her room and helped her into a clean nightgown. She did ask for regular clothes, but he informed her it was easier to do physical therapy in something loose-fitting. At least the gown had a little breast pocket for her to keep her hairpin in.

It was also now that she saw her new scars for the first time, staring down at her skin as it was revealed. The two jagged scars on her belly looked like they came from surgery, but her eyes ran over the smaller, rounder ones on her chest and covering her arms and legs in confusion. *What could leave injuries like that? Was I shot? But why keep shooting, unless you kept missing my torso? You’d have to have really bad aim for that....* She almost wanted to ask Kamukura-kun about it, but wondered if she was just better off not knowing. There had to be a reason her brain forgot about the event, after all.

Then, picking her back up, Kamukura-kun brought her back downstairs to start the therapy.

It began with him wrapping his long fingers around her forearm and stating only one thing. “Stop me from lifting this.”

Easy, right? The sort of thing she could do without thinking. But she suddenly couldn’t muster up any resistance, and he brought her arm up effortlessly. Chiaki frowned. “Let me try again.”

The second time, she also failed to stop him. And the third, fourth, tenth times. Forget lead; her limbs may as well have been made of butter.

They did this for a few minutes, then went through the whole thing again with her other arm, then both her legs. Then shoulder shrugs, which were easier; sitting up for long periods; stretches; squeezing one of those squishy stress balls she’d always privately thought Kuzuryu-kun could have used; and other exercises she wouldn’t even have considered. When it was over she was so tired she just fell right back asleep, right there on the living room floor. She woke up to find a blanket over her and smell food cooking in the kitchen.

And so that was how that first week—and she only knew it was a week because Kamukura-kun told her so—went. Chiaki felt like a baby, spending most of her time asleep and needing assistance
for everything during her waking moments. Bathing, combing her hair, brushing her teeth, there was nothing she could do alone. It was depressing, to wake up one day and find that she’d gone from functional human being to invalid.

That first day set her schedule. When she woke, Kamukura-kun brought up breakfast from the first floor. After she’d eaten he helped her go to the bathroom, then changed her into a clean gown and brought her downstairs. In the living room he would put her through her physical rehab for most of the morning. They’d stop for lunch, then she spent the afternoon napping while he did…whatever he usually did. She’d wake up for dinner, after which there’d be a bit more therapy, then he brought her back up to get ready for bed. Wash, rinse, repeat.

Throughout this Chiaki got to see the rest of where they were living. It was a typical five-room house—dining room/kitchen, bathroom, living room, and two upstairs bedrooms. While Chiaki did have a wheelchair, it stayed on the first floor; Japanese homes didn’t really have room to build ramps from the second floor to the first, so Kamukura-kun carried her up and down the narrow stairs each time. The place was nice, but to her it seemed a bit sad. Empty, almost. There was a distinct lack of city sounds and smells, and Chiaki guessed they were somewhere in the countryside. She couldn’t confirm, though, as there was one thing that set this place apart from a regular house—Kamukura-kun always kept the windows curtained shut.

At the end of the week he handed her a Game Girl Advance, and Chiaki almost shrieked in joy. “You are not to neglect your therapy for this,” he stated, eyes narrowed as he watched her eagerly flick it on. The prompt for a new game flashed on the screen, which was to be expected; her old games had probably been sent back to her parents by the Academy. “Only play them in your free time, not when you’re supposed to be exercising.”

“I will, I will,” she promised distractedly, already lost to the wonderful world of Pokémon Emerald. “Thank you so much!”

'Free time' was really only during meals and the little she could stay awake before succumbing to sleep. But soon enough, her internal clock had reoriented itself, and her hours started to look like a normal person’s. Chiaki found that she slept less during the afternoons, and her precious games ate up her little free time. Figuring out how to play with her limited range of movement was a bit of a challenge; she had a hard time holding the console, but she quickly discovered she could play just by resting it on her lap. Stabbing the buttons didn’t require much dexterity, after all.

While her games did distract her for a while, they didn’t prevent her from turning one question over in her mind—namely, who Kamukura-kun was. It wasn’t that Chiaki didn’t trust him, she did, she just didn’t know how to start connecting to him. He seemed almost inhuman in how still and quiet he was. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. So she almost tiptoed around him, while he seemed content just to watch her do so. When they talked, it was only questions on her end and short, blunt answers on his, or else verbal instructions from him and acknowledgments from her, or those bland 'good morning' 'thank you for the meal' exchanges.

Chiaki knew she was being selfish. She owed it to Kamukura-kun to know him more. She owed it to Hinata-kun to find out what had happened to him. But she wasn’t ready for that yet. It was strange, to spend a year wondering, then not want to take the answers once they were in reach. Because she could see how different Kamukura-kun was, and she so did not want 'dead' to mean dead. She existed in a limbo, unable to pretend Kamukura-kun was who she’d known before yet equally unable to accept Hinata-kun might be gone.

It couldn’t go on like this forever, she also knew. She could ask other questions, avoid the elephant in the room, but sooner or later she would have to face it.
She only hoped she would be strong enough to endure the answers, when she asked for them.

“Kamukura-kun?”

His head angled slightly towards her, a gesture she’d learned was his acknowledgement of her calling his name. It had now been about two weeks since her awakening. They’d finished another physical rehab session, and the muscles in her limbs burned almost painfully. But she’d managed to keep her arm firmly on the mat, which she felt absurdly proud of, and she was able to sit up without leaning on something. They’d be trying standing next, as well as holding objects.

She was resting against the wall behind her, watching as he typed something into his laptop on the other side of the room. It seemed he was always on that or his phone when he wasn’t helping her. Chiaki was a bit curious what he did on it, and made a mental note to ask him later.

“Will you tell me what happened to you now? I mean, I know you say you aren’t Hinata-kun, but I’m still not entirely sure how…” She made a fruitless gesture in his direction with her arm. “Well, how you happened.”

She’d slowly begun getting a clearer picture of how things were. Her friends had graduated, then faked their deaths—something to do with Hope’s Peak shutting down? He’d been frustratingly vague about that. Yukizome-sensei had apparently gone back to working with her boyfriend. Now she was out of ways to stall; the only way to progress the story was to bite the bullet. While she hadn’t forgotten about his scarce hints as to the world’s state, she’d just…decided it wasn’t important at the moment. It was hard to worry about what might have happened to the world when you couldn’t even feed yourself. And frankly, if she wasn’t ready for the truth of Kamukura-kun’s connection to Hinata-kun, there was no way she'd be ready for the truth of whatever happened to the world.

He was silent, and she tried to determine whether this was one of his ‘I’m silent because I’m not going to answer’ silences, or one of his ‘I’m silent because I’m just taking my time responding’ silences. He was so taciturn it could have been either, really.

Evidently, it was the latter this time. In his usual monotone, he began, “To gain entrance to the Reserve Course, one must normally pay an extortionate amount of money. However, Hinata’s parents could not afford the tuition fees, so he was instead allowed in on a special scholarship. In exchange for being permitted to attend, he would need to comply with a certain, secret project when the board was ready.”

Chiaki already didn’t like where this was going. Secret projects never ended well in video games. A stone had dropped in her belly, and she shifted, feeling dread and uncertainty well up within her. Still, she forced herself to pay attention.

“Eventually, the time came for him to pay his dues or drop out of the Reserve Course entirely. He chose the former, and so the Kamukura Project began. Over the course of the next six months, all traces of Hinata’s personality, memories, emotions, thoughts, and hobbies were systematically erased. This was so the scientists could pour every talent they could into the vessel, creating me.” Kamukura-kun fell silent, apparently finished.

Chiaki felt sick to her stomach. What he was talking about, was—human experimentation.
Lobotomy. It was something straight out a horror game, except it was real life. She could scarcely believe her school, the school everyone looked up to, had been engaged in such activities, but there was living proof right in front of her. She brought a fist up to her mouth, holding back the bile.

That last time she saw Hinata-kun—had he been ready to go meet with the board and start the project? He must have. His last words to her had practically screamed death flag, for goodness’ sake. Why hadn’t she seen that he was about to do something rash, that he was saying goodbye? As his best friend, she should have known, somehow… I failed him.

Her next thought wasn’t much better. If I’d told him how much he meant to me, would he have gone through with it? Could I have stopped him? This was why real life needed save files, so she could go back and reload and fix everything. The Ultimate Gamer ducked her head, blinking back tears. “That’s just…I have no idea what to say. I’m sorry.”

“Your apology is meaningless. What happened, happened, and you had no part in the events.” The first sentence stung, but from the second she guessed he wasn’t really angry. It didn’t do much to stop the miserable feeling churning in her stomach, though.

“Now answer something for me.” The sheer oddity of it caused her to look up; it was rare for Kamukura-kun to keep speaking. Usually, when he’d answered a question, he was done. His eyes were fixed on her. “Why did you care about Hinata Hajime?”

Chiaki blinked. “Huh?”

“He was not particularly wealthy or strong or smart. He was just an ordinary, unremarkable boy. Someone like him was far beneath you. So why did you care about him?”

“That’s not true!” Her outburst seemed to surprise him, if the marginally raised eyebrow was any indication. But how could she not yell, when he was talking about his past self, about Hinata-kun, so dismissively? Chiaki looked down, realizing her hands were shaking. She forced them to still. “Hinata-kun may not have had talent, but that doesn’t mean he was beneath me.”

“Doesn’t it? Hope’s Peak was a reflection of the world, built on a caste system where the talentless mass of the Reserve Course existed solely to support the elite Main Course. Only the talented excel and make history; what else can the talentless possibly offer?”

“Friendship. Hope.” She closed her eyes, recalling green irises and a sad, bitter smile. “Hinata-kun…no, he didn’t excel in any particular area. But he still had so many good qualities. He was kind and honest and hardworking. He reached out to me before anyone else. Before him, I hadn’t met anyone who didn’t give me strange looks for being so into my games. But he didn’t think I was weird. He enjoyed them with me, even when he lost. He…he gave me hope, that maybe I wouldn’t have to be alone anymore.” And I never told him…I’m so sorry, Hinata-kun...

The man who used to be Hinata-kun seemed to be mulling over her words. “Companionship…I see. Then why continue your association after you’d found companionship among your peers? You had no need to settle for him anymore.”

She frowned. “It wasn’t settling. That’s not how friendship works. When you care about someone, you don’t just abandon them as soon as you find someone ‘better’. Everyone has something to offer. Because everyone’s unique.”

“In my experience, people are all the same.”

“Then why did you save me?” she countered.
He went quiet—or, well, quieter than usual—and she realized maybe even he didn’t know. Chiaki dropped her gaze to her Game Girl, feeling drained. Why did you save me was one of the more pressing questions on her mind, true, a mystery she’d pondered but hadn’t yet worked up the courage to ask. She liked to think she’d have gotten around to it eventually, but she hadn’t wanted it to be in that sharp tone she’d used, either.

“I said all traces of my vessel’s identity were erased,” Kamukura-kun said, and her head shot back up in surprise. “And that was my, and my creators, original presumption. But other evidence suggests we were wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

He fixed those intense red eyes on her. “As I watched you bleed out, I felt a swell of emotions and a strong compulsion to act. After I had, I investigated the reasons behind such things and concluded that, against all logic, I do retain some of my vessel’s past emotions…of ‘caring’… for you. …That is why I saved you.”

Chiaki felt her face heating up. A cocktail of feelings were rolling her stomach. Surprise. Happiness. Embarrassment. Depression. He’d said it so coldly…

Of course he did, she realized with a surge of sadness, they stuffed all that talent into his head and didn’t leave room for anything else.

Well, there was something she could do about that. Chiaki rolled back her shoulders and held out a hand to shake, like she’d seen people in Western games do. “Then…shall we be friends, Kamukura-kun?”

He looked at her arm, trembling as she tried to hold it up, as if it were a foreign object. “I do not see the point. You will not defeat me in any activities we may partake.”

“Being friends isn’t about beating each other. It’s about enjoying the time we spend together. And that can happen regardless of winning or losing.”

He continued to stare, and Chiaki flushed, now embarrassed by his apparent rejection of her gesture. But as the strength left her arm and it started to drop, Kamukura-kun surprised her by taking her hand in a grip neither firm nor gentle. “Very well, Nanami Chiaki,” he agreed in that clipped way of his, “I shall give you the chance to surprise me yet again.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: In a lot of shows, waking up from a coma is an instant thing with no repercussions. In reality, it’s a painful process where you have to relearn everything. I’ll tone down the needed length of time a little since DR tends to be a bit unrealistic (Kyoko should not have been able to walk after her near-death experience), but it’s still going to be a long process.

Also, if you haven’t noticed, this might be a case of the slow burn. 4 chapters before they actually meet, 5 before they become friends. But the focus is on Chiaki and her getting better—she’s not really in the mood for a romance right now.
Skill Grinding

Chapter Notes

A/N: So I meant to get this up yesterday, but a nasty stomach bug stopped me. I apologize if this chapter isn’t up to snuff, my editing might have been a little sloppy from the after-effects.

Also, Extra Life now has a Russian translation, available here: https://ficbook.net/readfic/4909730! Thanks to VS17 for doing it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the next few days Kamukura-kun filled her in on the state of the world and how it had ended up this way. It had been steadily declining into war for the past few months, he said, with the oppressed and weak rising up to kill the talented and strong. Hope’s Peak Academy had been at the center of this because the mastermind was one of the students attending—a girl named Enoshima Junko.

At the name a nugget of memory jiggled the cogs of Chiaki’s brain, strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes and a sickeningly sweet voice proclaiming “I’ve been wanting to make friends with you!” Then, with a hissing sound, it dissolved into steam.

But it was enough to rouse her suspicions, and she hesitantly inquired “…This Enoshima, is she… Is she the one who tried to kill me, too?”

“Yes.”

Why? She almost asked. Why, why, why? What did I ever do to her?

What had Kuzuryu-kun’s sister done to her killer? There was no excuse Enoshima could have had for Chiaki to be okay with almost dying at her hand. And the very worst people, the kind who could throw a world into despair, didn’t need a reason to kill.

So instead of fear she turned to anger. Chiaki burst out, “Didn’t they do a background check on her?!”

“I do not know. However, it is likely that if they did, the Steering Committee did not care about her true nature and allowed her attendance anyway, in the name of studying her talent.”

Studying talent…was that all Hope’s Peak had really cared about? Enough to let someone who’d attempted murder walk free?

What a dumb question. Of course it was. She’d seen what they’d done to Hinata-kun and Kamukura-kun; why should this surprise her?

The more she learned about what really went on at her school, the less Chiaki liked it. She used to be proud to attend Hope’s Peak, proud to call herself “talented”, even if she thought her talent wasn’t nearly as useful as most of the others’. She’d been proud and happy because it was where she’d met Hinata-kun, Yukizome-sensei, and all her friends. But now… how could she say she was a student of that place with any sort of pride?
The next day, as they worked on stretching, she asked how intense the chaos was.

“It varies. The fighting is worst in large towns, cities and countries. Populous areas hold more ground for disarray and dissent, and are as such targets for those who wish to spread such things. Relatively isolated areas have been able to eke out something resembling a normal life, however, as long as they are willing to endure increased prices, crime rates, and pollution.”

“Like the area we’re in?” she guessed.

“Like the area we’re in,” he confirmed. “The nearby settlement still has a working economy; while I could easily grow the food we need myself, it is more convenient to take advantage of such resources while they exist. It is also where I acquired your clothes and games.”

Chiaki automatically glanced down at what she was wearing. A white shirt and plaid skirt, nothing special. But they were still so nice for what they symbolized. Once she’d been able to stay awake after therapy, Kamukura-kun had started helping her wear actual clothes again. He had to button up her shirts and slide on her skirts and put her hairpin in, but she was starting to get used to him seeing her nude, even if she wished it wasn’t necessary. It was worth it, though, to start feeling like an actual person again.

When he’d first presented the garments to her, she’d almost asked how he’d gotten her measurements. Then she’d remembered he’d been looking after her for months, which would have given him plenty of opportunity to familiarize himself with her sizes. So she’d just thanked him and taken the clothes, blushing lightly.

She’d also started to regain a bit of the weight she’d lost during her eight month slumber, and now she didn’t look like a stiff breeze would knock her over anymore. Some of the color had also returned to her cheeks, and her hair was regaining some luster. Kamukura-kun had been kind enough to keep her hair at her preferred length for her, trimming it every time it tried to go past her shoulders. The overall effect was that Chiaki felt a bit more like herself, and that helped her mood.

What she remembered the most, though, was the day she learned what had really happened to her friends.

It had started innocuously enough; she’d just asked when she could go outside as they ate dinner (curry rice, grilled chicken, and udon, and it was just as delicious as that first meal. She had a sneaking suspicion she would never be able to go back to regular food after this). She wouldn’t say she was going stir-crazy, per se—she could happily spend days in her bedroom just playing games, and had when she was younger—but she was starting to miss fresh air.

“That will have to wait for another month,” he told her. “You have been in completely insulated areas for a little under nine months now; your immune system will have severely weakened in that period. I can give you supplements to boost it back up, but you should still wait a full thirty-one days before attempting to go outdoors.

“Additionally, Enoshima’s followers used heavy pollutants to contaminate the air. That is another reason to wait: I need to synthesize vaccines for you before you go outside and contract something.”

“Who are her followers?” Chiaki questioned, wondering how exactly a teenage girl was able to bring the world to the state it was in.

“Many people,” Kamukura-kun said after a pause. “She calls them ‘Ultimate Despairs’. They are people she’s come in contact with, and…twisted to her beliefs with brainwashing technology.
Many of them are graduates of the Academy, talented people, people in powerful positions…”

He seemed to be weighing something, then added, watching her carefully, “Your classmates are among them.”

For a moment Chiaki thought she’d misheard. Then she thought maybe he was making a bad joke. But this was Kamukura-kun; he never joked. Her heart fell to somewhere in her stomach.


“And I was not lying when I said that. They did fake their deaths, not to hide, but so they could assist Enoshima in her endeavors. I simply withheld the reason from you until I calculated you were in a suitable emotional state to receive such news.” Nonchalant, he attempted to feed her the next bite, but she shook her head.

“They wouldn’t do that,” the pink-haired girl insisted. “They would never…”

“They did not have a choice. She used her brainwashing to force their loyalty to her.”

_This must be what it was like to be Celes, _Chiaki thought, numb, _to learn that not only did the apocalypse happen while you were sleeping, but that everyone you know and love is gone as well. Because they were, weren’t they? If her friends had been brainwashed…lost their wills…they couldn’t really be called themselves, could they? They were…_

“We need to help them,” she mumbled mindlessly. She tried to rise from her wheelchair only for her legs to give out beneath her. Chiaki instinctively braced herself for the pain that would come with her knees hitting the hardwood floor; instead, she felt Kamukura-kun catch her before she could. He’d anticipated her reaction and somehow made it around the table in the span of seconds.

His hands were gentle as he helped her back into the chair, but his voice was very firm. “No.”

“I am not abandoning the people I love!” she snapped, glaring at him with all the force she could muster.

“And I am not letting you run off to your death,” he refuted. “You are in no condition to help anyone, and there is already a way to save them.”

Hope swelled up in her, swallowing the fear and sadness and anger. “There is? What is it?”

“The Neo World Program, a virtual reality that can theoretically reverse brainwashing. Its development is currently being sponsored by the Future Foundation; however, they face a fair bit of financial difficulty. As I have taken an interest in the program, I send the organization funds I’ve earned through my various talents so they can continue production.”

An epiphany struck her. “Is that what you do on your laptop all the time?”

“Correct,” he nodded. “I watch. I monitor what happens outside.” His eyes narrowed. “There is no guarantee the program will work, but your friends will eventually get the chance to be saved. You cannot do anything for them now, however.”

Chiaki exhaled, slumping in her chair. Her appetite was completely gone; misery overwhelmed her. He was right, she knew; she was in no condition to do anything. But that didn't make it any easier to accept the reality that her friends had been forced into evil and she could do nothing. _I’m so useless…_
“I…I’m glad you told me. But I want to be alone right now,” she mumbled.

Kamukura-kun studied her, then inclined his head. Rather than bringing her upstairs and trapping her there, he simply retreated to his room, leaving her in the kitchen. Chiaki sat in her wheelchair and stared at the uneaten food until the tears blurring her vision came free. And she cried long and hard, for her lost friends, for Hinata-kun, for the absolute unfairness that she was still here while they were not.

Her mood was rather somber for some time after. Kamukura-kun did not attempt to speak to her, merely observing as always. But when two days had passed, Chiaki decided, more than anything else, that she had to get better. She owed it to her friends. Maybe she couldn’t do anything now but wait for that program to be ready, but getting back on her feet would at least make her feel better. And maybe it would open up new opportunities, who knew?

Of course, in her condition, it wasn’t that easy.

“Okay…let’s try this again.”

Kamukura-kun’s face was blank as he answered, “Whenever you’re ready.”

Chiaki inhaled. Like ripping off a Band-Aid, she reminded herself, and before she could psych herself out pushed herself up and out of her wheelchair.

Her muscles screamed in protest. The room immediately swayed beneath her feet. Chiaki didn’t make the mistake of stretching her arms to reorient her center of gravity—the sole time she’d attempted to lift them and focus on standing had proven too much and sent her toppling to the floor. It took all her concentration just to keep her balance as it was.

Hold it…hold it…

Despite her efforts, she felt herself start to fall backwards, and her hand immediately shot out and grabbed Kamukura-kun’s arm. He was a steadying presence, solid and strong, and once she had a hold of him she felt her equilibrium reassert itself. But the point of this exercise wasn’t to not fall, it was to keep her stability for as long as possible without holding onto him; she didn’t know how long she’d managed, but she had a sneaking suspicion it wasn’t as long as she’d wanted.

Without letting go of the Ultimate Hope’s arm, Chiaki lowered herself back into her wheelchair, feeling her legs shake. “Ah…how long was that?”

“Five seconds,” Kamukura-kun informed her, and she grimaced.

She’d be lying if she said she didn’t feel a bit irked. Despite all the stretches and exercises she’d been doing, the only improvements she’d made in the three weeks since she’d learned what had happened to her friends was that she could push her wheelchair around the house and grip objects. While she was extremely happy to be able to hold her precious video game consoles again, she wished she could just stop being so weak already. She could stand, if she had something to support herself with—usually Kamukura-kun. But she couldn’t yet stand on her own, much less walk, and still relied on his help for many things.

Still. Progress was progress, and if she’d once spent an entire day grinding against the Bionic Kraken for the 1/128\textsuperscript{th} drop chance of getting the Gutsy Bat without screaming, she could spend however long it took to relearn walking. She just needed to stay positive—wasn’t her motto “if you just do it, things will turn out okay”, after all?
That’s right…it’s frustrating now, but I’m sure to relearn it all in time. It’s just grinding my skills back up—if I’m patient and try as hard as I can, I’ll get there eventually.

I have to. For my friends.

“Ah…I lose again, huh?” Chiaki leaned back, placing the controller on her lap. It had been several days since then, and she’d slowly been adding several more seconds to her record. On the TV screen, the words KEN WINS! flashed in bold red letters. Ryu lay in an unceremonious heap on the ground, while a grinning Ken flashed the v-sign in celebration of his victory. His reaction could not be any more the opposite of his player’s, who was as expressionless as ever.

“As expected,” was all Kamukura-kun said. “How predictable.” Chiaki glanced at him, biting her lip.

Learning to hold things again had made her feel much more confident about her ability to do multiplayer. So, the very day she’d remastered it, she'd persuaded Kamukura-kun into playing video games with her. He had needed to run out to get second consoles and controllers—apparently he’d only thought to pack one for each platform—from the nearby town first, but once he had the afternoon schedule shifted.

When the morning therapies and lunch were done, the two would settle down to play. While Chiaki was concerned about her classmates, she wasn’t going to neglect Kamukura-kun; she’d said she’d be his friend, and she’d meant it. It didn’t matter what Chiaki picked, though—RPGs, shooters, strategies, puzzles, Kamukura-kun always beat her. She didn’t mind, trying to beat him or his scores actually gave her a goal to work towards, but she worried that it bored him. It gave her a newfound empathy for how Hinata-kun must have felt when he’d played with her, and she again wished she’d been able to reassure him better. So she leapt into each game determined to be as challenging an opponent as possible so Kamukura-kun could get even a little enjoyment out of it. And maybe, someday, she’d even beat him. Wouldn’t that surprise him?

Though sometimes things went a little differently. Sometimes, instead of playing, he asked her about their past together, and they’d sit down and she would spend the afternoon telling him stories of her time with Hinata-kun. Chiaki hoped she’d maybe jog his memory, but his face remained impassive throughout. Then he’d be more interested in asking about her part in those events than his. Why did she act a certain way here, why did she say this there? It sometimes seemed he wanted to microanalyze her, especially with how intently his eyes peered into hers. Hinata-kun’s eyes had sometimes been sharp like that, too.

Shaking away the sudden surge of wistfulness, Chiaki turned and gave him a bright smile. “That was a good match, Kamukura-kun! It was so close; I actually thought I’d beat you this time! If you hadn’t pulled that combo at the end…”

He chose not to respond, placing his controller down and rising. Chiaki twisted in her wheelchair, watching him head to the kitchen to start making dinner, not at all bothered by his silence.

“So, did you enjoy this one at all?” It was the same thing she always asked him after each game, and his answer was always the same each time.

“No.”

“Well, we’ll try another game tomorrow,” she said conversationally as she rolled after him, leaving the TV on. “You brought a lot. I’m sure we’ll find one you like eventually.”
“I doubt that. They all bore me.”

“But those are just the ones we’ve played so far,” she insisted. “There has to be one out there you’d enjoy. And I won’t stop until we find it!”

He turned slightly, eyes narrowed by a margin. “Why are you so invested in this?”

The corners of her mouth tugged down unhappily. “Because you’re my friend and it’s no good for me to be the only one enjoying our time together. You need to, too.”

“That is impossible. Everything bores me.” There was a pause, filled in only by the sounds of him cutting up vegetables. “…However, it is less boring to play games with you. Your company is… interesting. So that makes boring things tolerable.”

She brightened. “Really?”

He gave her a flat look, clearly indicating that he didn’t see the point in re-stating the obvious.

“Well, I’ll do my best to keep things interesting for you. And I won’t give up on finding you something you like, either.” She rolled up to his side. "So, pass me the plates? I'll set the table."

At the end of July, Kamukura-kun deemed she was able to stand well enough to start learning how to walk again. He placed a cane in her hands, showed her how to use it, and after seeing she could hold it properly, stepped back to let her try.

Walking took so much more effort than you'd think. The muscles in one leg had to contract, order it to rise. Then they had to pull it up, forward and down. Your other leg had to hold the weight of your entire body while this was happening. To do that, you had to keep your balance—a task that proved very hard when your muscles were as weak as hers.

She could stand on her own just fine, if not for more than a few minutes, but even with the cane, she crumpled as soon as she attempted to lift her leg for that one step. The cane fell out of her hands and clattered on the floor. Kamukura-kun swooped in and easily caught her before she could follow it. He helped her back into the wheelchair, his hands lingering on her waist for a fraction of a second before retreating. Chiaki blinked back embarrassed tears, keeping her head low so he wouldn't notice.

He did anyway, of course. "Why are you crying?"

"I can't walk," she choked out. "We've been working to get to this for weeks, and I can't walk. I just..."

"You will," he said, and anyone else would have tried to be reassuring, but his inflection was no different than normal. Ironically, that actually made Chiaki feel a bit better—it came across as him just stating a fact rather than attempting to pacify her. Wiping away her tears, she nodded and got ready to try again.

By the end of the session, she hadn't managed more than a single step. But to Chiaki, who hadn't even been able to stand not that long ago, that step was hope.

Chapter End Notes
A/N:

We never actually get a clear picture of just how bad the world was during the Tragedy. Yeah, Junko says it completely fell apart, but Junko lies a lot. I mean, TV is still around for her to be broadcasting the killing game on, and if the world has running electricity it’s not in completely terrible shape. And the gaiden manga Killer Killer shows that within a year of Junko’s death, towns have been rebuilt and several industries—manga, entertainment, idol—are back in business. So it’s unlikely there was a total destruction of civilization. Hence Izuru’s statement that some, admittedly remote, parts are still managing fine.

Next chapter: fluff! More walking! And we finally see the outside world!
Finally, a bit over a week later, Kamukura-kun decided she was vaccinated enough to go outside. Chiaki was practically bouncing in her chair as he opened the front door, one hand on her wheelchair’s handles. The door swung outwards; she grimaced and squeezed her eyes shut, not having seen natural light in almost a year now.

When she thought it was safe to open them again, she did. And the smile slipped off her face.

The sky instantly captured her attention. Instead of being clear blue or overcast gray, it was a deep crimson, with darker shades indicating clouds. She stared at it, horrifically mesmerized, for a few moments, before her eyes turned to the landscape; there weren’t any other visible buildings, but then again the wall completely encircling the property might have hidden them. The air was chilly and thin—they must be in a high area. Some sort of mountain retreat, maybe. The grass certainly looked healthy, if a bit less green than it should be at the tail end of summer.

“I suppose this is why you kept the windows shut?” she murmured, eyes unconsciously returning to that foreign sky as though hoping it’d go back to the one she knew. “To not alarm me?”

“Correct.” He carefully maneuvered her wheelchair down the front steps. The wheels hit the sidewalk pavement with a heavy clunk.

Now that she was actually outside, Chiaki wasn’t quite sure what to do. Look around more, maybe? Exploring was usually a safe choice in open-world games. “Can we go outside that wall?”

In response, he began pushing her in the wall’s direction. Chiaki strained her ears for sounds of life, but there were none; no birds singing in the trees, no planes flying overhead, no buzzing of the morning cicadas. It was completely silent, like the aftermath of a battle in movies. And she was just starting to notice some smell in the air, something faint but unpleasant. Oily, kind of.

They reached the wall; it was high, taller than them, and made of stone. It would have been normal, but along the top she could see turrets. Sentry turrets, Kamukura-kun had explained earlier, when he’d asked her to wait while he disabled them. She’d been shocked he would have such things, and that was the point he’d mentioned, almost off-handedly, there were other traps that he would have to physically disarm, too.

“The world is not kind, and there are people who would attempt to kill you just for being well off,” he’d said when she asked if they were really necessary, "There are times I have been required to leave this facility, and without these traps and the wall, you would be completely unprotected. It is a simple matter for me to evade them when I leave, but you lack that luxury.”

He’d then warned that she should never attempt to go outside without alerting him. Not that she
planned to; she wasn’t a prisoner, and really, doing that in this apocalyptic world would just be
stupid.

The turrets looked like something out of a military game, she thought as he pushed her wheelchair
through the gate, though she couldn’t be sure if they were par the norm or advanced. Had
Kamukura-kun made them himself, or stolen them? What about the other traps? With his skillset,
either was equally likely.

Outside the walls, she saw that she was right on both her guesses—they were in a high area, and it
had been some sort of retreat, for when she looked up and back she saw mountains rising behind
them. A road winded down to the valley below, where she could see rooftops. So they were maybe
halfway up, and down there must be the settlement Kamukura-kun spoke of. The visible trees still
looked in good condition, their green leaves valiantly clinging to the branches despite both the
pollution and the approaching fall. It would have been a beautiful view if it weren’t for the sky.

They stayed outside for a good twenty minutes, him mostly just pushing her around and letting her
familiarize herself with their location. There wasn’t much to see; isolated as they were, they didn’t
pass so much as a single person. The nature was beautiful, but it was hard to appreciate it when the
sky was a constant reminder of how wrong the world was. It didn’t take long for Chiaki to request
to go back inside.

Maybe another time she’d ask to visit the town, but she’d had enough for one day.

“That girl’s kind of weird, don’t you think? I mean, you never see her do anything but play on
those consoles all day…”

“Yeah, tell me about it. Who spends that much time on video games?”

“Only dumb gamer nerds.”

“And people too stuck-up to socialize. Have you seen her parents’ home? Rich kids always think
they’re too good for us…”

As she passed the gossiping students, she hunched her shoulders and peered at her screen harder,
as if the bright colors could block out what they were saying. She’d thought the words would have
stopped stinging by now, but they hadn’t.

They were wrong about her being stuck-up, she wanted to say. She’d gladly talk to them if she
could. But she didn’t know how. All the girls her age wanted to talk about were idols and fashion
and stuff she had no interest in, and all the boys scoffed at the idea of playing games with a girl.
There was just no way to connect her world to theirs.

Really, though, it was fine, she told herself. If the loneliness ever got too strong, she’d just ask her
parents for more games to distract herself with. Once, she’d have asked for their company, but
she’d learned long ago they just didn’t have time for that. So she settled for presents.

The pink-haired girl sighed, one hand leaving the console to hitch her slipping backpack further up
her shoulder. Her feet mindlessly followed the trail to her homeroom, her eyes trained on her
game. People milled around her, faceless students in a faceless crowd. It was just another ordinary
day at high school.

As such she was completely unprepared for the floor to disappear from under her.

It was so sudden she didn’t even have time to scream. One second she was approaching the door to
class, the next her foot was passing through the floor, and she was falling, falling, falling—

She hit the ground with a grunt, the console flying out of her hands and disappearing into darkness. Her limbs ached from the impact. Raising her head, she saw that she was in some kind of medieval hallway? Someplace stone and dark and cold. There were monitors stuck anachronistically to the walls, glowing bright in the gloom, but the image on them was distorted by static.

As she tried to figure out how she got here—wasn’t she walking to class a minute ago?—a voice spoke, feminine and soft and wrong, echoing everywhere around her.

“Run, class rep. Let’s see how far you get…”

Chiaki started awake with a quiet little gasp, her heart running rabbit-like in her chest and cold sweat clinging to her skin. Tile. She was looking at white tile ceiling, not shadowy hallways. She was in her bed, safe. Her heartbeat slowed, and she let out a sigh of relief. The Ultimate Gamer wiped the sweat away and yawned.

It had been a while since she’d dreamed about her old high school. Her memories of that lonely time were ones she preferred not to look at, and her brain was usually willing to cooperate, feeding her pleasant dreams of playing with her friends instead. But that last part…what had that last part been? She frowned, but in the way of all dreams it was disappearing in the daylight. She was scared, she remembered that much. Must have been a nightmare.

Rubbing the sleep crust out of her eyes with one hand, Chiaki groped blindly for the cane Kamukura-kun had given her with the other. It was right within arms’ reach of her bed, and once she had it she used it to help her stand up, legs shaking a little as she did so.

As the days turned to weeks, her progress on walking became slow but steady; she’d gradually built up how much she could walk with the cane, but it wore her out so much. The wheelchair was still her primary form of travel. She barely crossed the distance to her dresser before she had to stop and sit down to wait for Kamukura-kun. That was fine, since she couldn’t manage stairs anyway. Chiaki did not like imagining having to learn how to walk up and down those again.

Despite the odd dream, the day was rather ordinary. Therapy progressed as usual, with small improvements on her end. Lunch she practiced eating on her own, and managed to feed herself a few bites before the chopsticks fell out of her shaking grip and Kamukura-kun took over. It wasn’t until the afternoon that anything notable really happened.

Chiaki was trying to figure out whether Kamukura-kun would enjoy *Disgaea: Hour of Darkness* or the ported *Dungeon Explorer* more when he appeared, almost out of nowhere, and handed her a thick stack of papers. “What are these?” she asked, taking them carefully.

“You requested pictures of your friends.”

That was right, she had. It had been earlier this week, and he’d said he didn’t have any. She thought he’d forgotten about it. How he came by these she didn’t know, but she didn’t doubt his ability to get things done.

Chiaki looked through the paraphilia slowly, heart clenching. A photograph from Mioda-san and Saionji-san’s latest dual performance; a newspaper article about Kuzuryu-kun and Pekoyama-san’s latest raid on the Future Foundation; a magazine cover featuring Monokuma-themed food by Hanamura-kun; and other various clippings.
It hurt, to look at the proof of what her friends were doing, and it was probably wrong of her to hope the Future Foundation didn’t catch them; after all, they were terrorists and criminals now. But she didn’t care. They’d been her first friends, them and Hinata-kun. They meant so much to her. She wanted them to be safe and free, even if it meant they could continue doing atrocities. *I guess I’m selfish that way.*

The pink-haired girl swallowed and placed them aside. “Thank you.”

She could feel his eyes boring into the side of her head. “You have not asked me to find your parents.” A question disguised as a statement.

“Ah…” Chiaki shrugged, mind involuntarily flashing back to her dream earlier. “They…weren’t really around when I was growing up, so I don’t really feel much for them. I mean, I don’t want them to be dead or anything, but it’s a bit hard to be concerned when I feel like I barely know them. Yukizome-sensei was more a mother to me than my actual mother.”

Part of her felt a bit guilty for thinking that way, but she couldn’t help it. Yukizome-sensei had been everything she imagined a mother to be, even though Chiaki knew she was only a few years older than them; kind and encouraging, yet firm when she had to. Interested in her students’ well-beings and hobbies, and always willing to offer advice. Chiaki had admired her, tried to base her behavior as class rep off her. She’d been her role model.

So why was it that, when she recently thought of Yukizome-sensei, she felt a sense of betrayal? She knew Yukizome-sensei had been brainwashed with the rest of their class, but that didn’t explain the way her heart pinched when she thought of her teacher, and not her classmates.

Thinking of her maternal figure and absent biological parents brought a question to her attention, and she turned to the raven-haired man. “What about your parents, Kamukura-kun? Are they doing alright?”

“I do not have any memories of them. I do not know whether they are alive or dead, and I do not care enough to find out.”

“They didn’t visit you during the project?” Hadn’t he been underage at the time, actually? Didn’t that mean his parents would have to consent to their son being used as the guinea pig of the Kamukura Project? Chiaki sorely wished she could forget that question as soon as it occurred to her. Her parents had been neglectful, but she was fairly certain they wouldn’t have agreed to anything of that nature.

“They did not. After my creation all non-essential personnel were prohibited from visiting. Before does not matter, though I calculate visits would have been infrequent. Loving parents do not allow their child to partake in human experimentation.”

Chiaki had to swallow the lump in her throat at the thought of poor Hinata-kun sitting in a lab somewhere, alone, knowing his own parents didn’t care. Then Kamukura-kun sitting in that same lab, bored out of his mind and locked away from society like some prized animal.

She knew that feeling of being ignored by the people who were supposed to love you, and she hated it. She also knew he didn’t care. And maybe that was what made her saddest of all. He genuinely did not care about how short the stick he and Hinata-kun had drawn was.

“I guess that’s something we have in common,” she mumbled sadly when it became clear he was done. *Dungeon Explorer* was looking the better option. Co-op would probably be ridiculously easy for them, but having only two players instead of five might make up for that. And she was a fan of
the classics.

He took the controller wordlessly, and she inserted the disc. Then she settled down next to him and prepared to play.

Nanami was a most illogical girl.

That was the conclusion Izuru had drawn from his interactions with her. He’d already suspected it somewhat, when he saw her attempting to “help” him while bleeding to death, but more time with her confirmed it. She was prone to acts of faith and emotion, acts which had little basis in reality. And there were her constant attempts to beat him at video games so he could “have fun”. It was impossible for him, he’d told her multiple times. But she persisted.

Granted, he did feel less bored when with her, which was the closest he could ever get to “having fun”. So there may be something there. But then again, it was only because he was with her; playing the games by himself made them go right back to being dull.

Currently he was overseeing the end of another therapy session. They had actually gone over schedule a little; he’d suggested stopping a few minutes ago, but she was determined to continue. She felt that she could reach cross two rooms this time, and after a moment Izuru had calculated that she was likely to manage it within the next three tries, so he allowed it.

Just as he’d predicted, on her second try her legs held out until her hands were pressed against the furthest wall. Then her knees buckled, but she managed to turn her fall into an ungraceful slide to the floor. She seemed far too happy to notice, eyes sparkling.

“I did it!” Nanami exclaimed as he approached. She looked up and beamed at him. “Kamukura-kun, did you see that? I walked all the way to the wall!”

“That you did,” he agreed listlessly. He could never look at her smile for too long. It caused fluctuations in his heartbeat. Each and every time, without fail. He’d quickly figured out it was a byproduct of his attraction to her, but somehow it failed to prepare him for the next time.

He took her upper arm and pulled her up. It felt so thin, he noted not for the first time; his hand closed almost all the way around the fleshy upper part, his forefinger brushing his thumb. And she always felt so small when he carried her. Sometimes it made him concerned she was malnourished. But whenever he checked, her weight was within healthy parameters for her height and age. She was just short.

He wasn’t certain why he was always taking mental note of things like that. Why should her frame or hair color or eyes capture his attention? Multiple times, at that? They never changed from the last time he looked, but they were always intriguing to him.

But then, the fact she could prompt consistent emotional reactions from him, without them growing dull, was one of the reasons he found her interesting.

As he half-carried her back to her wheelchair, Nanami’s gaze drifted to the calendar on the living room wall. Her smile faded, and her pink eyes grew melancholy. Izuru ran some quick mental calculations and soon realized why. *Today is the day she almost perished.*

He was not surprised by his failure to recall that before now. Some distant part of him had noted September’s arrival, but he never tended to pay much attention to dates. They held no significant import to him when each day was as meaningless as the next. It seemed unreal, somehow, that a year had already passed since he’d first fought to save her life.
“Thank you, Kamukura-kun.”

Her words were soft and sudden, but he heard them nonetheless. It was obvious what she was thanking him for—given the date, it had to have been his saving her life—but he would entertain her. He blinked at her, gesturing for her to elaborate.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I mean…you looked after me for a year. For you, it was probably boring, to spend most of that long time with an unconscious person.” It had been. “But you did it anyway. And you’ve continued to help me and watch over me since. And I just realized I never said it before now, so…sincerely, thank you.”

She was grateful to him. She trusted him. Izuru let her wait in the silence as he mulled this over. It was not new information, but it was still something he couldn’t quite comprehend. It was just foolish of her. She didn’t remember the full extent of his past association with Enoshima, but given how intricate his knowledge of the model was, she must at least suspect it.

“You’re thanks are misplaced. I am not a good person, Nanami,” he finally stated. “I do not care for the world, and I have plans that are not necessarily ethical ones.” His plan to upload Enoshima’s AI into the Neo World Program to test whether despair was stronger than hope, for example, was something Nanami would definitely not approve of.

Nanami winced at his bluntness. “I know,” she said after a pause. “I mean…with all your talent, you could probably have stopped Enoshima before things escalated this far. You probably had plenty of opportunity. But that doesn’t mean I can’t be grateful for what you’ve done for me. It doesn’t mean I can’t be grateful for getting to meet you.

“I know you aren’t a good person…but I don’t think you’re a bad one either.”

Izuru noted there was a warm feeling in his chest. This was not the first time he'd experienced such a thing, and he'd already ruled out environmental and health reasons as its cause. No, it was a reaction that solely occurred in her proximity, often at random moments. He should have tired of such a predictable thing, and yet...he had not. “…An irrational belief. You do not have sufficient evidence to support that hypothesis.”

Her smile returned, and his heart did those inane palpitations again. “I told you before, didn’t I? I just feel it in my heart. That’s good enough for me.”

A most illogical girl indeed.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Woooo look whose POV came back! We’ll be seeing through his eyes a few more times, not often, but I at least wanted to establish how Izuru felt about Chiaki now that he’s actually interacting with her.

My headcanon backstory for Chiaki has always been that she was a rich kid with neglectful parents who were always out on business trips and stuff. I feel that best explains how she could constantly afford new video games, her initial loneliness and isolation from her peers, and how she kind of latches on to Chisa as a maternal figure.

At least she’s better off than Hajime. His parents really did fully consent to the
Kamukura Project—there’s (Japanese) text saying so when Chisa’s reading up on it in Episode 6. No wonder the poor boy has issues, his parents essentially said they wanted to trade him out for a more talented son :(

Gank

Chapter Notes

A/N: RIP Carrie Fisher. Princess Leia was one of my role models as a little girl, and you were an amazing woman. You will be much missed :(  

In happier news, the chapters have titles now! Pretend those were always there. Please?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next several weeks trickled by in idleness. Chiaki’s condition continued to slowly improve; she left her wheelchair behind permanently, and with her cane her mobility was nearly as good as before. Her fine-motor skills reached the point that she could mostly dress herself, though she still struggled with buttons. Stairs were still her bane, and video games sessions continued even though Kamukura-kun proclaimed none of them to be interesting. All in all, there was a surreal normality about her current life.

Her dreams, however, just became more confusing. A haphazard collection of rain, gray hallways, and familiar faces plagued her sleep. Every time the dreams ended with her running from some kind of danger, and right at the very end it would always catch her. Then she would wake with tears clinging to her lashes, able to recall only a little. She never told Kamukura-kun about them; it just seemed like a trivial thing to bother him with, when he’d already done so much for her.

November was just dawning when things first shifted.

It began with Chiaki helping Kamukura-kun in the kitchen—she wasn’t allowed near knives, her hands weren’t steady enough for that. But she could try to make rice balls, and though her hands shook throughout and it took her twice as long as usual, she was reasonably pleased with the end result. With her cane’s help, she made her way over to the fridge for the filling, and that was when she noticed they were running low on food.

“I will obtain more tomorrow,” Kamukura-kun droned when she told him.

Though he must have done it several times already, the mental image of her aloof, above-it-all friend doing something as mundane as grocery shopping was oddly amusing to Chiaki. But the thought of going to town, seeing other people, was at the forefront of her mind—she’d ventured outside a few more times, but hadn’t yet left the sanctuary of the retreat. “Can I go with you?”

He was silent for a bit, likely weighing the pros and cons. But finally his head lifted up in a small incline, and she squealed in delight.

The next day they prepared to leave, dressing warmly. The temperature was chill with the first breath of winter, and a light snow had fallen, though it was tinted gray from pollution. They got in an ambulance, which Chiaki privately thought was a rather odd vehicle for Kamukura-kun to have, and drove to the town.

Chiaki pressed her face to the window and peered around with unbridled curiosity. There was a leanness to the citizens that hadn’t existed last year, a steely-eyed wariness that had them moving
with glances over their shoulders and bodies tensed for a fight. Rather than running about as bundles of energy, the few children visible clung to their mothers’ hands, young faces grim and scared. In the shadows of alleys and on the sides of buildings, she could catch glimpses of spray paint and graffiti, some denouncing the Future Foundation, others messages of encouragement. But there was still a sense of normality about things. There were still people entering shops, eating food at outside tables, and chatting with their friends. It could have been as ordinary a day as ever, in a town as ordinary as any other, if she didn’t look up at the sky.

They parked, entering a supermarket. The grungy automatic doors slid open; dim lighting flickered overhead, a few missing bulbs hinting at to the effects of the Tragedy. While there were also many people inside doing their shopping, they were subdued; even the bright colors of the interior decorating seemed dimmer. Everyone was giving each other measured glances, even the store personnel, and nobody was offering customer service. As Chiaki followed Kamukura-kun, looking this way and that, her eyes happened to catch one of the banners describing prices. She stopped, staring with her mouth gaping. “Huh?!”

“I informed you inflation had occurred,” Kamukura-kun said in his bland voice. He reached past her and selected a loaf of bread, placing it into the basket and moving on with complete indifference to the fact he was paying twice as much as normal.

Yes he had, but ¥400? For bread? Chiaki continued to stare as they moved from aisle to aisle and the absurd prices flashed by. ¥560 for eggs, ¥100 for tofu, ¥980 for chicken…

As she carefully pulled a bag of rice from its shelf, Kamukura-kun leaned down and breathed in her ear, “We are likely going to be attacked.”

She started, almost dropping the bag. “What?!”

“There has been a woman following us since we entered the store. Her manner and bearing are that of a delinquent.” Automatically she looked over her shoulder and caught a glimpse of a tattooed woman, several paces behind them. “And near the exit are several others who have been attempting to subtly watch us.”

She glanced at the front doors. Amidst the people coming to and fro was a particularly lean and hungry looking group of about five, loitering by the entrance. At a glance they would have seemed like they were casually waiting, perhaps for a friend, but their eyes were fixed solely on them. One of them, a man with a silver mohawk, even gave a jaunty wave when he noticed Chiaki looking in his direction.

Chiaki swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. She’d picked up some basic self-defense through her gaming, like her Heaven-Slaying Dragon Fist from Double Dragon II, but she hadn’t practiced it in forever. Why hadn’t she thought to practice? She didn’t even know if she could throw a regular punch right now.

“Do not trouble yourself over them,” Kamukura-kun’s voice cut through her thoughts, which had started to border on panic. She looked up at him sharply. “They pose no threat so long as I am with you.”

Alright. If he said they’d be fine, she’d believe him. Chiaki nodded and attempted to push the issue from her mind, but it was impossible now that she was aware of the woman trailing their every movement, just on the edge of her peripheral vision.

They paid at a sharp-eyed cashier, tapping a finger against the bat at his belt, and began to walk to the doors. As soon as they reached them, the waiting group closed in around them. Her heart
pounded louder and louder in her ears as the gangsters stopped in a rough semi-circle. The mohawked man stepped forward…

Either they were dumb or arrogant, but they were the richest looking marks Mizota Mushi had seen in this damn town, and they were walking around like they weren’t inviting people to come mug them.

Kuhara, who’d tailed them, wasn’t kidding when she’d texted that they were prime targets. They were just kids, probably barely out of high school. The girl was small and delicate-looking, with hair and eyes a matching shade of pink. Nothing particularly special about her, except for the cane she was leaning on. The guy, though, the guy was interesting. He was tall, with stupidly long hair —seriously, who could afford to keep their hair at their ankles?— and wearing a suit made of material that only high-up places like Hope’s Peak could afford. Nancy rich boys like him made the best victims. Not only was the yen sweet, but Mushi’d always hated seeing all those higher-ups prance about as if the world belonged to them, paying no attention to the people their ¥100,000 designer shoes stepped on. Well, now the world had fallen, and those people were suddenly in the same lot as everyone else. He finally had lease to get even.

This new world was great. All that despair propaganda, he didn’t care for. What he cared for was that in this new world, a lowly clerk could pick up a knife and suddenly be the most powerful person in the room. No repercussions—in fact, you were more likely to have people join you or praise you for it. And that was exactly what Mushi had done. Formed up his own little gang of ne’er-do-wells. Dyed his hair silver and put it up in a mohawk, just because he could. Going from town to town, taking whatever they pleased. Towns like this, towns away from Future Foundation interference, were the best targets. Oh, there were still mayors and stuff, but they lacked any actual power to back themselves up. And power was all that mattered now. It was a grand life.

He promptly christened the two victims Suit and Cane as he stepped forward. “Afternoon,” he said pleasantly. “I just had to say, you two look really nice today. So nice that my buddies and I…” He made a show of tossing his knife in the air and catching it. “got a bit jealous. So: pockets inside out. Wallets, keys, cell phones, toss it all over. Oh, and we’ll be taking everything in those bags too. Plus that fancy suit of yours.”

Neither moved. Cane was throwing glances around as if beseeching the nearby people for help—the notion made Mushi want to laugh. “No miracle’s gonna happen, girl. No one’s gonna save you. See? They’re all walking away.” They were; muggings like this were so common that bystanders didn’t even call the police anymore. The authorities were just too swamped with work to help everyone. And no one was going to stick their neck out for a stranger.

What should have happened next was that they complied, or maybe begged for their lives. What actually happened was that Suit broke away from the script. “Walk away.”

It was such a surprise that Mushi was temporarily at a loss for words. But then he registered how Suit was looking at them, and it made him twitch. The bastard didn’t look at them like they were a threat. He looked at them as if they were ants, or gum stuck to his shoe. No—that implied some level of disgust. There wasn’t even that. He looked at them like they were tiny, unimportant specks of dust. The way Mushi had always been looked at every damn day at that damn job.

Hate, he reveled in. Condescension? Apathy? Those pissed Mushi off, and he let that seep into his tone as he took a step forward and stabbed the air with his knife. “That’s not how it works, pretty boy. You and your girlfriend hand over all your belongings and yen, and maybe we let you walk away. Or else we kill you and take everything off your bodies.”
“How boring,” was all Suit said. “Your threats are as unsubstantial as the air.”

“What did you just—”

He fixed his eyes on them, and Mushi found himself stopping mid-sentence. A cold sweat broke out on the back of his neck. Because those eyes—

There wasn’t misplaced confidence in those eyes. There wasn’t anger or fear. There was nothing.

“Hey, boss,” Kuhara mumbled from his left side, her face a deathly shade of white, “there’s something about this guy that’s kinda… I dunno, maybe we should just…let these ones go?”

The timid suggestion snapped Mushi out of his stupor, and he glared. “Don’t be stupid. Long-haired bastard’s just trying to intimidate us, that’s all,” he snapped, and he would never admit in a million years that his voice trembled a little. It was stupid to take this guy at face value. “He’s not going to cooperate, we’ll do this the hard way.”

And with that he charged, slashing with the knife. Only—a hand rose and casually caught his arm mid-swing, the blade never even coming near Suit. He hadn’t even seen the bastard move. For the briefest of moments, Mushi’s confused eyes met his blank ones. “What the fu—”

He couldn’t have explained what happened next. One moment he was trying to wrench his arm out of Suit’s death-grip, the next he was spinning through the air and oh shit he was rushing towards the floor—

He hit it hard, only barely managing to avoid knocking his head against the linoleum. But the impact still sent a fierce jolt through his body, and something around his ribs cracked. Winded and dazed, he watched the fight unfolding before him as if from far away. He could only see a group of people attempting to assault what looked like a black blur, moving almost too fast for his eye to catch. The blur was fending them off with ease; a backhand here, a chop to the neck there. Each blow sent them flying farther than they should, some crashing into shelves of produce to distant, outraged shouts. None of them got up again.

A glint of silver in the blur’s left hand caught his eye. A knife. His knife. Reality crashed back with a vengeance. How the hell had the bastard taken his knife right out of his hand without him noticing? Were they really being taken down by someone fighting with just one hand? Humiliation and rage coursed through him, motivating him back onto his feet.

The girl, he thought violently, struggling to breathe. He had to get to the girl. She’d taken a few steps back when the fight had started, and didn’t seem able to tear her eyes away. She was clinging to her little cane as though it were all that were holding her up. If he could get to her, take her hostage—

He hadn’t taken more than a few stumbling steps in her direction before the figure just on the edge of his vision whirled, arm whipping out in one fluid motion. Mushi howled in pain as his own damn knife flew and sank into his leg. He fell, clutching the injury.

The mohawked man looked up, holding back tears of pain, to see the rest of his gang lying still on the ground and their would-be victim approaching. Through his blurry vision, those red eyes almost seemed to be glowing.

Mizota Mushi had enough time to bitterly reflect on the irony of his situation before the pain in his chest and leg became too much, and the world faded away.
Everything had happened so quickly, Chiaki’s brain hadn’t yet realized the danger had passed. Adrenaline and fear were pumping through her veins, and even though she knew she was safe, the Ultimate Gamer couldn’t stop shaking.

She couldn’t stop staring at the bodies, either. The muggers hadn’t even known what hit them, hadn’t known what they were up against and hadn’t paid attention to the warning signs. It was like the bandits in that Western game *Skyrim*, who would attack the player even if they were twenty levels lower. She’d thought it was funny then, giggling and shaking her head with a wry smile at artificial stupidity before obliterating them.

This wasn’t funny at all.

Kamukura-kun had killed six people in as many seconds, with the ease of making a sandwich.

She’d known he had every single talent. Logically, that meant he had skills such as martial arts and blade work. But for the first time, she realized exactly what that meant. For the first time, she realized Kamukura-kun was dangerous.

But that wasn’t even the most disturbing part. No, what she couldn’t understand was why it had seemed familiar, to see him move and disarm someone like that. Why those words, “no miracle will happen”, had a sense of déjà vu about them. A sharp pain throbbed behind her eyes, as if her lost memories were pounding against the inside and trying to break free.

Why…why do I feel like I’ve seen him attack someone before? What could that…

“Nanami,” Kamukura-kun stated, appearing before her suddenly. Chiaki jumped, unable to hold back a little gasp. His face was still set in its normal impassive expression, but she heard the silent inquiry as to her well-being in the single word. That more than anything else reassured her. Her racing pulse began to slow.

*At the end of the day…he’s still Kamukura-kun. He won’t hurt me.*

She took a deep breath, mentally shook herself, and attempted a smile that came out a grimace. “I’m fine.”

She fought very hard to not stare at the…at the bodies. But like magnetism, her eyes slid back towards the prone form of their leader. Chiaki swallowed; she hadn’t even noticed him sneaking up on her, worried about Kamukura-kun as she’d been.

Kamukura-kun’s eyes followed her line of sight. “They are not dead.”

She started, looking back at him wildly. “They aren’t?! But…they’re lying so still…”

“I did not wish to traumatize you more than necessary, so I checked my blows. They are only unconscious; even their leader’s injuries are not fatal.”

It felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. She wouldn’t necessarily say they wouldn’t have deserved it—they had attacked first—but she was still relieved. She’d had enough of death. Chiaki tossed the unconscious muggers another hesitant glance. “Should we…call a hospital or something?”

Kamukura-kun had already turned away, picking up the bags, which he’d set down at the start of the confrontation, with one hand. “No. Leave them.”

“But…”
“The hospitals are too overworked to assist everyone. If they’re fortunate, they’ll wake robbed completely blind. If they aren’t, they won’t wake at all. Either way, their fates are of no concern to us.”

She didn’t know what to say to that, so she just nodded. Maybe she should have pushed harder get help, to do the right thing, but right now she just wanted to go home. Home—when had she started thinking of that isolated place as home?

They quietly resumed walking. People scrambled to get out of their path as if they carried the plague, staring at Kamukura-kun with fearful eyes. Even the clerks, who’d started to yell angrily when he sent those men into the produce shelves, were quiet, backing away and ducking their heads.

Chiaki still couldn’t believe they’d been attacked, just like that, out in the open. Muggings were only supposed to occur at night, or at least in dark alleys, not at the entrance to a store with people standing around and watching. It was only when she’d tried to catch the attention of the lingering bystanders, and seen them turn and hurry away as soon as they met her gaze, that she understood why.

The world was every man and woman for themselves now. No one would step in to help strangers, even ones being attacked right in front of them. Perhaps some had even been hoping to take whatever the muggers left; already she could see a few flocking around their attackers’ still bodies, vultures ready to pick apart the still-living corpses.

The reality of it was much starker in that moment, and she suddenly needed something familiar to cling to. Hesitantly, she reached for Kamukura-kun’s hand.

He looked at their joined fingers blankly, and Chiaki wondered if she’d been too assuming. Saying Kamukura-kun wasn’t a touchy-feely person was like saying the world had had an accident; she got the feeling he didn’t even know what ordinary human contact was. But he didn’t pull away, and he slowed his pace to match hers. They made the trip back to their mountainside house in silence.

That night, she dreamed they were back at the store, but instead of the gangsters it was her classmates cornering them. The knife Kamukura-kun took morphed into a gun, and he shot them one by one before turning it on her. When he pulled the trigger, she fell backwards into a maze. Traps sprung out at her, and she ran as a woman laughed.

That night, she remembered, and she woke up screaming.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: A single yen is approximately equal to .0085 US dollars. So ¥400 is about $3.55. Economics are admittedly not my thing, so the price inflation probably isn’t consistent. If any of you happen to be economic experts and spot mistakes, let me know.
A/N: Happy New Year, everyone! 2016 is dead and it's time for a fresh start. Are y'all excited for NDRv3 in a few days? Can you tell I'm nervous about this chapter? Y'all seem to have high expectations for it; I hope it delivers.

It wasn’t a complete recollection, mostly just large, disconnected chunks. But it was enough.

The mob outside the gates was so loud. She’d hurried as fast as possible to class, but it was impossible not to flinch at the sight of the parading Reserve Course students, their voices thick with hate, and the way their yells grew louder and angrier when they saw her. She couldn’t help thinking, what if Hinata-kun’s among them? The thought of him being among that jeering crowd, violent and furious and in danger from security, frightened her, and she worried at her lip.

She snapped open her umbrella and followed Komaeda-kun outside. While she was glad he was back, fear for Tsumiki-san wormed in her stomach. This was such a terrible time for Tsumiki-san to get lost; what if some of the parading students assaulted her? The nurse’s self-esteem was so fragile she probably wouldn’t fight back at all. She hoped that Komaeda-kun’s luck would ensure they found her before anything too bad happened.

Her skin was distinctly crawling, like when she was playing a horror game late at night. How had Mitarai-kun gotten down here ahead of them? Why was he so thin, why were his face gray and body shaking? Who was this woman with him? Her eyes, her bearing, everything about her gave off the vibe of an antagonist. These questions battled for dominance in her mind, and she fought the urge to run away. Mitarai-kun looked like he was in trouble, and it was her duty as class rep, as his friend, to help him.

“Killing is wrong, no matter what!” she protested. She barely understood what Komaeda-kun was talking about, this huge speech on “hope” and “despair”, but she did know that one law was universal. Whatever this girl had done, she surely didn’t deserve to die for it. How had Komaeda-kun even snuck a gun past all the security, anyway? Was she really about to witness an attempted murder? This was supposed to be a normal day! Things had escalated so fast—

His eyes suddenly widened, and he wheeled, pointing the gun at something over her shoulder. She turned to see why, catching sight of a young man with very long, dark hair. Something about him seemed familiar, but before she could study him more closely he disappeared. There was a gunshot, and she saw Komaeda-kun fall. She almost screamed, rushing to catch him—she patted him down, looking for blood—oh thank god, there’d been a handbook in his breast pocket, he wasn’t dead—and when she looked up—when she looked up—

Time stood still. Everything fell away. The room, Enoshima-san, Mitarai-kun, even Komaeda-kun’s injured body. None of it mattered in that moment, as she stared up and up into red eyes that should have been green. It was dark and his hair was hiding most of his face, but she knew, she knew. Spellbound, she peered into those eyes, searching for Hinata-kun, because it was definitely him—but she had to ask, had to make sure—
Her heart was a jumbled knot of emotions; happiness at finally finding Hinata-kun, curiosity as to why he looked so different, anxiety about the blank look in his eyes, and then pain at his cruelly indifferent “who are you?” And then there was worry about Komaeda-kun, worry about Yukizome-sensei, and a thick, heavy fear overlying it all. Her feet pushed her and Komaeda-kun to the Academy building ahead, but her thoughts were with those behind.

She smiled as her classmates rallied their assent, a wave of relief washing over her. It had taken more self-control than she thought she owned to not let her friends be privy to the fearful thoughts in her head. Because Yukizome-sensei had tripped a mentor death flag, staying behind as she had, and she couldn’t let her die. Not after everything she’d done for them. Alone, she was powerless. She was just that bullied gamer. But with her friends...with her friends, with all their talents in tandem, she could surely succeed.

Tsumiki-san...Yukizome-sensei...why? There was pain in her arm from where she’d landed on it wrong, but it seemed inconsequential compared to the pain in her heart. Her throat was too clogged by betrayal to speak; all she could do was stare up at the rapidly-shrinking image of her teacher as the elevator carted her off into darkness. Memories of Tsumiki-san’s apologetic face, the crazed look in Yukizome-sensei’s eyes, floated before her. She didn’t understand why they’d done this, and she could only ask their phantoms, uncomprehending, why?

Her heartbeat was echoing loudly in her ears, and she almost couldn’t stand, her legs weakened by terror. A cold, stone hallway spread out before her. Monitors glowed brightly in the shadows, on them a face with ice blue eyes and a smile with too many teeth. Her eyes took all this in with disbelief, because this just couldn’t be happening, as Enoshima-san’s cheerful voice proclaimed, “As the curtain-raiser for our wonderful despair...it’s Punishment Time!”

She couldn’t figure out the puzzle to this awful maze, the secret route that would get her out safely. Her heart drummed like a jackhammer as she tried to navigate her way out. A mindless litany of thoughts ran through her head, over and over: so dark everything’s gone wrong I’m so scared what’s wrong with Hinata-kun what’s wrong with Tsumiki-san what’s wrong with Yukizome-sensei I’m so scared where are my friends they won’t leave me where are they danger dodge pain god it hurts I’m so scared—

Euphoric relief crashed into her as her blurry vision saw the door, the golden GOAL printed on it. Everything hurt, it all hurt so much, but she was so close. So close. She pushed through the pain, a bloody hand grasping the doorknob. The door creaked open slowly, and she envisioned her smiling friends and teacher on the other side. All she could think was, I made it. I’m safe. I’m safe. I’m sa —

And then everything cut off. But it wasn’t hard to figure out what had happened. Of course the door would be trapped; what better way to push people into despair than offer it on the heels of hope? Looking again at the scars on her body, Chiaki figured that whatever trap had been on the door was behind the marks on her abdomen. They were the only ones she didn’t remember getting, and the one on her chest was so close to her heart, so obviously intended to be fatal, it was a miracle Kamukura-kun had been able to save her at all.

The entire ordeal was an awful thing to remember, and she trembled. After all, no one wanted to recall being forced into a game of cat-and-mouse, where they were harassed and harried and slowly tortured to death. But amidst those puzzle pieces, one memory, one line, stood out as more terrible than everything else.

“When you die, this video will throw all your classmates into despair!”

It was my idea, Chiaki thought, almost choking on guilt and horror now, it was my idea to go
There. It was my idea to try and fight Enoshima ourselves instead of getting help. And she predicted it! And she used it to brainwash them!

She screamed. There weren’t any words in it. It was purely animal, a howl of pain and despair.

**It was my idea! It was my idea that put my friends in her claws! It was my idea that doomed them! It was MY IDEA!**

She’d run her party into the final dungeon thinking they were ready to beat the boss, only to find they’d been horribly underleveled.

*You stupid, stupid girl!* Her inner voice berated. *Did you really think you could play the hero? Save the mentor, save the love interest, save the day and everyone goes home, jolly as can be? Someone like you could never have succeeded! You should have left it to the experts! But you didn’t, and now look what came of it!*

She couldn’t breathe. Her chest was heaving, trying to suck in air, but her lungs just weren’t working. The scars on her body suddenly seemed as burning brands. She wasn’t vain, she’d never been bothered by them much, but she had viewed them with a certain pride, as testimony to her survival. Now they were just reminders of every single mistake she’d made that day, hot and shameful against her skin.

A voice was calling her name. A familiar voice. But it was distant. Her room was dark and her vision was blurred by tears, but she could vaguely see a solid black form with two red pinpricks of light leaning over her. A small part of her brain recognized it, but the overwhelming hysteria and despair drowned that part out. To her, it seemed some kind of shadowy monster, come to finish the job Enoshima started. She screamed again and lashed out.

Hands caught hers and easily pinned them to the bed. She struggled, trying to get away, but the grip was iron. The hold shifted, her wrists were moved to a single hand; then something metallic and cold stabbed her arm, and Chiaki felt her limbs grow heavy. Everything seemed to be fading away…

Consciousness returned slowly. Whatever she’d been injected with must still be running through her veins—her body felt light and floaty, and an unnatural calmness seeped through her. Even remembering everything she’d…well, remembered, didn’t break the veneer of tranquility.

She opened her eyes to the familiar ceiling of her room. Chiaki instinctively glanced to her right, and yep, there was Kamukura-kun. Sitting in his chair, one foot on the frame, arm across the knee, eyes on her. It was almost like she’d gone back in time to the moment she woke from her coma. Except this time she knew the full story.

“You helped her.” There was no need to elaborate on who ‘her’ was. Chiaki wished she could have filed her words into an accusatory edge, but she was just so tired. They came out sad instead.

His response was immediate and unapologetic. “Yes.”

“Why?”

He was silent for so long that she started to think he wasn’t going to respond. Eventually, though, he spoke, voice low. “She offered a way to escape my boredom.”

Chiaki squeezed her eyes shut. She wasn’t sure how to feel about that. She knew Kamukura-kun was perpetually bored and hated it more than anything, in a way she would never really be able to
understand. She knew his apathy caused him to be detached to most everything, exempting her. She knew these things probably had a hand in his decision to do nothing as society crumbled. She’d accepted all of this. And while she wasn’t angry, it was still…difficult to hear.

An awful thought occurred to her, and even through the sedative she felt like she’d been punched in the gut. She opened her eyes, but couldn’t bring herself to look at him. The pattern of the wallpaper was very interesting, after all. “Then, was saving me… something she wanted? Was all this some kind of plan of hers? To keep me alive so she can, I don’t know, laugh at—”

“No.” His voice was unusually sharp, the single word coming out louder and almost angrier. Except that was silly, because Kamukura-kun didn’t ever get angry. A heartbeat passed before he spoke again, monotone back, and Chiaki almost thought she’d imagined the vague surge of inflection. “Enoshima very much wanted you dead. She had no hand in this.”

The tight feeling in her chest loosened. “Okay,” she said quietly, shakily, “Okay.” He’d never directly lied to her before. Omitted things, but not lied. It was a relief to hear her half-formed suspicion had been wrong. After the two betrayals from Yukizome-sensei and Tsumiki-san…she didn’t know if she could have handled a third. Especially not from him. Thinking their names dragged the associated memories back, and she swallowed. “So, then… do you know why Tsumiki-san and Yukizome-sensei…?”

“They had already been brainwashed by Enoshima at the time they betrayed you.”

That’s right, Enoshima had mentioned something like that, at least for her teacher. She remembered that now. A hollow pit opened up in her stomach. Yukizome-sensei must have been captured and brainwashed when she came to save Chiaki and Komaeda-kun. She didn’t know when Enoshima had gotten Tsumiki-san, and that was arguably worse. The nurse might have been brainwashed for days, weeks, months, and she hadn’t noticed. And you call yourself class rep.

Trying to stave those thoughts off, she reached for another question, any other question. "What changed? What made you want to help me? The only time I spoke to you, you asked who I was.”

“I did. But although I did not know you, I was still drawn to you. I felt the urge to seek you out as you were dying. We spoke.”

“I don’t remember that,” she stated in some surprise, sitting up.

“That is natural. Your brain was struggling for oxygen, it would not have had the energy to retain the memories of your near-death. What you said and did…” Here he paused, as if searching for the right words. How odd; hesitance was something she’d never seen on him before. “…caused me to question Enoshima’s ideals, and the entire ordeal lowered my opinion of her. I still find despair intriguing, but I am no longer associated with her.”

Chiaki got the feeling she should be proud of that. You sometimes got an achievement for swaying a major character away from the antagonist’s side. But the sedative was working its way out of her system, and the calm was fading. Her regained memories were waving at her; pain, guilt, regret, self-loathing, and sorrow were reasserting themselves, jabbing into her heart like a thousand needles.

“When you die, this video will throw all your classmates into despair!”

Her hands clenched her bedsheets. If I’d been stronger, smarter…if I hadn’t been so stupid…my friends wouldn’t have been brainwashed. That was just the truth of it, plain and simple. They’d trusted her judgment, and she’d danced them into Enoshima’s hungry jaws.
She wasn’t the protagonist who would save the day. She was a side character, delusional enough to think she was the hero when in reality, she was the one who made messes for them to clean up.

Kamukura-kun seemed to be awaiting a response, but she couldn’t bring herself to say anything. A pause stretched out, past pregnant and into overdue. It was uncomfortable, nothing like the cozy quiet that sometimes hung over their meals together.

Finally, when it became apparent she wasn't going to say anything else, he rose. She suddenly realized his suit was wrinkled, as if he’d been sitting at her bedside for hours. “Now that you have regained your memories, you will begin attending additional therapy sessions,” he said. “For the good of your mental and emotional health.”

“Okay,” she agreed quietly, even though she didn’t really care about her health. It wasn’t worth a fight. That nasty little voice from before whispered that maybe she didn’t even deserve to be well, and in that moment, when everything seemed so bleak, it was hard to find reasons to disagree with it.

A hint of softness touched Kamukura-kun's face. "Stay in bed until you feel well enough to leave. I will bring you something to eat."

She was a little hungry, but Chiaki didn't feel like she could eat a single bite. Relieved to no longer be scrutinized, she made a slight noise of assent, and he left. But being alone with her thoughts wasn’t much better than the earlier awkward atmosphere. It just meant she had less to distract her from every mean, whispered mental jab at how foolish she’d been.

Seeking a distraction, Chiaki’s gaze drifted blankly around the room to the window. The curtains were open, showing the red sky—a sight she’d already disliked. Now, with shame fresh in her veins, it was unbearable. She looked away, casting her eyes about until they fell upon her Game Girl Advance, sitting innocuously at her bedside table.

She stared at the device for a long moment. The pink-haired girl slowly picked it up and flicked it on; the happy, bright colors and cheerful jingle of Gala Omega greeted her. Chiaki gazed at the screen with a slight frown, reminiscent. This was the one game she’d never played with her classmates, something she’d kept just for herself and Hinata-kun. They’d played other games too, of course, but this one was…special. It was how they met. And it felt nice, having something she shared only with him.

Her eyes started to burn. Because of course, once she thought about her time with Hinata-kun, she inadvertently thought about her time with her friends as well. The parties, the school activities, the field trips; especially the field trips. Sonia-san was always so eager to learn more about Japan, and Soda-kun would trip over himself volunteering to show her around, and Tanaka-kun would somehow blow him away with effortless theatrics…

Now those same friends were criminals without a future. Because of her actions.

*You weren’t just a terrible friend to Hinata-kun. You were a terrible friend to your entire class. Someone like you was never fit to be class rep. You should have just stayed in your little bubble where you belonged.*

Tears tried to escape the corners of her eyes, but she pressed her knuckles into the sockets, forcing them back. What right did she have to cry? She’d tried her best, and her best just wasn’t good enough. Worse, her best had doomed everyone she loved. Her best had twisted Nidai-kun’s loud speeches and Koizumi-san’s beautiful photos and even Komaeda-kun’s hope—
With a frustrated cry, she threw the Game Girl Advance across the room. The music came to an abrupt halt as the console broke against the wall, falling in pieces to the floor. Shaking under the force of the emotions and memories that just wouldn't stop assaulting her, Chiaki pulled the covers over her head, curled into a tiny ball, and desperately bit her lip to keep from screaming again.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This was originally longer, but I liked where it ends here more. So now the original ending of this chapter is the first part of next chapter. On the plus side, that means part of it’s already written! Which is good since I head back to college Monday.

Medical and scientific studies show that people who have near-death experiences almost never remember the moment of “dying”. They can recall the events leading up to it, but not the actual impact. This is generally because of shock and lack of oxygen in their brains, making it unable to scribe the memories to the cerebral cortex. So Chiaki wouldn’t remember getting impaled (fortunately for her), nor anything after it, including her talk with Izuru. It’s less a mental block (like with her other ones) and more the memories just not being there, so she’s never going to remember them, either.
Chiaki drifted through the next few days as if dreaming. Only if she was asleep, she could actually wake up. This, this state of emptiness, guilt and sorrow, wasn’t ending. The world had taken on a hazy, ash-gray tinge. It didn’t seem quite real. Kamukura-kun had given her medicine for her mood, but Chiaki had yet to notice a difference. Sometimes she felt so awful she just wanted to curl up in her bed and lie there, like a useless lump.

Progress on her physical therapy had ground to almost a complete halt. She just couldn’t seem to muster up the energy to put actual effort into it. The mental-emotional therapy wasn’t much different—she’d talk for maybe a few minutes, then clam up.

Such as now.

“Recount what happened.”

“I don’t see the point. You already know what happened, probably better than me.”

Kamukura-kun’s eyes were like stones—flat, hard and unamused. “I know what happened from my perspective. Tell me what happened from yours.”

Chiaki shuffled a foot against the tatami, shifting in her seat. She’d thought the imagery of “sit down and tell me how you feel” was just a silly stereotype. And while this wasn’t quite the same, it was close enough—her on her bed, Kamukura sitting in his chair, knee up.

This wasn’t the first time they reached this kind of stalemate. At the therapy sessions Kamukura-kun would sit her down and ask her to tell him everything that had happened. But she could never bring herself to. Every time she tried it was as if she was transported back, and she’d shake and sweat, and it was just…so awful. She could talk about a few events, but not the entire thing. Then he’d push her to say how it made her felt. And she would always lie and say she was fine.

But in truth her dreams had morphed into nightmares. She would run through that endless maze, and each wrong turn would bring her before a red-eyed classmate. Sometimes Hinata-kun was there too, staring at her accusingly, blood dripping from a crown of cuts on his head. She’d turn and try to run, but they’d follow her, steadily increasing into a mob. The words they flung...
physically manifested as blades and darts, nicking and stabbing her until she woke up. “You were supposed to protect us.” “You should have done better.” “We would have been better off without you.” “I needed help and you didn’t notice.”

Sometimes she wanted to shout at Kamukura-kun to stop trying to help her. She wasn’t worth helping, and it was irritating that he wouldn’t just leave her alone. Why did he even care about her? She couldn’t do anything right. She’d just disappoint him in the end.

And then, sometimes she wanted to shout at him for not trying hard enough. Because she felt so alone, and Kamukura-kun—all he did was watch. When they weren’t in therapy, he let her be. He didn’t try to intrude on her space, and rather than appreciating it, it annoyed her. He only ever asked about her health in a clinical manner, as if she were some interesting specimen in a lab that was misbehaving. Maybe that was all she was to him. Maybe she was just deluding herself when she thought he actually cared, at least in the way a normal person did.

Then she’d swing around to being guilty again. Hadn’t he done enough for her? What did it matter whether he actually cared or not? She shouldn’t ask any more of him. It wasn’t his fault she was such an emotional, needy mess. It was all hers.

It was a ceaseless cycle, a whirling maelstrom of misery-anger-guilt-misery, and at its core was the memories she’d regained. The central belief that she didn’t deserve to live.

But…

_I don’t want to die._

She didn’t deserve to live, but she was too scared to die. And she knew from experience that Kamukura-kun wouldn’t let the therapy session end until she’d said _something._ So she gingerly spoke, in a faltering tone with lots of pauses, trying to abbreviate as much as possible.

“Komaeda-kun and I were looking for Tsumiki-san. We went down a secret tunnel and found Mitarai-kun…” Who she now remembered was the real Mitarai; the one she’d known and befriended had been the Ultimate Imposter. “He kept shaking and repeating ‘it’s not my fault’, then E-Enoshima showed up.” Just saying the name brought back the saunter in that girl’s steps, the cold flash of her blue eyes, her bruising grip on Chiaki’s chin. Unconsciously, she started to tremble.

“Komaeda-kun pulled out a gun… you took it and shot him, and we stared at each other for a bit. I recognized you, you asked who I was, then Enoshima…” Chiaki realized there was pressure building behind her eyes and in her chest. She forced it back and swallowed, feeling nauseous. “I… I can’t, not anymore, Kamukura-kun…”

He was silent for a moment. “Very well,” he finally acquiesced, and Chiaki could have sobbed in relief. Something similar to apprehension shadowed his face for half a second. “Do you wish to play video games today?”

She shook her head. “No…not now. I’ll just take a nap. Maybe later.” A lie. They both knew it. But he didn’t call her on it, just stared long and hard. Then he slightly canted his head up and rose from his chair.

Chiaki always waited until he’d left her room to cry. It was why she’d insisted on holding the therapies there in the first place—she knew she wouldn’t be able to get away fast enough. Here, she could just bury her face in her pillow and let the tears out as soon as the door closed. Plus her bed was conveniently right there, so she could go back to sleep once she was done.
That was all she wanted to do, now. It was too tiring to stay awake, and even the nightmares were better than the nasty, awful feelings constantly hanging over her.

Izuru had been in a state of unrest lately.

It had been exactly one week since he’d begun emotional and mental therapy for her, and Nanami was barely eating. She was not speaking. She slept too much. She rarely left her room, and she often gazed sightlessly at the walls. Her demeanor shifted between irritability, sorrow, and listlessness, a sign of hormonal imbalance.

He’d analyzed all her behavioral patterns and concluded that Nanami was plagued by a combination of post-traumatic stress disorder, survivor’s guilt, and depression. She’d been putting on a show of being fine in a feeble attempt to get him to stop the therapy and leave her alone, but it was easy to see through for him. Her conduct was not unusual, many people with such traumas felt like they were ‘burdening’ others, but irksome. Did she not realize how damaging it was to her own health, to neglect herself this way?

The most alarming sign was that she didn’t touch her video games anymore. He had never seen a day go by where she didn’t play them since he first made them available to her. Yet every time he offered—encourage patients with depression to partake in their hobbies—she refused. And even more troubling...

He looked quietly at the Game Girl Advance in his hands. When he’d returned to Nanami’s room with her meal the day she regained her memories, he’d immediately spotted it in pieces on the floor. It had been an intriguing but worrisome sight. He’d pretended he hadn’t noticed and swiped it while she was poking at her food. Fixing it wasn’t a problem, but the fact she had broken it at all...

It was…concerning to him. He wasn’t sure whether to welcome this sudden change or not.

He slid the console back into his pocket.

Loathe as he was to admit it, he could understand Enoshima a little better now. He could understand her drive to push Matsuda into despair before killing him. After all, despair was showing a new side of Nanami, one he hadn’t seen before, one as captivating as her other sides. He would never have predicted she’d break one of her beloved consoles, after all, and yet in her despair she had. It was fascinating, and he almost wanted to see more.

A vague part of him recognized and acknowledged that this would repulse an ordinary person, but Kamukura Izuru was beyond the ordinary. He was a superhuman with a superhuman way of looking at things. He was not blind to the parallels between himself and Enoshima, either; their genius intellect, their mutual boredom, their desire to alleviate it by whatever means necessary...

But the stark difference between him and the Ultimate Despair was, while he did find Nanami’s misery interesting, he did not like it. He did not like the ugly dullness in her pink irises, the dark shadows under her eyes from stress, the limpness of her hair. It physically hurt him, it was hurting her, and he did not like it.

That alone was interesting, that he could dislike something that held his attention. But he truly did not value despair enough to leave Nanami floundering in it. Thus, his attempts to apply cognitive therapy.

Mental therapy sessions began after lunch. Today, he began the session like he always did. “Tell
Izuru could tell Nanami was feeling better than usual today. Her posture was slightly relaxed, and she’d actually eaten most of her sandwich. Using that, he predicted that Nanami would speak more than usual before shutting down. He was right, of course; she managed to get to where she was rallying her classmates before having to stop.

“…and then Komaeda-kun said—” She cut herself off, looking away sharply. “…I don’t want to keep talking.”

For the past seven days, Izuru had accepted that. But today, he could sense a breakthrough was imminent, and so he pushed. “You must. Recounting it in your own words will gradually lessen the pain it has on you. Additionally, knowing what was around you at the time will be helpful in discovering any triggers you may have. It is vital for you to understand—”

Anger flared fast and sudden on her face. “I don’t need to understand it! It was awful! End of story!”

“It is very illogical to ignore facts, especially ones pertaining to your well-being. It serves no purpose and only makes recovery harder.”

She turned her head away.

“Nanami, I cannot help you if you do not let me.”

“I don’t want help,” she grumbled.

“Why do you say that?”

Her eyes were starting to water. “I just don’t, okay? Can you leave me alone?!”

“No. Tell me why.”

“Because I let my friends down! I failed to protect them! So I don’t deserve to be here or to ask for help!” she shrieked, tears spilling over her cheeks as she leapt to her feet.

It was like a dam had broken. Her face completely crumpled, and the girl curled into herself, burying her face in her hands. And for the first time in a very long while, Izuru found himself caught off-guard. Not because he hadn’t predicted the possibility of her breaking down in tears, but because he had failed to calculate his reaction to it. The sight of her tears dropped a heavy weight onto his chest, not unlike what he’d experienced when he first saw her bleeding out, and it threw off all calculations his mind was attempting to make. Quite simply, he had a desire to do something and no idea what it should be.

He searched his memories for anything that might offer guidance in this situation. There was nothing—he had only once shed tears, alone and away from company, and he had quickly collected himself. He had never needed comfort, or been obliged to offer it. But then, recollection: Enoshima, sniffling and rubbing her eyes in exaggerated weeping. “Y’know, this is the part where you’re supposed to hold me close as I cry into your chest about my lost love.”

A quick cross-reference with Ultimate Therapist supported the notion that this was a prudent course of action. But still, his first impulse was to reject the idea. He did not see the logical purpose of it. What would hugging her accomplish, other than getting him dirty? There was no rational reason for…
His inner musings trailed off when he looked at Nanami, hunched over with her arms wrapped around herself, tears and snot running down her face. That pain stabbed his heart again. For only the second time in his life, a great compulsion to act overcame him; he stood from his chair and approached her.

Slowly, his hand extended. It came to rest at the back of Nanami’s head, so light she didn’t seem to feel it. For just a moment, an uncharacteristic uncertainty crippled Izuru; then he shook it off and nudged her forward into his chest.

She started and stopped crying, a surprised little noise escaping her throat. Her shock was only to be expected: it was the first time he had ever initiated physical contact for non-assistance purposes. For a moment she was still, and he began to suspect he’d miscalculated. But then her trembling arms came up around his back, clutching him tight. Nanami buried her face in his shirt and resumed sobbing, the sound slightly muffled by fabric.

Keeping his hand on her head, Izuru noted with some interest that his muscles were unusually tense as he stood there, her tears dampening his shirt. It was an emotion akin to awkwardness, but not as discomforting. Rather than return her embrace, his other arm hung stiffly at his side, but Nanami didn’t seem to care. Somehow this seemed to have helped her, but he couldn’t comprehend how—

Actually, on further reflection, this was like when they’d gone to the store and she’d held his hand after the attack. He hadn’t rationalized the purpose for it at the time, but it had felt pleasant, so he’d allowed it. Judging from her reactions then and now, though, the contact seemed to be reassuring to her. Why, he still couldn’t explain. But the results were there, so he mentally compartmentalized physical contact as comfort for Nanami. Then he waited for her to calm down.

By his estimate, it took her a good fifteen minutes to stop crying. At some point her legs gave out, and he was forced down to the floor with her. Now they sat against the wall; Nanami still hadn’t let him go, and so she was twisted rather awkwardly, half on his lap and half curled up into his side. The skin around her eyes was puffy and red, and faint tearstains were visible on her cheeks.

“You deserve to be alive,” Izuru finally said. “Your judgement is clouded by guilt and despair currently; ergo the conclusion you have reached is false. It will fade in time.”

She shuffled quietly, but did not look convinced. So he added, “If that is not enough to convince you, then think of your desire to see your friends again. You cannot do that if you perish.”

Although Nanami still didn’t answer, her face showed she was mulling his words over. Judging now was an apt time, he fished the Game Girl Advance out of his pocket and handed it to her. The pink-haired girl blinked, taking it with shaking hands. Her eyes grew wet, and Izuru automatically began to calculate the odds of her crying again. She finally spoke, voice raw with emotion. “You…fixed it.”

He didn’t see why that seemed to have such an impact on her. “It is of some import to you.”

She stared at it for a long moment, lower lip trembling. Wiping her eyes with one hand, Nanami quietly set the device down on the floor beside her, then settled back into his body. Izuru memorized the way his heart leapt at that to analyze at a later date. “Thank you.”

Speaking as gently as he could, he prodded, “Why do you feel you failed your classmates?”

She sighed. “Because…before she left, I promised Yukizome-sensei I’d protect them. It was my duty as class rep. And I couldn’t do that. Worse, I led them into danger. So…it’s definitely all my
fault.”

Izuru agreed with that assessment. “You do have blame. You should have perceived that fighting
Enoshima was an unwise course of action, or at the very least left some classmates behind to get
assistance. Not doing so was indeed a failure on your part.”

“Wow, your Empathy skill could really use some work.”

“But the fault does not lie solely with you,” he continued. “Had Enoshima not initiated the actions
she did, you would never have been in that situation in the first place. So why are you giving
yourself the blame that belongs to her?”

Nanami was silent. When she spoke her voice was very small. “It’s not that easy, okay? I’m not
like you. I can’t just rationalize away my emotions.”

It was rather ironic she’d said that, when Izuru was trying and failing to do just that right then.
With her warm body pressed against his and her breath tickling the junction of his neck and
shoulder, he was finding himself getting rather illogically distracted. “You can live with them
without letting them conquer you. That is what the therapy is for.”

More silence. But finally, Nanami took a deep breath and nodded into his shoulder. “I’ll try.”

It wasn’t as easy as that, of course. There were more medications, more therapy sessions, more
spilling of her heart onto him, more leaning on his quiet presence. A month of therapy later and she
still had nightmares, still had bad days where she wanted to lie in bed. But she was improving, at
her own pace.

They established goals, just like with the physical therapy. Get her to talk about what had
happened, repeatedly. Get her to talk about how she felt. Slowly lessen the amount of guilt and
sadness she felt. Find possible triggers so she could avoid them.

It was difficult, and she broke down crying more than once. But it was helpful.

Kamukura-kun surprised her by eventually suggesting a pet, saying studies showed the
responsibility that came with them was helpful for people with depression. After some time
thinking it over, she’d tentatively agreed. He’d disappeared for the rest of the day, only to return
with a small brown rabbit in a cage. He’d informed her he would perform necessary veterinarian
checks, but other than that he wouldn’t interact with it at all. It was solely her responsibility, so it
would die without her.

For some reason, that actually encouraged Chiaki more. Thinking about how the rabbit, whom
she’d named Yumigami, after a character in one of her video games, would go hungry if Chiaki
didn’t care for her got her out of bed on bad mornings. I can do this small thing, she’d think, as she
gently fed her bits of lettuce. I’m not worthless. Here’s something that loves me unconditionally. I
just need to focus on doing what I can.

The afternoon was peaceful; her cane rested within arm’s reach as she relaxed on the couch.
Kamukura-kun was on her other side, fingers tapping away at his laptop. Impulsively she patted his
hand, the contact sending a tingly feeling through her, and he paused in a deliberate way. There’d been a shift of some sort that day when he’d gently embraced her. Chiaki wasn’t quite sure
what it was, exactly. But—she knew she’d liked being held by him. He’d been warm, like a stone
that had bathed in sunlight, and he’d been safe, and it had been nice. Really nice. And—she’d
realized she was starting to get starved for human contact, and now that she’d had a taste, she had
to have more. So she touched him more often. Just occasionally took his hand or hugged him when he went out or came back, harmless little things like that. Whenever she did he would narrow those vivid red eyes and examine her closely, but he didn’t seem to dislike it.

She hoped he didn’t dislike it. He’d tell her if he did, right?

She flushed and looked down at Yumigami, who was sitting contentedly in her lap as Chiaki stroked her with her other hand. Petting her was very soothing. She was a quiet animal, and the way she bumped her head against Chiaki’s hand was adorable, usually eliciting a giggle from her. It helped keep the foul, negative thoughts away.

Chiaki smiled and closed her eyes.

*It’s not easy. I’m struggling. But I’m still here. I’m not alone. I’m still alive, and I deserve to be alive.*

*And if I’m alive, then someday maybe I can try to make things right.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *pulls hair* I spent so long going over this chapter it’s kind of lost all meaning to me.

PTSD is a subject I wanted to handle respectfully, so I did research, hence the slightly-longer than normal wait for the chapter. One of the things I looked up is how real therapists treat people with it, and the technique Izuru uses actually is one of them. Though don’t think Chiaki’s “over it”—its effect will still hang over her for quite a while. She’s just doing better now.

One thing that’s interesting, to me, is seeing characters handle being the ‘switched’ role in a relationship. For example, Chiaki is pretty much always the ‘comforter’ in Hinanami/Kamunami fanfics, which is a given since that’s what she does in the game/show. So having her have a breakdown and need to be the one comforted, just once, is interesting to write, especially when the other is someone like Izuru, who is not at all prepared for providing emotional support. His section definitely took me the most time to write.

Internet cookies to anyone who can guess which game Yumigami’s name comes from without Google!
And so the year came to a close. It ended with a whimper; there were no wide-spread New Year’s festivals, an oddity for Japan. But Ultimate Despairs and terrorists alike had taken to attacking public celebrations, and no one dared risking their attention. Chiaki spent the evening curled up on her bed, staring out the window at the night sky and missing the fireworks that normally bloomed across it.

But there was something else on the gamer’s mind, something just as important. Hinata-kun had mentioned once, before he left, that his birthday fell on New Year’s Day.

She remembered—she remembered waiting in the snow by the fountain, shivering and clutching his present in mitten-clad hands. It had been part of winter break, and he’d surely gone home, but she’d still clung to the hope he might stop by the school. So she’d waited and waited for him to show up, waited until the sun had gone down; only then had she conceded defeat and brought his gift to the post office.

Chiaki tried very hard not to think about what had actually been happening to him during that time.

She hadn’t been able to celebrate with him then, but she could celebrate with Kamukura-kun now. The problem was how. Chiaki didn’t have the supplies to set up a big birthday party, and she got the feeling Kamukura-kun wouldn’t like one anyway. She didn’t even have a way to get him a present, or any idea what he’d even want. But she still wanted to try to show him she was grateful he’d been born, so she set her alarm to wake her bright and early January 1st.

Which turned out to be unnecessary, as her nightmares woke her up first. She was already laying on her back, breathing heavily and chasing the images of that damned maze out of her head, when the annoyingly loud ringing started. Chiaki jumped and swore, glaring at the red numbers as if they’d personally done her wrong as she slammed the alarm off.

I hate alarm clocks, she thought grumpily.

Popping the stiff joints out of her back, she slowly dressed. Skirts, buttons, ties; she could do that all on her own now, fingers only slightly clumsy. Chiaki still marveled at it sometimes; it felt like not long ago that Kamukura-kun had to do this for her. She grabbed a piece of paper off her dresser and slipped it into her blouse packet. Then, leaning on her cane, she tiptoed out into the hall, to the
stairway. Her eyes darted to Kamukura-kun’s door. It was closed, the lights off. *Good.*

Tentatively, Chiaki sat down on the top step. Kamukura-kun had her doing exercises to strengthen the anti-gravitational muscles in her legs, but she still couldn’t quite manage to go up and down the stairs, especially not on her own. It was the one thing he still needed to carry her for. But if there was one thing video games had taught her, it was problem-solving.

Placing her cane on her lap, she very carefully scooted forward and down, bracing for the slight jolt. She took a moment to catch her breath, and then she repeated the motion. This odd slide-bump down each individual step scraped her bottom and thighs, but it worked; she made it downstairs without making too much noise.

Chiaki didn’t know how early Kamukura-kun got up—she liked to sleep in, and he was always awake by the time she was. So she’d set her alarm for six AM, hoping that he would be like a normal young man for once and not want to get up before then.

Unfortunately, he was.

“It is unusual for you to be up this early, Nanami,” he commented idly from his position on the sofa, where he was dispassionately watching the morning news. The television’s display was par norm, a news report tallying last night’s murders and arsons. In the corner of the room was Yumigami’s hutch, where even the rabbit was blinking as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. “I do not believe it has happened before.”

Chiaki’s shoulders slumped. Kamukura-kun’s face was cast in eerie blue light from the TV screen, which, combined with his blank expression, made him look practically alien. Had he been there all night? But his eyes showed no sign of tiredness, just slight curiosity. All that effort to wake up early and surprise him, and he’d beaten her to it.

Actually, for him to be up, dressed, shaved and ready at six, didn’t he have to get up even earlier than that? She shuddered at the thought.

“I wanted to get up before you. I was going to try making you breakfast,” she mumbled, moving to Yumigami’s hutch. If she was up this early she may as well feed her. Kamukura-kun’s head turned, tracking her across the room.

“Why? The quality and nutritional value of your food would not be as high as my own.”

“Well…it’s your birthday today.”

A beat.

“So it is,” he said, as if the thought hadn’t occurred to him. “However, I still fail to see why such an occasion warrants you deviating from your normal routine.”

“It’s your birthday,” she stressed, “That means—you should be getting treated today. And…” She fiddled with the food bag, feeling suddenly nervous under the weight of his stare. “Normally friends do that with presents and a party, but you aren’t particularly material and it’s hard to party with just two people anyway. So… I don’t know, I just wanted to do something nice for you.” Aware she was starting to ramble, she flushed and hurriedly turned back to pouring out Yumigami’s food.

“How illogical,” was all he commented. “A birthday is nothing particularly celebratory. It is merely a reminder that an individual’s cells have aged, bringing them closer to perishing.”
“No, it’s a day where I show my appreciation for you,” she corrected, turning so he could see her puffing her cheeks out. “Where I show how happy I am that you were born.”

He was quiet for so long that Chiaki had time to finish feeding Yumigami and decided to make breakfast anyway. Even if it wouldn’t be a surprise anymore, even though she knew he didn’t have a favorite food, she still wanted to treat him.

She paused on her way to the kitchen, recalling the paper in her pocket. Hesitantly, almost shyly, she drew it out and gave it to him.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get you a proper present,” she apologized as he stared and stared at the handmade card, Happy Birthday written on the front in bright blue ink. Held in his elegant hands, against the stark formality of his suit, it suddenly looked very childish. It didn’t help that her art skills were terrible. “I couldn’t think of anything you’d really want, though.”

“I am talent incarnate; I was created for that purpose, not to want.”

That struck Chiaki as incredibly sad. Does he really see himself that way? She placed a hand on his arm, and his eyes snapped to it.

“You’re not just your talent. You’re a person, too. There must have been things you’ve wanted.”

They locked eyes. His gaze did that thing it did when he was analyzing something intently, where he stopped blinking and stared and stared as if he were looking into her soul. I’m missing something, she thought, feeling her face warm under his intense stare. She didn’t dare think about what it was.

Then he turned away, gently placing the card on the seat beside him, and the moment broke.

“There are exactly two things I have desired. One is beyond my reach for now. The other is your company.”

Chiaki was quite glad he wasn’t looking at her, since she couldn’t hide the surprised, flattered smile that crossed her face. “Just…spending the day with you is enough?” I’m enough?

“Yes.” A pause. “However, if you really desire to cook, I will not stop you.”

Her smile became a beam. “Thanks. I appreciate you letting me treat you. Even if you don’t think your birthday is anything special…I do.” Western-style, she decided as she ambled off, the bounce in her step not hindered by her cane at all, just to shake things up a little.

And so, fifteen minutes later, she proudly set down a tray of fluffy pancakes, biscuits and sausages before him. Chiaki knew her cooking level wasn’t the highest, but it wasn’t so low as to make her comically burn everything, either. But Kamukura-kun was Kamukura-kun; he saw every little flaw, and he couldn’t stop himself from pointing them all out as he consumed his breakfast. Still, he did eat everything, and that pleased her more than it warranted.

Watching his unchanging face as he chewed, Chiaki suddenly realized something. I’ve never seen Kamukura-kun smile.

Her bite of food paused on its way to her mouth.

It was true, she hadn’t. Hinata-kun hadn’t smiled often, either, and they’d usually been bitter. But there had been times he’d smile a true smile, one where he wasn’t weighed down by self-deprecation and cynicism. They had been so, so rare, but Chiaki had loved the sight of them. He’d had a gorgeous smile, and bringing it out had felt better than beating her high score.
Kamukura-kun, though, he never smiled. Ever. Or laughed, or ever seemed happy. His indifference to life had never struck her more clearly than it had now, seeing his apathy to his own birth. And she’d tried to help him enjoy life, tried to show him fun with her video games, but that suddenly didn’t seem enough for her. Determination burned in her chest.

That’s it, then. That’s my new year’s resolution. I want to make Kamukura-kun smile.

“I fail to see the purpose of this,” Kamukura-kun said, repeating his words from his birthday as he settled down on the couch with his back to her. “Human beings change how they wear their hair according to environmental needs, such as being overheated, or to attempt to increase how others perceive them. I feel no discomfort at the moment and you are not so shallow as to be swayed by a hairstyle; ergo there is no need to perform such an action.”

Chiaki hummed, experimentally taking a fistful of black hair and running a brush through in search of knots. “Well, why do you think I want to?”

She hadn’t succeeded in making him smile on his birthday. Or the days and weeks after. But she hadn’t given up.

For the past few weeks she’d tried different activities. Sometimes instead of playing video games, she’d ask Kamukura-kun to spend the afternoon reading books with her, or watching movies, or folding paper cranes. Once she asked him to help plant flowers outside, under the pretense of wanting some color, and after spending a few days creating a formula that would help the seeds adapt to the pollution, he did just that. She was rather put-out to learn the seeds wouldn’t be sprouting for several weeks, unlike in Harvest Moon.

None of it seemed to resonate with him, though. There wasn’t any click, any moment where he looked like he’d found his passion. If anything the video games, especially competitive ones, came closest, since that was what Chiaki was best at. And it did make Chiaki happy to know he…well, found them less boring than most activities, especially when she noticed she was actually doing slightly better against him.

But she still looked for other activities or hobbies he might like. Today’s attempt was hairstyling.

He paused, tilting his head slightly as he pondered. “The most logical conclusion is that you are attempting to increase your fingers’ dexterity with exercises like hair plaiting.”

She shook her head firmly. “Nope! I want to do it because I want to; there’s no deeper reason.” Other than wanting to make him smile, but she wasn’t going to say that lest he feel obligated to. “Besides, who knows? Maybe you’ll like whatever I do with your hair.”

He didn’t respond, and Chiaki took that as her cue to begin, filling the air with small talk to keep him from getting too bored. “I used to do this with some of the girls in my class, you know. When we were getting ready to go to a festival or something, we’d all help each other get dressed up. It was a lot of fun!”

“Hm.”

“You wouldn’t know it from looking at her, but Owari-san was actually pretty good at it. She said she used to have do her little sisters’ hair all the time. Didn’t care much for styling her own, but she’d do everyone else’s.” Nostalgia rose in her as she recalled getting ready for their first class festival, Owari-san rolling her eyes at Saionji-san and telling her to “stop squirmin’, you’re worse than my youngest sis.”
“You’re yanking too hard, you stupid—ow!”

Giggling with the other girls as Saionji-san pouted, looking very much like a child.

Swallowing the bout of wistfulness, Chiaki smiled, though he couldn’t see it. “Oh, but don’t worry, I think I gained enough EXP in that skill! You shouldn’t look too bad.”

She placed the brush aside and started weaving. There was something oddly soothing about this, the motions of looping and twisting his strands of hair together into a thick braid. They felt smooth, like silk, and Chiaki took a guilty moment to run her fingers through them in admiration. His hair was just so nice, and she spent a bit longer than she should stroking it.

Her fingers stilled in their dance across his skull. There was a bit of raised skin beneath them, rough in texture, and she traced it, hypnotized. It snaked from the side of his head down to behind his ear and around to the other side; with his mass of hair, it would have been completely invisible to the eye. This must be...

“The scar from my various brain surgeries,” he monotoned, guessing what she was thinking. Chiaki paused; the air suddenly felt heavier, as if she’d set foot onto sacred ground.

“What about it?” she asked quietly, so soft as to almost be inaudible. But she knew he’d hear.

A noise that almost qualified as a scoff left him. “Of course not. There is no reason it would.”

She didn’t answer that. Her scars hurt sometimes, phantom blades of pain slicing them in the waking hours of her nightmares. But then again, he cared about what had happened to him far less than she cared about what had happened to her. A somber mood settled as she wordlessly resumed her work.

“All right, done,” she announced a short time later, wrapping the end off with a band.

He rose; his hair was so long that even now it still fell to his waist. Chiaki handed him a small hand mirror and took a moment to admire her handiwork; the braid was rather messy and loose, slung over one shoulder. But with his bangs pulled back and tied into it, you could actually see most of his face now. Combined with the suit, the effect was...striking. Her breath caught.

“It looks good on you,” she told him as he dispassionately examined his reflection, and meant it. His eyes flicked towards her briefly, inscrutable, then away.

“Attractiveness is subjective. What you define as ‘looking good’ is not the same as what someone else defines it as.”

Chiaki’s smile faded a little. “…You don’t like it?”

“I hold no particular like or dislike for it,” he said flatly. Her crestfallen look must have touched something in him, though, because after looking at her face he continued, “However, I appreciate the intent behind your gesture.”

“Well, maybe I can try a different one another day, if you don’t mind?”

“Do as you please,” was all he said, but the words lacked any real coldness.

February came brisk and cold. But not so much as the past few months had been, and so the snow outside was beginning to melt. Chiaki appreciated that—her cane was prone to slipping on the wet
clumps, and after the fourth time she’d fallen she’d decided it was just better to stay indoors before she permanently hurt something.

“Start with your strong leg going up, start with your weak leg going down.”

The stairs were her current opponent. Kamukura-kun was a step below her, supporting her and ready to catch her if she fell. Chiaki really was trying to pay attention to what she was doing, but she was oddly distracted by his hand, large and warm, against her lower back.

She let out a tiny yelp as she started to tilt backwards. A light but sure push righted her. “Balance,” was all the black-haired man repeated.

The Ultimate Gamer exhaled, shakily lifting her right leg. She had to raise it higher than she did for regular walking, and tears stung the corner of her eyes as the underused muscles screamed. Even with the cane and Kamukura-kun helping, her left leg trembled, almost crumbling from the combination of keeping her balance and holding her up.

Move the foot forward. Set it down. Take a moment to breath; push up with the stronger leg and use the momentum to lift the weaker one. Drag it up behind you. Set it down. Take a moment to breath; repeat.

“Enough,” Kamukura-kun proclaimed, when he saw how much she was sweating. Relieved, Chiaki lowered her foot. The Ultimate Hope quickly scooped her up and carried her back down the steps, moving so swiftly he may as well have not been touching them at all.

Five steps isn’t so bad, she decided, as he set her on the couch and moved to get her some water. That was a third of the way up. The key to grinding wasn’t to think about how far you had to go, but how far you’d come.

Even so, it was harder to keep a positive attitude about her physical therapy lately. It felt like her progress had hit a plateau. Chiaki could successfully look back over the past nine months and point out the milestones, but now there were far less. There hadn’t been any major changes; it was mostly just rebuilding her strength again and improving the skills she’d already regained.

Not helping things was that she still had to use the cane to walk more than a few steps. They’d been practicing walking without it, and Kamukura-kun estimated she could be off it permanently in another month or two, but that seemed very far away. She sighed.

“Nanami,” Kamukura-kun called, and though his voice hadn’t raised in inflection, she could still hear the question in it. She hummed and glanced over. He’d walked out of the kitchen, and she could see he was holding—oh no.

“Could you maybe forget you saw those?” she asked with a wince. “They were supposed to be a surprise…”

“You did a poor job of hiding them in that case,” he remarked.

“C’mon, they kind of had to stay in the fridge. And I was going to give them to you soon anyway. They’re tomo choco,” she added, in case he mistook them for giri choco.

Nervousness fizzled in Chiaki’s stomach as he continued to stare at the handmade chocolates in his hands. It hadn’t been easy to make them without him noticing—she hadn’t even had a chance until he ran errands this morning, and her nerves had been on fire as she hurried them out. She’d gotten her male classmates tomo choco last year, of course, but those had been store-bought. Making them herself felt more…personal.
Then he said something that surprised her. “After lunch, eat them with me.”

She blinked. “Huh?”

“I will not consume these all myself. High amounts of sucrose cause a variety of health problems,” he said dryly, placing the chocolates down and handing his original goal, the cup of water, over. “And you are the one who insists things are more enjoyable with someone else.”

Chiaki smiled softly as she took the cup from him, their fingers barely brushing. “That’s right, I am.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: In Japan, there are several types of chocolate you give out on Valentine’s Day—giri choco is “obligation chocolate”, which isn’t as bad as it sounds but is still kind of impersonal. Tomo choco is “friendship chocolate”, and honmei choco is the romantic chocolate. Generally, giri choco is cheap and store-bought, tomo choco can be homemade or better-quality store-bought, and honmei choco is almost always homemade. If you're disappointed she's giving him tomo choco instead of honmei choco, honmei choco is the equivalent of a confession. Chiaki’s definitely not at that stage yet.
There was a window in their living room, looking out at the backyard of the house. Though there were several cherry blossom trees visible, they were sad things, twisted and black. There would be no blooming season this year, a fact that had saddened Chiaki greatly when she realized it. The pink flowers had always been a sign of beauty and cheer, and their absence was just another reminder of the world’s state. The pansies they’d planted had just started to bud, and the color was appreciated, but it wasn’t really the same.

“Have you noticed any abnormal side-effects from your medication?”

Breaking out of her musings, Chiaki turned her gaze away from the view outside back to Kamukura-kun. He was looking at her expectantly, and she tried to remember what he’d just asked. Something about her medicine having side-effects? Right, that was it. She hummed in affirmation. “Not at first, but lately I’ve been getting a lot of stomachaches.”

Her mental therapy sessions had gradually been reduced to once a week rather than every day. Chiaki didn’t doubt that this was partially due to Kamukura-kun’s analytical skills; the counseling sessions were mostly just progress reports on how her mental state was, not a search for any abnormal behavior. He wouldn’t need to ask her to spot them himself.

He nodded once, short and precise. “I will adjust the formula, then. Have your nightmares increased or decreased in frequency or vividness?”

She frowned. “They’re still pretty common…every other night, I’d say? And pretty realistic. Like, 16k resolution-realistic.” The sad thing was she considered herself lucky; she only had one awful nightmare a night. Kamukura-kun had told her that some PTSD patients had multiple a night, so they’d wake from one and then fall right back into another. Chiaki would take one long nightmare over several smaller ones any time.

“The content is still the same?”

“Yeah. Most of the time I’m back in the maze, reliving everything. Sometimes Hinata-kun or my classmates will chase me through it.” She rubbed her arms, trying hard to not think about their red eyes or the wounds on Hinata-kun’s head. “Other times Yukizome-sensei is pushing me in the elevator, or Enoshima is taunting me. The dungeon is the most common, though.”

“When Hinata and your friends show up, are they still saying the same things? ‘You should have died’ or ‘you let us down’? Other sentences in that category?”

“Not anymore. Now they’re just silent.” She glanced at him. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“It is an indication that subconsciously, you are starting to let go of the self-blame. So yes.”

Chiaki was quiet. It didn’t feel like she had begun to absolve herself. Every time she thought of her friends, the surge of guilt still hit her strong. Not only for her role in their brainwashing, but for not being able to do anything to help them now. If she thought on it too long the depression would start to creep back, whispering useless, useless over and over.

She hugged her knees to her chest, reaching down to play with her socks. “When…will the Neo
World Program be ready?” Kamukura-kun had kept her a bit updated on it; with his anonymous
funding the faculty on Jabberwock Island, wherever that was, had been built. Production on the
program itself had finally resumed.

“By my calculations, it will take at least another year for it to reach a beta stage. Of its three
developers, two are indisposed of; Matsuda Yasuke is dead and Fujisaki Chihiro is locked inside
Hope’s Peak Academy. Gekkogahara Miaya has been attempting to continue its development
without them, but she only has their notes as reference points, and her other duties to the Future
Foundation keep her busy.”

The Future Foundation… Chiaki wasn’t quite certain how to feel about that group. On the one
hand, she was glad there was an organization trying to restore order and peace to the world. On the
other, she was leery of them. According to Kamukura-kun the leader, Tengan Kazuo, was once
headmaster of Hope’s Peak, and after learning what she had of the academy’s corruption…well,
she just wasn’t certain she could trust any authority figures from there anymore.

“Do not dwell on it.” Kamukura-kun was rising from the chair opposite, so he must have decided
the therapy session was done. “There is no point in musing on things you cannot change.”

“I know. I just can’t help worrying about them, the longer they’re out and brainwashed.” She
watched him glide across the room. “Where are you going?”

“To begin modifying your medication.”

“Oh, can I watch? I’ve never seen medicine be made before.”

His indifferent silence told her she could do whatever she wanted. So Chiaki pushed herself up, and
with cane in hand followed him up the stairs. She made it halfway before having to stop, and he
turned and picked her up before resuming.

He set her down outside his door. She looked around curiously as he opened it; she’d never
actually been in Kamukura-kun’s room before. It was much larger than hers; against one wall was
a table with a chemistry set, a freezer, and a cabinet, probably for creating her various medicines.
The opposite one held a desk with his laptop and computer equipment, for hacking and security,
she wagered. The bed was impeccably made, the closet held only rows of identical black suits,
and everything was very proper and clean—and empty. Everything in it was only there for a
practical purpose. It felt more like an office he happened to sleep in than a bedroom, a place to
work, not to live. The only hint of a personal touch was the birthday card she’d made him, looking
very out of place on his dresser—she beamed when she saw it still there.

“You kept that?”

“There was no logical reason to discard it.”

“But there wasn’t a logical reason to keep it, either.”

He did not respond, and she stepped forward and embraced him, closing her eyes to better relish his
warmth and the smell of detergent on his clothes. A lot of otome games would talk about how
musky a guy’s scent was, but she’d never noticed that with Kamukura-kun. He just smelled clean.
“Thank you for keeping it.”

Hugging him had become something she was very fond of, and each time she was always a bit
more reluctant to let go. He was just so solid and warm and—and cozy. Definitely an odd image for
the stoic and apathetic man, especially since he hadn’t returned her hugs since the first one, but it
was just what she thought of him.

“Why do you do that?” he asked suddenly. Chiaki tilted her head back and peered up at him, puzzled.

“What?”

“Hug me. You have your pet for physical comfort. So why do you continue carrying out this action?”

Disappointment and hurt swelled in her. Chiaki knew she was weirdly touchy, with little sense of personal boundaries. It was just hard to read what was socially inappropriate and what wasn’t, so she usually didn’t try. If people had problems, they’d tell her, and she’d try to account for it. Her friends had never said anything about minding, and Kamukura-kun hadn’t either, so she’d just assumed... She released him and stepped back, face red. “Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you didn't like it.”

“I did not say I was averse to it. I just do not understand why you continue to seek physical contact with me when you are not in distress and when, even if you were, you have other avenues available.”

“Why? I just...there’s no rational reason, I guess. I just like it.” She played with her fingers, hoping he wouldn’t ask why, because she wasn’t certain she could answer.

Fortunately, he did not. Her answer instantly silenced him, and from the focused look in his eyes she knew she wouldn’t be able to pull him out of his thoughts for...however long it took him to sort through them this time.

She cleared her throat, feeling unusually warm. “Well. I’ll just, um...watch you work, then.” She went to sit on his bed and thought better of it—there was something overly familiar about that. So she pulled over a chair and sat beside the strange table full of medical equipment.

And despite the lingering awkwardness, she was able to pass a pleasant afternoon in that manner.

“You are distracted,” he stated, and Chiaki almost tripped down the stairs. An arm reached out and wrapped around her waist, yanking her back up against him. Heart racing from her close shave, she tried to think of how to respond.

How was she supposed to say it was because of him? Or rather, her failure in any progress related to her goal for him? March had just started, and she hadn't even made his lips twitch. And that was ignoring how it was almost a year since she’d been living with him. That long with not even one expression of happiness. She’d known getting him to smile wasn’t exactly going to be an easy task, but it was disheartening to set a goal and not make any progress on it. Even she had moments where she was tired and doubted, and he’d just happened to catch her in one.

I just want him to be happy...why can’t I do that one simple thing?

“Sorry,” she sighed instead. He wordlessly released her, and she slowly took the last two steps down, legs shaking even with the cane’s support. And that was that, task complete. Chiaki supposed she should be elated to be able to walk up and down the stairs again, albeit at a snail’s pace and, as always, with aid. But her churning thoughts, the swell of disappointment in herself and self-doubt, tempered any joy she might have felt. It didn’t help she was still frustrated with her body’s limitations.
“Why?” he asked, stepping nimbly around her as he descended the stairs as well.

_Huh?_ Oh, why was she distracted. He would see through a lie, so she offered a half-truth instead. “I was just…being a downer. Sometimes it doesn’t feel like I’m making any progress on this at all.”

““You are. I estimate a few more months of physical therapy will remove your reliance on the cane; however, with modifications to your dwelling, you should be capable of living independently sooner than that.”

A funny feeling was born in her stomach as she listened to him, uncomfortable and twisting. “Oh.”

_In a few more months, I…can live independently again. That…should make me happy, right? I don’t like feeling like a burden. But...if I can live on my own...he won’t need to stay anymore, will he?_

She’d never really thought about what Kamukura-kun would do once didn’t have to look after her anymore. She’d just _assumed_ he’d stay with her. But what if he got bored, or wanted to do something else? She still wasn’t entirely sure what the “one other thing” he wanted was. What if they reached a point where his personal quest took him in a direction away from hers?

“I’m being silly,” she sighed later to Yumigami, whose response was to nuzzle her hand. Chiaki scratched her ears, letting the therapeutic action soothe her churning stomach. In the privacy of her room, she was free to confess to the rabbit on her lap.

“First for fretting so much about not making him happy, then for this. I mean, if Kamukura-kun wants to leave when I’m recovered, of course it’s his right to.”

What was she even scared of? He hadn’t even given any indication he would leave. And even if he did, that wouldn’t mean they’d stop being friends. They could still stay in contact with phones or email, those still worked.

She just…she did not want him to leave her. She liked how things were. She liked seeing his face early in the morning and giving him hugs and setting the table while he made breakfast. She liked talking to him and playing games with him and even trying to decipher his inscrutable expressions. The thought of his absence left her feeling raw and hollow, and now it was forcing her to confront a question she did not know the answer to:

_What happens after?_

She’d thought about what she’d do after school, of course. Before everything went wrong she had been looking at gaming companies to join, as a beta tester or designer or something. With Hope’s Peak’s credentials, she could have gotten a job anywhere she wanted. But now the world was just so different…was there even a place for a gamer like her in it anymore?

“I just don’t know what the future holds,” she confessed in a small voice. “And I’m kind of scared of facing it without Kamukura-kun.” It felt like she could have done anything, if he were with her. She’d been _counting_ on him being with her. Wanting it.

She couldn’t even make him smile and she had the nerve to want him to stay. How selfish of her. How foolishly selfish.

As if sensing her owner was about to be swallowed up in depression and self-loathing again, Yumigami not-so-gently bit her pointer finger. Chiaki yelped and yanked her hand back, automatically lifting the digit to suck on the injury. She gave the rabbit a stern glare. “There are less painful ways to tell me to stop worrying, y’know.” The gamer sighed. “But I probably needed
that. Thanks.”

Yumigami settled down, and Chiaki tentatively resumed petting her. “What would you say if you could talk, I wonder? Would you mirror my motto back at me? ‘If you just do it, things will turn out okay’?”

She wasn’t certain it was 100% true anymore—she’d tried to rescue Yukizome-sensei and escape the maze, and neither had worked out. Though…the fact she was still alive could be testimony to the truth in that phrase. There was still time for things to be fixed, wasn’t there?

Liquid brown eyes blinked up at her. It’s okay to get discouraged. It’s okay to be upset. Take the bad as it comes, then keep going anyway, they seemed to say.

The pink-haired girl smiled tentatively. “…Right. Okay. I’ll try not to worry about that anymore.” She picked the rabbit up and snuggled her against her chest. “Even though you can’t really talk… thanks.”

Chiaki had grown complacent.

It was easy to forget the state of the world, cozied up in her home with Kamukura-kun. She didn’t like watching the news unless it involved her classmates, and she didn’t really go into town anymore, so she was rather sheltered about current events. She did go outdoors, but the red sky had gradually become familiar, until she barely noticed it anymore. It was almost as though they existed in their own little bubble, far away from everyone else.

But though they ignored the world, the world did not ignore them, and she was reminded of its realities late one night in early March.

They’d decided that evening they would watch an anime together—or rather, she’d suggested it and he’d agreed with his usual disinterest—and had been surfing the channels for a suitable one. The Ultimate Despairs had control over the TV networks; they allowed little to play besides the news and Enoshima’s propaganda, but made an exception for the most depressing of media. There wasn’t a lot of room to be picky, but Chiaki knew she didn’t want anything gory, and had already flipped past Berserk, Elfen Lied, and Grave of the Fireflies before deciding on Air. She was trying to focus on the meeting between Yukito and Misuzu, not how Kamukura-kun’s leg was brushing hers, when the screen suddenly crawled with noise.

Chiaki frowned. “…Did our receiver break or something, Kamukura-kun?”

He’d already moved to check it. “No.”

Just as he returned to the couch, the static cleared up, showing a classroom. Dominating it was a rocket, with a struggling man strapped to a chair inside. Chiaki leaned forward, squinting. “…Is that…Kirigiri-gakuenchou?” She couldn’t be certain since a blindfold was covering most of his upper face, but it certainly looked like the principal.

Kamukura-kun experimentally changed the channel, but no matter how far he went, the image stayed. “A forced network-wide broadcast,” he concluded. “It seems Enoshima has begun her next plan.” Chiaki glanced at him, and a shiver ran up her spine; the Ultimate Hope’s eyes were keen with something akin to anticipation.

“Upupupupupu…”

She turned back to the screen as a small black-and-white bear jumped into view, stepping
disdainfully on Kirigiri-gakuenchou’s legs as it approached the camera. It looked like a stuffed animal, yet its face was oddly expressive; it was smiling broadly as it waved.

“Hellooooooooo all you bastards! It’s me, Monokuma! The adorable mascot and spokesperson for the mastermind of this whole tragic state of affairs! Did you miss me?”

She blinked. A talking bear wasn’t as odd as some of the other things Chiaki had seen in her games, or even in the real world. But the overly friendly attitude, the strangeness of the entire situation, left her speechless.

Monokuma giggled, as if it—he?—had actually listened to a reply. “Of course you did! I’m so loveable, after all.” His face suddenly fell, and he kicked at a stray bit of trash. “Which is why everything I’ve heard hurts so much. Because I have heard quite some hurtful things. ‘Whoever orchestrated all this has kind of fallen off the radar’. ‘Do you think they’re dead’. ‘Maybe we can finally recover’.

He blew a raspberry. “Boo, I say! I haven’t stopped my work at all! I’ve just been biding my time, building up for a grand event! The magnum opus of my existence! The death blow to hope! And finally, after a year of planning and waiting, my masterpiece is finally ready to be presented!”

A rumble was building up from beneath the rocket, increasing in pitch. The principal began screaming incoherently, the words lost in the noise, and flailed furiously against his bonds. The bear sat down across from him, in front of a large red button, and gestured with a stubby arm.

“But before we get started, let me tell you something about this man.” Monokuma pointed a claw at Kirigiri-gakuenchou dramatically. “This man, the leader of Hope’s Peak Academy, has committed numerous crimes against humanity! Covering up murders, expelling innocent students, allowing human experimentation, he’s done it all! It’s a despairingly awful truth, but it must be known! This man is a criminal! And what do we do to criminals, my lovely viewers?”

Monokuma pulled out a gavel and spun it around, slamming it down onto the button with gusto.

“We execute them! IT’S PUNISHMENT TIME!”

Beads of sweat broke out on her forehead, and Chiaki trembled as the words from long ago came back to haunt her. The camera zoomed in for one last look at the principal’s face before the doors slammed shut around him. The gamer’s ears rang as the rocket roared to life, fire flaring up around the bottom. It lifted slowly, an unstoppable machine drilling through the roof, causing the room to shake…

“Oh, but don’t think that was my pièce de résistance,” the bear continued as the rocket disappeared from view. “No no no. You see, I think the world had forgotten something: no one is innocent. Anyone can fall into despair. And who better to showcase that than the last remaining students of Hope’s Peak? The kids you all call your hope for the future? The kids you thought were safe? The kids you thought you could hide from me?”

He laughed again. “Upupupupu…despair will always find hope! It will always seek out those little bits of light so it can smother them!” The camera enlarged his single red eye, until it was filling the screen, glowing menacingly. “And I’m going to remind you all just how powerful despair is.”

There was an explosion of sound as the rocket crashed back down. The camera panned back to show the wreckage. It had buried itself nose-first in the floor; smoke was billowing out from the point of impact, and various parts were falling off. With a loud groan, the metal doors cracked open, and out tumbled the remains of Kirigiri Jin, former principal of Hope’s Peak Academy.
Chiaki stared and stared in horror as Monokuma gleefully exclaimed, “The Second Mutual Killing Game of Hope’s Peak Academy has now begun! Be sure to tune in tomorrow morning, folks, you do not want to miss what these kids are going to do to each other…”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Enjoyed the fluff of last chapter? Good! Because we have now caught up to the timeline of the series proper. Time to bring back despair.

I figured Jin’s execution would be the ideal point for Junko to start her broadcast. And if she’s broadcasting it, she’d probably want to narrate what’s happening and what’s going to happen, just to drive the despair in further. So even though Monokuma doesn’t talk during the execution, I added it in as some “behind the scenes” stuff only people watching the broadcast saw.

Also, Junko had to have people in charge of television networks, otherwise the Future Foundation would have been able to stop her killing game from being broadcast.
PvP

Chapter Notes

A/N: So the killing game was going to be one chapter, but it got so long I had to split it up into two. Remember when Extra Life was supposed to be short? Yeah, me neither.

You may notice Chiaki’s birthday from last chapter has disappeared. That’s because it’s been edited and moved to this chapter, since DR1 actually has a concrete date: the fifth trial happens on April 1st, according to the execution’s title screen. That’s on Day 23, and that means DR started March 10th. 4 days before Chiaki’s birthday. Oops. But in my defense that is a very easy-to-miss detail (I didn’t notice it until a buddy pointed it out).

Disclaimer: Some dialogue here is taken directly from the game. Obviously, that isn’t mine.

Trigger warning: PTSD flashback in the last part of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What did Monokuma mean, second killing game of Hope’s Peak?” she asked Kamukura-kun when the shock had worn off, twisting in her seat to peer into the kitchen where he was. Monokuma had cheerily informed them that the broadcast would begin at 8 AM tomorrow before signing off. Air had resumed, but she was definitely not in the mood to watch anime anymore. She’d sat there, numb, as Kamukura-kun nonchalantly got up to do the dishes. How were you supposed to react to something like this?

Chiaki couldn’t get Kirigiri-gakuencho’s body out of her mind. She’d never seen anyone die right before her eyes. Yes, she’d seen people die in her video games and movies and anime, but those had all been fake. And it was easy to pretend this was fake too, just another TV show, but Kirigiri-gakuenchou had been a real person. Someone she’d seen on campus. And Monokuma’s words, about killing games and the 78th class, were buzzing about her head like Bite Bugs.

Kamukura-kun put away the plate he was holding before he answered. “Shortly after I met her, Enoshima organized a killing game to show me despair. She brought me to the old school building, where she had summoned the student council. Using intimidation tactics and blackmail, she manipulated them into a mass slaughter. All but two perished in the initial conflict: one hid and faked falling into a coma, and was murdered by Enoshima’s lover some time later. The other attempted to kill me with a chainsaw.” He didn’t elaborate on what happened after; he didn’t need to.

She blurted out the first question that came to mind. “Are you okay?” And wow, that was stupid; obviously he was, or he wouldn’t be standing in front of her.

He turned, raising an eyebrow marginally. “What a pointless inquiry. Except at the very end, my life was never in danger, and I knew nothing of and cared nothing for the other participants; their deaths had no emotional impact on me. There was no way for the experience to leave mental scars.”
Cold as always, she thought with a wince. Rather than settling her down, his words had only agitated her further. Clutching her cane, she rose and joined him in the kitchen. Without looking he handed her a plate, and she moved to put it away, hoping keeping busy would alleviate the distinctly unpleasant feeling of ants crawling across her skin.

He continued, “The Steering Committee tried to cover the event up by claiming the council had been called overseas. But Enoshima used footage of my presence there to pin the blame on me, leaked it to the Reserve Course, and incited them into the Parade. She also used the footage to create her brainwashing video. The first killing game was, essentially, the linchpin for the greater tragedy.”

“So…this killing game is going to be like that? Some kind of battle royale?”

“Doubtful. Enoshima is a fickle creature, and the first killing game was very swift. A longer, drawn-out one would carry her message of despair better. So she has likely modified it.”

Chiaki gave voice to the faint, foolish hope fluttering inside her. “Is there any chance of them being rescued before it starts?”

“The Future Foundation will attempt one; however, the building was converted into a shelter. It is meant to survive outside attacks. Additionally, Enoshima has likely set up extra defensive measures. I calculate the odds of a rescue succeeding to be almost nil.”

He paused, turning away from the sink to meet her gaze. “The question is, what will you do, Nanami? Should you watch this Killing Game, you will likely witness events you find emotionally distressing. From a medical standpoint, I do not recommend it, but I will leave the final decision up to you.”

Her grip on the next plate tightened, and she stalled. “I…I think I have to watch it. If I need to stop, I will. But I have to know they’ll be alright.” Not knowing would be worse than knowing. And she could ask Kamukura-kun to just tell her what happened, but…well, he didn’t exactly sugarcoat things.

His face was unreadable as he nodded. “Very well. Set your alarm early and I will meet you downstairs.”

The next morning, he had breakfast waiting for her in the living room. Accepting the offered plate of miso soup and eggs, she sat on the couch, nervous butterflies taking flight in her stomach as Kamukura-kun turned the TV on. At 8 sharp, the broadcast begun with a brunet boy dozing on a desk. A colorful nameplate flashed on the screen, informing them his name was Naegi Makoto and he was the Ultimate Lucky Student.

“Oh, by the way,” Monokuma explained, briefly popping up out of nowhere, “Naegi-kun and his classmates have all had their memories of their time in Hope’s Peak taken from them. I hate adhering to a cliché plot device like amnesia, but it was necessary to set the mood, you know? I mean, what good is a murder mystery show if there’s no overlying mystery to solve? Upupupu…” And just like that, he disappeared.

Of course Enoshima has something like that at her disposal, Chiaki thought grumpily. The antagonists always started with more power than the protagonists, but just once it would have been nice for the opposite to hold true.

They watched Naegi-kun sleep for a few more minutes before he jerked awake with a gasp, staring
around with wide eyes. He took everything in: the iron-plated windows, the security camera, the childishly scrawled pamphlet on his desk. Confusion crossed his face, and he rubbed his forehead like he was trying to remember something.

After a few moments of holding that pose, the brunet uncertainly made his way to the entrance hall, the broadcast trailing his steps. The rest of his class was hovering there, and Chiaki watched him go around introducing himself. As with Naegi-kun, Enoshima had nameplates appear to inform them of all the students’ names and talents, though it was mostly unnecessary. Several of her classmates had been fans of Maizono-san’s idol group, she’d heard Kuzuryu-kun grumble about Hagakure-kun’s debt more than once, Nidai-kun and Owari-san had talked up a storm about sparring with Ogami-san…other than Naegi-kun and Kirigiri-san, Chiaki had been peripherally aware of all of Class 78 in some way.

When Naegi-kun spoke to Enoshima, the gamer frowned and leaned in, studying the screen with a furrowed brow. There was something…off about her. Subtleties in her face that didn’t line up with Chiaki’s memory of the strawberry blonde. Sure, it had been dark, and a while ago, and she might be remembering wrong, but…something was off. Naegi-kun seemed to notice it too, for he commented on her not looking like she did on the magazine covers. She laughed and waved it away as special editing, and that seemed to convince the Ultimate Lucky Student. But Chiaki was still uncertain.

It was the eyes, she decided. Enoshima’s eyes had been piercingly blue, glinting like ice, and this one’s weren’t. She remembered that clearly.

“That girl doesn’t seem like Enoshima,” she told Kamukura-kun.

“You would be correct in that assessment.”

She waited for him to elaborate. When he did not she prompted, “So…who is she?”

He stared at her. Realization dawned. “…You aren’t going to tell me, are you?”

“It will be interesting to see what conclusions you draw,” was all he said, and she pouted, turning back to the screen.

Trepidation built up in her chest as the intercom came on, Monokuma’s discomforting, cheeky voice calling the students to the gym. Chiaki wished she could somehow warn them what was coming, watching them act like it was a joke as they trickled away. Kuwata-kun even talked about napping. She bit her lip, hating her helplessness.

Monokuma made his entrance, and there was a rather humorous segment of the students’ alarmed exclamations. Then he started to lay the rules out for them, and by extent, the audience. Class 78 would be forced to live inside the school for the rest of their lives, no outside communications allowed—and now Chiaki understood why Enoshima had taken their memories, besides wanting ‘a show’. Hope’s Peak Academy was probably one of the safest places on the planet, if it had been converted into a shelter. Yet the students would think it a prison, since they didn’t remember the Tragedy. Naturally, they all clamored to leave. And that was when Monokuma dropped the bombshell she’d been dreading: the only way out was to kill.

Silence fell.

“K…kill?” Naegi-kun finally squeaked, his voice cracking.

“Beatingstabbingclubbingbeheadingburningsuffocatingstranglingslaughteringvoodooocursing… The
method doesn’t matter. ‘Only a student who kills someone can leave’. It’s a very simple rule. The most evil of actions leads to the best of outcomes.” Monokuma grinned, exposing his sharp teeth “I hope you all cooperate.”

All fifteen of them seemed frozen by fear and shock. The bear giggled. “Upupu… This heart-thumping feeling of distress… It’s just as if the salmon suddenly started assaulting people… Like said before, you bastards are often called ‘the world’s hope’. Making such ‘hope’-filled kids kill each other—such a ‘despair’-filled situation—my heart is all a-thump with excitement!”

The taunting and mocking continued until Owada-kun snapped, stormed forward and grabbed Monokuma by the face. Ignoring his squawk about violence towards the headmaster being against the rules, the delinquent lifted him up in the air. He cursed and yelled, spittle flying out of his mouth as the bear suddenly, eerily, went quiet.

BEEP…BEEP…BEEP…BEEPBEEPBEEPBEEPBEEPBEEPBEEPBEEPBEEPBEEPBEEP—

Chiaki’s eyes widened. She’d played enough video games to recognize that sound. “Oh no—”

Kirigiri-san seemed to recognize it too. “It’s dangerous! Toss it!”

“Eh…?”

“Just do it!”

Looking baffled, Owada-kun threw Monokuma high in the air. Mere seconds later, the bear exploded in a ripple of fire, sound and light. Ash and charred bits of metal and fur rained down upon the gaping teenagers. And that was when Class 78 seemed to realize they were not, in fact, being pranked.

Another Monokuma popped up and scolded them for trying to break the rules, quashing any hopes they may have had about the danger being past. That was the end of their resistance. The students were all silent, gray-faced and stricken, as he finished his speech. They wordlessly accepted the Electronic Student IDs he handed out. And they stood there, staring at each other with apprehension, long after he disappeared.

Enoshima had apparently decided that Naegi-kun would be the “protagonist” of her twisted game; the broadcast followed him around the school, showing his interactions with the other students and his unwavering optimism. Chiaki melted a bit at how sweet and just adorable he was; he reminded her of a puppy. Or maybe Kingdom Heart’s Sora? That seemed a more fitting analogy.

“It’s so nice that he and Maizono-san were able to reunite,” she commented as the duo talked about dreams in the trophy room. “It’s sweet when childhood friends can meet again, don’t you think?”

“She is using him,” Kamukura-kun said flatly. His only opinion on Naegi-kun was “his luck patterns are difficult to analyze”; other than that, he held the same indifference to him as for every other member of Class 78. Most of the socializing bored him, so he was multi-tasking on his laptop at the same time, monitoring the Future Foundation’s forces as they repeatedly threw themselves at the doors. Chiaki had only looked at it once in curiosity; the number of strewn bodies kept her from doing so again.

“That’s an awful thing to say!”

“She is. Japan places its idols on a pedestal; she has an image to keep. Fraternizing with those beneath her social status would tarnish that image. And Naegi, an ordinary student who possesses a
boring talent like luck, is definitely beneath her social status.”

Chiaki glared. “Well maybe Maizono-san doesn’t think social status is everything. It shouldn’t be, anyway.”

Still, the days crawled by uneventfully. Class 78 cobbled together a semblance of order and schedule, and the broadcast followed it, running from 7 AM to 10 PM every day, every channel—likely because, Kamukura-kun hypothesized, murders were most likely to occur at the designated ‘Night Time’. This was Enoshima’s way of keeping them in the dark just as much as the students.

On the game’s fourth day, March 14th, before they turned the television on, Kamukura-kun brought over a pair of boxes. “Happy Birthday and Happy White Day,” he droned, sounding anything but.

Delighted warmth bubbled in Chiaki’s chest—she hadn’t been certain Kamukura-kun would notice the occasions, given his dour opinion on birthdays and holidays. But then uncertainty and guilt overshadowed it, and she bit her lip. “Thank you, but…it feels kind of wrong to celebrate while Class 78 is going through that game.”

“As opposed to celebrating while the world is destroyed?”

“Fair point,” she conceded, taking the boxes and opening them. It would be nice to forget about reality, even for a little while.

Despite what she’d said to Kamukura-kun about his birthday, hers had never been particularly celebrated, either. Partially because of the misfortune of it falling on White Day, partially because she’d had no friends, and partially because her parents had always been so busy; their only acknowledgement of the date had been the larger-than-usual amount of pocket money they threw at her and the dismissive “do whatever you want today”. She’d still enjoyed the occasion, treating herself by binge-shopping new video games and eating gallons of ice cream, but it wasn’t until Hope’s Peak that she’d had her first real birthday party. Once she’d realized how much she’d missed…how could it not become important to ensure her friends felt that same level of love?

The White Day present was a collection of handmade chocolate truffles, way too extravagant to be proper return presents for her measly chocolates. It was rude to refuse though, so instead she only puffed her cheeks and said, in a tone brooking no argument, “You’ve got to share them with me, okay?”

He made a non-committal noise, which she decided to take as assent. Chiaki placed the chocolates aside and turned to the other present, opening it to find a book with a red leather cover. Looking inside, she saw the insides were blank, transparent with room to slip in square pieces of paper.

“…A photo album?”

“You have been keeping the pictures I obtained of your friends stacked on your dresser, where they can fall off and get lost. Practicalities’ sake supports a place to store them.”

Touched, her lips parted in surprise, then turned upwards. “That’s…that’s a really thoughtful gift. Thank you, Kamukura-kun.” Chiaki darted forward to give him a quick hug, which he accepted with stoic grace.

Tilting her head to the side as she released him, she added, “You know, I don’t have a picture of you. Don’t you think we should remedy that?”
“I did not see a reason to bring a camera. I suppose I can obtain one at the town if the matter is of such importance to you, though I fail to see why.”

“Well, it’s important to me because you are, and I want something to preserve that. And we can just use your phone, can’t we?”

“A phone’s camera is of inferior quality compared to a proper one.”

“Maybe, but…don’t you think that adds a bit of charm, in its own way?”

She and Hinata-kun had once used her phone to snap a picture together, when they’d gone out to the local game arcade. They’d been riding the subway there, so they’d been jostled by the people around them, and the picture had been blurry and off-center and she’d been in the middle of a blink, but she’d loved it. It was the only one of Hinata-kun she’d had, and she used to look at it every day after he left, folding and unfolding it until she’d memorized the creases.

It was gone now, of course. Either shipped back to her parents with the rest of her possessions or lost in the Tragedy. Just another thing she couldn’t get back.

Kamukura-kun didn’t look like he believed her, but he did agree to two photos. One of just him, one of the two of them together. They had to shuffle close together to fit in the viewfinder; her head was nestled on his shoulder, her hand resting beside it. Little sparks seemed to crawl from the point of contact, and Chiaki was suddenly aware of the hard planes of his body pressing against hers.

_If my life were a dating sim_, she thought _inanely_, cheeks aching from her smile as she stared into the camera, _this would be a CGI._

_What an…odd thought to have, huh?_

The _click_ of the phone brought her back to reality. Kamukura-kun stepped away from her, and the thought abruptly dissipated. Her face felt oddly warm, and she coughed self-consciously, hoping he hadn’t noticed. Attempting to cover her awkwardness, she peered at the screen.

He wasn’t smiling in either picture, of course. But they were still lovely, and when he printed them out, Chiaki placed the one of him with the rest in her album. The two of them together, she folded in her shirt’s pocket and nestled above her heart.

On Chiaki’s birthday, Enoshima released motivational videos to get the students to kill. And the day after, everything changed again.

Maizono-san looked like a broken doll, lying there, her head lolling to one side and her limbs abnormally limp. A knife was embedded in her stomach like a morbid pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. Dried blood caked the floor and wall of the shower.

Chiaki swallowed, watching Naegi-kun scream and scream until he fainted. She was a bystander, and she was shaken by this; how much worse was he feeling, then, when he’d known and cared about Maizono-san? If it had been one of her precious classmates there instead…

Pounding footsteps echoed, and Ishimaru-kun came charging in. “Naegi-kun! What caused you to—” With a surprised yell he tripped over the unconscious boy’s body. Grimacing, he lifted his head and came face to face with Maizono-san. His face paled; his mouth opened and shut for several minutes before finally spluttering “W-W-What…?”

Kirigiri-san was next, deftly stepping past the tangle of limbs at the entrance. Her eyes widened a
little, but that was her only visible sign of surprise. As she moved, pressing two fingers to Maizono-san’s neck, the school’s intercom dinged. “A body has been discovered! All students, please make your way to the gym for a special assembly with your headmaster!”

Ishimaru-kun scrambled backwards, looking ill. “Body? Then…Maizono-kun really is…?”

There was a stampede of footsteps, and the rest of the students burst onto the scene, clogging in the doorway, trying to peer over each other’s shoulders. Fukawa-san alone hung at the back, eyes squeezed shut, mumbling “I’m not gonna look, I’m not gonna look,” over and over. “Goodness,” Celeste-san said mildly, one hand delicately covering her mouth. “Is she really…?”

“It seems so.” Kirigiri-san rose, looking resigned. She cast Naegi-kun’s body a glance. “Could someone pick Naegi-kun up and bring him with us? We’d best not tarry any longer than we have.”

“Wait!” Hagakure-kun stepped forward on shaky legs, his casual grin ever-so-slightly strained. “Th…This is…still just a prank, right? I-I mean, it looks very real, that b-blood is very convincing, but—”

“Are you blind, deaf or just dumb?” Togami-kun sneered. “She’s clearly dead.”

“Nope!” The Ultimate Clairvoyant’s smile looked very forced now, and he shook his head back and further, muttering in a lower tone, “Nope, nope, nope, it’s not real, none of this is really happening…”

“Leaving the idiot aside…” Pushing past a shaking Fujisaki-san and a wide-eyed Kuwata-kun, Owada-kun forced his way into the tiny bathroom, coming nose-to-nose with the young woman. “Did I hear you right? Are you really suggesting we listen to that punk-ass bear?! He’s the bastard who caused all this!”

“I know, and that’s exactly why I’m saying we should.” Her cool response snapped Owada-kun’s mouth shut. Kirigiri-san’s gaze swept over the students, making sure to look each one in the eye. “Like it or not, we’re prisoners here. Monokuma oversees our comfort and our lives. It’s best to comply with him for now—who knows what else he might do otherwise?”

And, well, that was that, wasn’t it? So Ogami-san picked up Naegi-kun, and the students headed out to the gym. There, Monokuma had them wait for Naegi-kun to wake up, and once he did… Chiaki’s heart twanged in empathy, seeing his pale face and teary eyes when he was told that no, he hadn’t been imagining things—his friend really was dead.

But he didn’t have any time to mourn, as the bear leapt into the explanation of what was to come next. And Chiaki was shown that just when she thought things couldn’t get any worse, they could. 

*They’ll have to go through a trial? They’ll have to sentence one of their classmates…one of their friends…to death, or they’ll all die? That’s just…too cruel.*

Apparently, she wasn’t the only one who thought so. She watched Not-Enoshima storm over to Monokuma, throwing up a big fuss about how she wouldn’t do this. He warned her to fall in line or else be locked up, but it had no effect. Her heel came down on the stuffed bear, stomping him into the floor as she sneered. And then—

Chiaki shrieked, recoiling back as innumerable spears shot out of the floor and impaled the strawberry blonde. Oh god, blood, there was so much blood. Hollow eyes widened, and quivering hands pawed at the spears. “…Huh…? …What…? …That’s…strange…why…was…I…?”

And with a final shudder, Not-Enoshima went limp. The spears retracted, and her body fell to the
floor with a wet *thump*. A red pool slowly formed around her. As the corpse spasmed in the last of its death throes, Yamada-kun screamed. Fukawa-san moaned and covered her eyes, her thin frame trembling. Fujisaki-san’s eyes welled with tears, and several others gaped in disbelief.

“Boring,” was all Kamukura-kun sighed.

“Do you have any ideas on who did it?” she asked Kamukura-kun as the students morosely investigated, a dark cloud visibly hanging over them. Chiaki had played her share of mystery games, and was compulsively piecing together the different clues in her head. But it was hard when she couldn’t investigate herself and had to go off what Naegi-kun was seeing. Not to mention still being shaken by what she’d just seen, the deaths of two young women her age.

For some reason, the scars on her torso had ached, seeing what happened to Not-Enoshima.

“I have already deduced who the killer was, yes.” Then, rather than saying who, he turned and fixed her with his sharp gaze. “Tell me, Nanami: do you believe Naegi Makoto killed Maizono Sayaka?”

“No.” She interlocked her fingers together, dropping them onto her lap. “…I won’t deny I thought he might have for a moment, when they said the crime scene was his room. But looking at how hard he’s working, and at some of the evidence itself…no. More than that… I don’t believe he would kill someone he cared about.”

“You have no evidence to support that belief.”

Her lips twisted into a wry smile. “I’ve told you before, haven’t I? There’s no logic to believing in someone. I just rely on what my heart’s saying.”

“Then who do you think the culprit is?”

“…Kuwata-kun. Those English numbers Maizono-san left as a dying message…if you flip them upside down, they spell out his given name.” Something she’d only recognized because *Pokémon’s* Unown alphabet had a basis in English. She’d been thinking 11 and 0 looked like “N” and “O”, and had tried to figure out what “NO 37” could mean. Then she’d thought that if the first two were letters, maybe the others were too, and after a bit of struggling found the answer. “I’m just not sure how he was able to get in the room.”

Kamukura-kun did not answer, and all conversation ceased completely. They stayed that way for the rest of the investigation, until finally Monokuma announced it was time for the students to gather at a set of red doors on the first floor. Breaking away from his talk with Fujisaki-san, Naegi-kun hurried through the halls to the appointed place. Goosebumps rose on Chiaki’s skin as he drew closer to the doors, sickeningly familiar. He pushed them open, and the gamer’s blood ran cold when she saw what lay beyond.

An elevator, the doors sliding open with a cheerful *ding* and suddenly the arms around her tightened in a squeeze, like a farewell, before shoving her. Caught off-guard, she stumbled and fell, her elbow banging painfully against the floor. Blinking back tears of pain and shock, she turned, wanting to ask what was happening and Naegi-kun was talking to the other students as they piled in, pleading innocent, but his words were nothing to Chiaki’s ears, just meaningless syllables.

“That’s why you were chosen,” Yukizome-sensei breathed, smiling coldly. Her breath was coming up rapid and shallow. From the corner of her eye, she saw Kamukura-kun’s head sharply turn towards her as she hunched over, hands gripping her shivering arms.
The doors slammed shut in front of her teacher’s face, the camera followed the elevator down. It was dark and the metallic rattling was loud and she was too stunned to move as it began its descent; all she could think was Tsumiki-san…Yukizome-sensei…why? There was pain in her arm from where she’d landed on it wrong, but it seemed inconsequential compared to the pain in her heart. Her throat was too clogged by betrayal to speak; all she could do was stare up at the rapidly-shrinking image of her teacher as the elevator carted her off into darkness.

“Nanami.”

Memories of Tsumiki-san’s apologetic face, the crazed look in Yukizome-sensei’s eyes, floated before her. She didn’t understand why they’d done this, and she could only ask their phantoms, uncomprehending, why?

“Nanami.”

Eventually, she managed to get herself into a sitting position. She didn’t dare try to stand; her legs felt like jelly, and the elevator was shaking so much. Her heart pounded faster and faster, trying to escape out of her chest. Her tongue was heavy and dry in her mouth.

“Nanami.”

It was pitch black; she couldn’t see anything. It was just her and the darkness and the rattling…was gone. Slowly, the gloom around her melted into the blurry image of…a living room? She blinked, once, twice, to make sure it wouldn’t disappear. Somehow she’d ended up on the floor, curled into the fetal position. Her toes dug into the tatami, a feeble anchor.

The TV was turned off. Kamukura-kun was crouching in front of her, watching her. He stayed a good distance away, and once he saw he had her attention, spoke lowly and carefully, like he was talking to a frightened animal. “It is March. You are not in Enoshima’s domain. You are in the mountains with me. We were just watching the killing game broadcast. You are safe. Repeat it.”

His words broached the haze around her. It was like surfacing from too long underwater, and she gasped harshly. “It’s…it’s March.” Not September. “I’m not in Enoshima’s domain. I’m in the mountains with you. We…were watching the killing game broadcast. I’m…” Safe. Safe, safe, safe. “I’m safe.”

Still speaking in that slow tone, he asked, “What did you flash back to?”

Chiaki squeezed her eyes shut. “Elevator,” she croaked. “I was…with Yukizome-sensei, at the elevator…she p-pushed me in…” Saying the words brought the memories squirming back to the forefront of her mind, wriggling like maggots, and she whimpered. The tears clinging to the edges of her eyelashes spilled over.

“You were triggered by the sight of the elevator Class 78 entered. That is all. It was not real. You are not back there.”

His words bumped together in her brain meaninglessly, until they eventually fumbled into place. Elevators are a trigger for me? They had been keeping an eye out for triggers, and found one in dungeon-crawlers with a first-person perspective, like the Wizardy series. Losing that had sucked, she’d really liked that series. But though he’d taught her some strategies to cope with it, they hadn’t known about elevators, and discovering a trigger so suddenly had left her unprepared to use those methods. Her body shook, head throbbing as she tried to focus on the here and now.

“You want water?”
She shook her head.

“Do you want your rabbit?”

She nodded. Chiaki pried her eyes open and stared straight ahead at his legs as they rose and moved out of view. A few moments later, they returned.

“Nanami, you need to uncurl to hold her.”

Slowly, she did, just a little, just enough for there to be room. Yumigami’s soft brown form was deposited into the slim space between her torso and her legs, and she burrowed her face into her fur. Yumigami was warm and alive and safe. Her heart began to slow down, but she still couldn’t stop trembling. Kamukura-kun ran a detached eye over her.

“You still seem distressed. Further physical contact is likely necessary. Are you alright with that?”

Was he asking permission to touch her? Her first instinct was to flinch away, because he would be close and Yukizome-sensei had been close and she’d been pushed—

But it was Kamukura-kun.

“…Okay,” she whispered.

Even so, she instinctively tensed as he sat down beside her. His hand hovered in the air, as if he were deciding what to do with it, before it extended and wrapped around her shoulders. She closed her eyes and pressed closer into Kamukura-kun’s side, relishing the weight of his arm around her and his warmth and the sound of his heartbeat. At that moment she felt incredibly protected, like nothing could ever get to her here, and she honestly would not have minded staying in his arms forever. It’s okay. I’m safe. It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay. It’s okay…

In the end, they missed the first trial. Her flashback had only lasted a minute or two, but it took an hour before she was mentally sound again. And she just…had not wanted to deal with the killing game, so she and Kamukura-kun played silly, non-violent video games for the rest of the day.

Chiaki felt awful, weak and ashamed, when she woke up the next morning and realized the entire class might have died. She was beyond relieved when Kamukura-kun carefully turned the TV on and they saw the class doing a radio exercise at the gym. “Thank goodness…they solved it. I guess it was Kuwata-kun after all.” The redhead was conspicuously absent from the assembled students. She hoped his death—because what else could “punishment” have meant?—had been swift.

"Correct." And then Kamukura-kun laid out the most probable sequence of events: how Maizono-san most likely wasn’t just a hapless victim, but an attempted killer herself. How she’d probably been the one to take the knife from the kitchen. How she’d lured Kuwata-kun in, planning to kill him and frame Naegi-kun for it, only to be slain by her intended victim.

“As I said…she was only using Naegi,” he concluded.

Chiaki shook her head. “No…I don’t believe that’s true. She left that dying message, didn’t she? Surely…she must have felt remorse, and wanted to save Naegi-kun.”

“There are other explanations for that. Spite, for one.”

“True. And we can’t really ask her, so I guess we’ll never know for sure.” She smiled, a bit sadly, and placed a hand over her heart. “But I still choose to believe she was acting with good intentions.
Because…humans are pretty complicated. Even if she was using him…it doesn’t mean she never
cared.”

He did not respond, and in somberness, they went back to watching the broadcast.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: You might think it odd Chiaki gets triggered by elevators and not the specific phrase “Punishment Time”, but triggers can be anything, really. Even something as apparently inoffensive as cologne. And since getting pushed in that elevator is what sealed her fate, it seemed likely to me she’d subconsciously associate them with danger.

I tried to recap the game's events quickly (since y’all know what happened already, so there’s no point in boring you with exposition) while still offering perspective. Hopefully that worked.
The killing game was like a trainwreck; you wanted to look away, but you couldn’t. Chiaki would have suspected that Enoshima was using her brainwashing techniques if Kamukura-kun hadn’t already assured her he detected no signs of subliminal messages. She had, he suspected, grown bored of and discarded them. No, it was sheer desire to know her underclassmen would be alright that kept her watching.

Enoshima’s next motive was threatening to spill their deepest secrets to the world, and Chiaki’s hands balled into fists, red-hot rage flaring. She didn’t doubt that the model had coaxed those secrets out of her classmates during their two years together, just for this purpose. How can she throw something as precious as friendship aside so casually?

And once again, despite all the assertions to the contrary, a corpse turned up.

She didn’t know who could have killed someone as sweet as Fujisaki-san in such a cruel manner. She took some comfort that the Monokuma File reported death as instant, so the poor girl hadn’t been forced to endure the crucifixion.

Throughout the investigation, she listened to Togami-kun lay out all the data gathered about Genocide Jack—the message in blood, the method of killing, the theory that he was a high school student with dissociative identity disorder. He clearly suspected Jack was responsible for this murder, which meant Hope’s Peak had willingly let a serial killer in. Chiaki couldn’t find it in her to be dismayed. She was just angry, angry that the academy she’d so loved had proven itself to be so rotten to the core, something like this didn’t surprise her.

When the investigation period ended, Chiaki fled upstairs. She’d wanted to watch the trial, for support if nothing else, but remembering the panic that had seized her upon seeing the elevator… she knew she wouldn’t be able to watch them actually arrive. So instead she waited in her room until Kamukura-kun came up and told her they’d left the elevator behind.

Returning downstairs, she took in the sight of the room with disturbed curiosity. Enoshima had actually set up a trial room, with podiums arranged in a circle and a judge’s seat and everything. Among the podiums were portraits of the deceased, large red Xs—which she hoped wasn’t blood—slashed over their faces. It was, she realized as Naegi-kun shuffled to his place, trying not to meet any of the painted gazes, just another way to make the students uncomfortable and depressed.

The trial, she thought as she watched it unfold, went about as well as could be expected of high school students. Which was to say not very well. It was nothing like the structured trials of Ace Attorney, where evidence was presented and dissected in an orderly fashion; it was a scrambled mess of overlapping voices and jumping to conclusions and general, pointless arguing. Only Naegi-kun, Kirigiri-san and Togami-kun seemed able to steer it in any one direction, and with their guidance progress was gradually made.
She felt so bad for poor Fukawa-san, having her secret outed like that. Unnerved when Genocide-san made her appearance, scissors snipping away and tongue waggling. Shocked when Fujisaki-san turned out to be Fujisaki-kun. And then furious when Togami-kun claimed to have altered the crime scene.

“Why would you do that, you idiot?!” she yelled at the screen. “You put everyone’s lives at risk!”

“Most likely, he had a failsafe in place for a worst-case scenario,” Kamukura-kun droned in his soft voice. “Some decisive evidence to oust the culprit. Togami is not a suicidal person.”

“Even so…just why?”

“If he already knew who the culprit was, he would have found this case boring. Ergo I calculate the most likely reason to have been making it more interesting. Understandable, if a pointless endeavor when he knew the end result.”

Incredulity welled up in her. “But they’re his friends!”

“No, they are not. They are individuals who, as far as he knows, he has been acquainted with only recently. He has no emotional attachment to them and ergo no need to be concerned about their well-being.”

“That’s still not a good enough reason to put people in danger!”

He gave her a hard stare. “It was enough for me.”

Chiaki flinched, remembering Kamukura-kun’s indifference to the world’s destruction. Was that really so different from what Togami-kun had just done? Both men had encouraged or allowed chaos for their benefit. Did she have a right to get angry over one’s actions, but not the other’s? Especially when, from the most emotionally cold, distant perspective, she could kind of see his point?

She bowed her head. “…Sorry.”

Kamukura-kun was silent. Was he hurt or insulted? She didn’t think so, but she felt a need to explain anyway. “You’re right…I’ve already accepted your reasons for your actions, and they aren’t so different from Togami-kun’s. So…even though I don’t agree, I’ll back down. I really didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I was not upset. You do not have to give up your belief system to placate me.”

She smiled tentatively. “So…agree to disagree?”

“Yes.”

Several hours later, her nerves were frayed to the breaking point. Chiaki genuinely had no idea who the culprit was. The students had been debating about Fujisaki-kun’s jersey for a while now, and she was still coming up blank. The obvious candidate was Togami-kun, but she agreed with Naegi-kun; his attitude was too casual for him to be the culprit, and he’d been shocked at Fujisaki-kun’s gender. He should have known that if he had killed the programmer.

Her jaw dropped when Naegi-kun and Kirigiri-san finally pinned Owada-kun as the culprit, citing his speech variation. *They noticed a detail as tiny as that?!* Her respect for them went up a notch; she was sure Kamukura-kun had spotted it, but something as small as that would have gone completely unnoticed by most people.
After that, it was pretty much over.

She teared up as Ishimaru-kun sobbed and begged Monokuma to postpone the execution. But mercy wasn’t in the bear’s vocabulary, and the chain slammed around the biker’s neck, dragging him to his death. She couldn’t bring herself to watch it, burying her face in her hands when the motorcycle engine revved up. Kamukura-kun picked up on her mood and turned off the sound, and by the time she dared to glance at the screen again the students were slowly filing away.

The next few days were thankfully dull. Monokuma’s next motive, money, failed to really catch anyone’s interest. The students started to disappear into the bathhouse more often, where there were no cameras. During those periods the broadcast would just show what Monokuma deemed “the blossoming young love between Togami-kun and Fukawa-san”. Watching her either stalk him from the shadows or chase him while proclaiming her love got old fast, but, Chiaki reminded herself, it was far better than another murder. The only thing truly of interest was that the students would sometimes whisper about an “Alter Ego”.

“I’m sure my precious viewers are very confused about this ‘Alter Ego’ my students keep mentioning!” Monokuma narrated with a laugh, as Naegi-kun brought Ishimaru-kun to the locker room. “Just this once, I’ll give you a little behind-the-scenes. The build-up for a big reveal is fun and all, but I’m more of an instant gratification kind of bear!”

He made a big show of looking around, then leaned in, whispering conspiratorially. “‘Alter Ego’ is the laptop hidden in that room they’ve all been visiting, a technical marvel left behind by the late Fujisaki-kun. ‘Oh, but Monokuma-sama’, you may say, ‘there are no cameras there! How could you know such a thing?’ I’m the headmaster of this school, you bastards! I know everything that happens here, cameras or no!”

The bear giggled. “Upup…isn’t that despairful? They think they have a hidden advantage over me, but really, they’re just puppets dancing on my strings! Putting on a pretty play for your purloined pleasure! And when the curtain falls, the curtain calls will go unanswered…upu…upupupu!”

“She doesn’t really know everything, does she?” Chiaki asked, frowning, when the bear left. On-screen the scene was depicting another round of Fukawa-san’s stalking, which she knew by now was safe to tune out. Sometimes she and Kamukura-kun even focused on therapy, leaving the TV on in the background, though now was not one of those times.

“She does not,” Kamukura-kun confirmed. His back was to her as she ran a brush through his hair. Chiaki had quickly found she had to do something with her hands while watching the game, or she’d get antsy—petting Yumigami was the most common distraction, but styling his hair like that first time was her favorite. “There are cameras in the students’ bedrooms. She would have witnessed Fujisaki working on his artificial intelligence there. But presenting a facade of omniscience is a good tactic for mental warfare.”

I love his hair. Twisting a hairband off her wrist, she tied his black locks into a high ponytail as she spoke. “Why wouldn’t she do anything to destroy the laptop, then?”

“She deliberately leaves loopholes and chances to lose in her schemes. The possibility of them failing pleases her.”

She brightened. “Oh, good! There’s a chance they can really get out alive after all!” This entire time she’d been afraid it was just going to be killing and killing and killing until there was only one survivor.
And for a while, nothing happened, until the morning when Naegi-kun and the others went on a chase for ‘Robo Justice’ that ended with them discovering Yamada-kun and Ishimaru-kun’s bodies. The backs of their heads were caved in; cranial fluid and blood intermingled on the ground around them, and there were bits of skull flecked among the mixture. Chiaki turned away, pressing a hand over her mouth, when Yamada-kun stirred, somehow horribly still alive.

In the blink of an eye, Kamukura-kun crossed the room and returned, trash can in tow. Immediately she learned over it, and he held her hair back as she retched. In the background, she vaguely heard Yamada-kun’s raspy breath, his hoarse voice as he struggled to croak out words. Then he stopped speaking; then the body discovery announcement; then silence.

“Celeste-san is acting pretty suspicious,” Chiaki mused, watching the gambler debate with Naegi about the dolly. “She’s being way too pushy. Plus, wasn’t she the only one who ‘saw’ Robo Justice?”

In a neutral tone, Kamukura-kun said, “Yamada claimed to have seen him as well.”

“That’s right, I forgot…” She frowned, tapping a finger against her chin. “But we saw Asahina-san stumbling about in that costume. I don’t think it would let you move with the speed and mobility required for a case like this…so it couldn’t have been Robo Justice who murdered them.”

Not to mention, Hagakure-kun was stuffed into a locker in the pool…if he somehow did kill them in that costume, he’d have designed it to be taken off so he wouldn’t be incriminated…then why would Yamada-kun…?

A metaphorical lightbulb went off above her head, and she gasped. “He was helping her! Yamada-kun was helping Celeste-san!” She’d jotted down notes during the investigation, and she snatched the paper, looking over it rapidly. Things like the note Kirigiri-san found, how Yamada-kun’s big body could be moved in such a short time, Ishimaru-kun’s broken wristwratch, started to make sense. “If he worked with her to kill Ishimaru-kun, faked his death, then got betrayed and killed by her while they were all split up…that’s got to be it!”

Kamukura-kun nodded slightly, giving up his pretense. “Togami and Kirigiri figured it out as well, before even stepping in the trial room. …What a boring case. I expected better from a liar of her caliber.”

She silently watched Naegi-kun refute Celeste-san. “…How terrible…getting betrayed like that…” It just struck way too close to home, and once again Yukizome-sensei’s manic grin flashed before her eyes. She closed them and focused on breathing deeply, her hand automatically stroking Yumigami for purchase. Not there, not there, not there...

As the trial continued, Naegi-kun’s eyes became narrower, more focused. And eventually, he reached the same conclusion as her, turning to Celeste-san and pointing out all the strange things surrounding her testimonies. Togami-kun and Kirigiri-san chimed in with their evidence, and the gambler’s smile became minutely more fixed, her laughs a tad more forced. Two blotches of color appeared high on her cheeks, and her teeth ground together as her attempts to prove them wrong were all deflected. Until finally—

She slammed her hands against her podium, eyes bulging and enraged. “DON’T FUCK WITH ME, BASTARDS!! HAA? YOU’RE NOWHERE NEAR A CHECKMATE!”

Well, if they weren’t sure of her guilt before, that outburst just sealed it, Chiaki thought.
In the end, though Celeste-san fought like a lioness, Naegi-kun overpowered her arguments and laid out the tale of her murder. Her shoulders bowed when her defeat came, and Chiaki tried not to judge Celeste-san as she gave out her reasons. She could understand being scared and wanting out, but…killing people for money?

At least she was graceful about her defeat. The gambler stopped only long enough to place an object in Kirigiri-san’s hand. And then, with her head held high, Yasuhiro Taeko marched off to her execution block.

Chiaki didn’t watch that one either.

The remaining students started to splinter after that. It started with something small: a fight between Naegi-kun and Kirigiri-san. Chiaki had noticed the two gradually growing closer, but they’d apparently been spending more time together than she’d thought; Kirigiri-san kept mentioning snippets of conversations that hadn’t happened on-screen as she pushed the Ultimate Lucky Student to trust her with some worry he was having. When he apologetically refused, her face hardened, closed off. Spinning on the balls of her feet, she ground out a clipped goodbye and left, heels clacking harshly against the floor.

Their fight chilled her not just to him, but to the rest of their classmates. And all of them seemed to have a thing to say about it.

“Um, Naegi-chi,” Hagakure-kun said, very seriously planting a hand on the boy’s shoulder, “When a boy and a girl’s relationship goes to shambles, the two people involved aren’t the only ones whose lives get wrecked. Trust me, I know what I’m talking about! So just make up with her quickly, ’right?”

“I said her type was easy to win over, but you’ve been doing it all wrong!” Asahina-san grouched at breakfast, when Naegi-kun was told Kirigiri-san wasn’t eating until he’d left. She waved her fork at him, a bit of waffle wobbling on the end. “It’s dirty, Naegi. Real dirty. You’re the king of dirty boys!!”

“…Do they not have more important matters to discuss than a classmate’s hypothetical romantic endeavors?” Kamukura-kun questioned as said boy spluttered.

“Worrying about silly little things like that probably makes them feel normal.” With a pang, she remembered Mioda-san’s excited conspiracy theories about how Pekoyama-san and Kuzuryu-kun had to be secretly dating. “Like they don’t have to worry about killing games and murders.”

Things only got worse when Monokuma, probably attempting to further increase tensions, revealed his mole—Ogami-san. Chiaki felt for the martial artist; she believed her about being blackmailed, and she believed that she really wasn’t going to kill anyone. Unfortunately, it seemed only Naegi-kun and Asahina-san shared that belief; Hagakure-kun, Togami-kun and Fukawa-san immediately shunned the large woman. Asahina-san became defensive and angry of her best friend, snapping at the other three for their suspicion and fear. The next morning the brunette actually slapped Togami-kun over it. Which he’d deserved, but that wasn’t the point. Class 78 was falling apart, and Chiaki could only hope they’d put themselves back together before things got worse than one slap.

They didn’t.

The fourth trial was heartrending. She ended up crying alongside Asahina-san as the swimmer tried to take the blame for Ogami-san’s death. Chiaki refused to believe she’d done it, and Naegi-kun
proved her right. Then she cried for a different reason, because it was just awful that Asahina-san was in so much despair she thought the only way left was for them all to die.

“You do not seem angry she attempted to kill her friends,” Kamukura-kun noted, as the trial began to wind down. He’d figured out that Ogami-san had committed suicide almost instantly and declared her case to be the most boring of all. “Yet you were angry at Togami, whose intentions were not malicious.”

She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. “It’s not as clear-cut as that… I am mad at what Asahina-san tried to do, but I empathize with her too. She’s grieving, and that makes people do stupid things.”

“Indeed. Her despair was interesting to watch.”

Chiaki almost lunged at the screen, sadness forgotten, when Monokuma started taunting Asahina-san, mocking her for almost making Ogami-san’s death meaningless and not understanding her suicide letter. She cheered when Naegi-kun turned Monokuma’s words against him, as Togami-kun announced his withdrawal from the game. And she smiled so broadly her cheeks hurt when she saw them all forgive Asahina-san.

And then, of course, Monokuma ruined the mood by ordering an execution anyway.

Again, she had to avert her gaze away as the bulldozer crushed the laptop. Even if she hadn’t met Alter Ego before now, even if it wasn’t a human, it...no, he, he had been helping the students. And he must have been as much of a person as the rest of them. At the very least, enough for Class 78 to consider him a friend.

Naegi-kun exploded at Moonokuma for that.

“Naegi-kun was great after the trial,” she commented, when it was finally over and she and Kamukura-kun were finishing up a late dinner. “I didn’t know he could get angry like that. It was really cool to see him let Monokuma have it.”

“You appear to hold a considerable amount of admiration for him.”

Chiaki’s drink paused on its way to her mouth. To anyone else Kamukura-kun’s tone would have sounded as stolid as ever, but she could detect the barest hints of...she wasn’t sure. If pressed she’d say he sounded bothered, but that didn’t make any sense. Why would this bother him? “Well, yeah. Leading his class in the trials, directing everyone to fight Monokuma, talking about hope…it’s like he’s a real hero from a game.”

“Do you have romantic designs on him?”

She choked on her soda like in some comedic anime. “Wh-What?! Where did that come from?”

He didn’t answer. “Do you?”

“No! I mean, yeah, he’s cute, but I’m not...he’s more kouhai material than love interest material for me. Besides, I...” ...prefer taller men, she almost finished, but an unusual feeling of self-consciousness seized her. Instead she said, “Besides, I think he and Kirigiri-san are a much better match.”

“I see.” And in a frustrating bout of typical Kamukura-kun behavior, he shut down completely, leaving her flustered and wondering why the hell that was on his mind.

It did not occur to her until much later, as she was starting to fall asleep, that maybe Kamukura-kun...
had been *jealous*.

The students were unified, now. Togami-kun was still snippy and cold, but something in his demeanor had changed. He was cooperative. At one point he even paid Fukawa-san a compliment, which utterly melted the author.

But more than that, all six of them were focused on overcoming Enoshima. Chiaki thought her chest would burst with pride when she saw them dismantling Monokuma and making plans to break into the mastermind’s office. It was a similar feeling to what she got when she raised a party all the way to the level cap, even though she hadn’t had any hand in this party’s growth.

She was worried about the missing Kirigiri-san, of course, but she’d come to think of the quiet woman as another Kamukura-kun—stoic and distant, but more than capable of handling herself. Knowing her, she was probably using secret passages or something to investigate even deeper than everyone else.

Which is why her heart lodged in her throat when, on the third day after Alter Ego's execution, Genocide-san blithely mentioned seeing a body on the rooftop. *A body…but they’re all here except Kirigiri-san. So, that means—*

The body did not look like Kirigiri-san. It didn’t look like anyone; the face was covered by a mask, and it was dressed in a body-concealing white robe. As the camera panned over it Kamukura-kun stiffened, and she glanced at him. Chiaki frowned at the look on his face. She’d become adept at reading the minute changes in his expression, the subtle differences that indicated his mood. But this one, with the slightly tightened lips and clenched jaw, was new to her.

*Anger,* she realized, *it’s anger.*

*I’ve…never seen him angry before.*

It was disconcerting. The notion of a Kamukura-kun who *wanted* to hurt someone, and had all the talent in the world to do it…it was frightening. He was like a taut bowstring, tense and thrumming with potential energy.

“Are you okay?” she asked hesitantly.

He didn’t respond, just continued to glare at the screen, and she knew she would get no answers from him.

Nothing added up.

Chiaki *knew* the other four had been together all night, and she knew Naegi-kun wasn’t the type to kill anyone. The most suspicious person was Kirigiri-san, but she didn’t think the lavender-haired woman had done it, either; she spent a lot of time off on her own, but she’d been so helpful in the trials. And then she made that point about how she wouldn’t be able to return to her room to get the locker key—

“I can’t figure it out,” she gripped, “Nothing’s making sense. Naegi-kun *should* be the only one who could have done it, but…it’s Naegi-kun!”

“Naegi Makoto did not kill Ikusaba Mukuro.” She started; it was the first time Kamukura-kun had spoken since discovering the body. That dark look still hadn’t left his eyes. “Neither did Kirigiri Kyoko. Nor the other four.”
At first, she just felt relief, because none of them would get executed. Then confusion. *Then... how did she die? Was it suicide?* Her breath caught, and she snapped her gaze back to the screen, where the students were voting. *No, that’s not important. If none of them killed her, and they vote anyway, then—*

“*Well done, everyone!*” Monokuma praised, as the votes came in and Naegi-kun was declared the culprit. “You were correct once again!”

...*Huh?*

Naegi-kun looked just as shocked as she felt. His eyes were the size of dinner plates, and a trembling finger pointed at his chest in disbelief, a wide-eyed *me?* “She is framing him.” Kamukura-kun answered her unspoken question. If tone could kill, the thinly-veiled venom in his would have struck Monokuma dead. “She is breaking her rules and framing him. …She’s ruined the game.”

Chiaki could have screamed at him. Who *cared* about the game? Naegi-kun was going to—

The collar clasped around his neck, and he was dragged into a classroom and slammed into a chair. The camera pulled back to show them the set-up, and Chiaki’s vision grew blurry—he was on a conveyor belt, facing away from a massive slab of metal. Every few seconds it came crashing down. After letting them soak that in, Enoshima zoomed back in to Naegi-kun’s face, treating them to a close-up of his terror-filled green eyes.

*BAM.*

Usually this was the part where Chiaki looked away, but she couldn’t. *Komaeda-kun’s luck saved him—Kamukura-kun’s luck saved him—so then his should too. It has to. It has to—*

*BAM.*

As the conveyor belt carried him to his destination, Naegi-kun’s face slowly drained of color. His small body shook, helpless to only listen to the sound of his death approaching.

*BAM. BAM. BAM.*

The tears on her eyes started to spill over. It was right behind him now, so close the vibrations were making his body jolt slightly.

*BAM.*

Naegi-kun passed under the block. Chiaki moaned and pressed her face into her hands.

Except the sound of him being crushed into bloody chunks never came. A metallic groan reached her ears instead. Peeking through her fingers, she saw a girlish, determined face flash on the monitor, the shock on Monokuma’s, and the block stalling. *Fujisaki-kun? ...no, wait... alters Ego?*

The conveyor belt had not stopped moving. Naegi-kun was carried past the block and—disappeared. Falling down a chute of some sort? It didn’t matter; his luck had *saved* him. Air rushed shakily out of her mouth, and tears filled her eyes again—this time of relief. “Oh, thanks goodness…thank goodness…”

“I hope they’ve grinded enough,” she fretted, watching Class 78 investigate the school. Enoshima had been determined to make her audience believe Naegi-kun was gone; the broadcast the day after...
hadn’t shown him at all, but followed the other five as they fruitlessly searched for anything new. But she’d seen Kirigiri-san slipping off on her own, and hope had flared bright in her chest—hope that proved true when, the very next day, she returned, Naegi-kun in tow. And now it was time for them to win and escape.

They must be high level by now, after all the trials they’d done. This wasn’t going to be like her and her classmates, rushing in unprepared. They’d already gone up against Enoshima, via Monokuma, several times and triumphed. This would be no different. It had to be.

Of course, Enoshima didn’t play fair. She tried to trick them with photos, laying false trails and implications to turn them on each other. But despite her best efforts, the class hounded and harried her, until Naegi-kun tied all the evidence together in a neat little bow and declared Enoshima Junko the mastermind and murderer of Ikusaba Mukuro. Stabbing his finger at Monokuma, he finished up his statement with a tone of finality. “How about it?! This is the whole truth about this case!”

Monokuma went completely silent, not even responding to the students’ taunts. With his slumped shoulders, he almost looked defeated. A notion that was quickly proven false when he slowly raised his head, a chilly tone entering his voice. “…Over? Upu… Upupu…”

He began to laugh. “Did you really think it would be over with that climax…? You’re wrong! There’s still so much to do!”

His red eye gleamed brightly, and then smoke billowed out of the vents, obscuring the entire courtroom. Naegi-kun and the other students recoiled, coughing. And when it cleared, there she was, hands on hips and chin lifted proudly. Enoshima Junko. Ultimate Despair and orchestrator of the Tragedy. The sight of her painted Chiaki’s vision red, and something curdled black and heavy and sour in her stomach. *I wish Komaeda-kun had shot you,* she thought vehemently.

It was awful, to wish one of her friends had killed someone, but she did. She wished, with her whole being, that the Ultimate Lucky Student had just shot Enoshima on the spot. So much would have been prevented if he’d just pulled the trigger.

She hated Enoshima. And that hate only grew as Enoshima revealed that Ikusaba Mukuro had been her twin sister, killed on nothing more than a whim. As she rattled on about how much despair she’d felt at her sister’s death, and how stimulating that despair was, and how jealous she was of Ikusaba for experiencing the despair of betrayal.

*She did all this…destroyed the world…had her classmates, her friends kill each other…murdered her own sister…because it felt good?!*

“Unforgivable…” Chiaki hissed. “It’s absolutely unforgivable…”

Not content with just using her words to break their spirits, Enoshima pulled up footage of the outside world. The riots, the desecrated monuments, the Ultimate Despairs. The red sky and the fires burning bright. By the end of it, the color had completely drained from the students’ faces.

And then, with a broad, gleeful grin, Enoshima broke them down with a simple ultimatum: sacrifice Naegi-kun and live in safety forever, or kill her and be forced into the outside world. Class 78 visibly shrank, curling up and suffocating under the weight of her words. Even Chiaki was feeling crushed, and she knew things weren’t nearly as bad as the Ultimate Despair was pretending. And then—

“DON’T LOSE HOPE!”
Naegi-kun’s words shattered the black gloom that had been creeping on everyone’s faces, and Chiaki felt her heart lift as he looked each one in the eye and spoke to their souls. His rallying cry resonated deep within them, reigniting their fighting spirit. With the softest smile she’d ever seen on the woman, Kirigiri-san murmured, “You’re the one who can defeat Ultimate Despair. You’re the one who was willing to face despair without ever giving up... I guess we should call you Ultimate Hope... Shouldn’t we?"

**Ultimate Hope, huh? That does fit him. His hope really is infectious. You feel better just by listening to him.** She glanced at the other Ultimate Hope, who was completely impassive. **I wonder what Kamukura-kun thinks of this?**

Enoshima gaped at the brunet. Her eyes flicked to Kirigiri-san, who was nodding, to Togami-kun, whose eyes had regained their fire, to grinning Asahina-san and smirking Genocide-san and firm Hagakure-kun. All the despair had been purged from their faces, and they stood, resolute and strong. In only a few minutes, the tables had turned. Her shocked eyes returned to Naegi-kun. “What’s going on...? What the hell are you...?!”

As she devolved into mindless ranting, Naegi-kun smiled wryly. “Nobody special, really. I don’t have any special talent...”

“You dare to stand against us? You suck! You’re gross! Would you like to die?"

“They may say I’m ‘hope’, but I don’t really think that’s true...”

“Everything is pointless! Hope is a joke! Suffer from despair!”

“But...but... I...!”

“Despair at the future! Despair at the unknown! Despair at your memories!”

He stabbed his finger at her, eyes blazing. And maybe it was just a trick of the camera, but for a moment Chiaki thought he seemed to be surrounded by a glowing, golden aura. “I will not give up. I will not wear down. I will not throw hope away. I will not despair!!” Then, with a little laugh, Naegi-kun added, “I mean, my one good quality is being optimistic!”

As Enoshima floundered for a reply, the students nodded at each other and cast their votes in unison. The slots spun, slowed, and then Enoshima's face smiled on the voting machine’s screen, GUILTY flashing beneath it. As the victory music played, a burst of confetti showered down around the gawking model. She’d lost.

Chiaki tried to guess how she’d react to her defeat. Would she rage? Would she cry? Would she try one last, all-out attack? Final bosses were sometimes hard to predict, and she quietly urged Class 78 to be ready.

But none of those happened. Instead, to everyone’s confusion, Enoshima squealed in delight, wrapping her hands around her body. “This is...Despair, isn’t it?! My elaborate plan for this school, which I worked so hard on for more than two years... The plan I even killed my own sister for... And then, at the last moment, that plan failed!!” She cackled. “This is super-Despair like I’ve never felt before!!”

Naegi-kun gaped at her. “W...What are you saying...?!”

Her gaze sharpened and her lips curled into a sneer. “I had always been Despair-inducingly Despair-inducing! I’ve been bored of everything since the moment I was born! There is only one thing I ever looked forward to my entire life... The first, last and greatest Despair! The moment I
Bored since the moment she was born... just like... Chiaki glanced at Kamukura-kun, who had been quiet this entire time. His eyes were narrowed at Enoshima, almost-imperceptible hate flickering in them. That bare hint of emotion, of loathing, reassured her. Impulsively, she took his hand, and he looked at it.

Even if he is similar to her... he’s choosing not to be her. He’s choosing not to be as much of a monster as she is. And that’s enough for me.

Her attention returned to the screen. Enoshima had finished firing off a few last taunts to the students. Now, her smile stretched impossibly wide as she reached a hand, shaking with excitement, for the red button. “Let’s give it all we’ve got! It’s PUNISHMENT TIME! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!”

Chiaki watched the entire execution. She had to, to get closure and see with her own eyes that Enoshima would no longer be a danger to anyone.

It was impressive, the gamer thought reluctantly, how much fortitude Enoshima had, to endure the baseballs and motorcycle and fire and everything. Even at the end, when she was bruised and burned and bloodied, she was still smiling, swaying happily in her chair as the conveyor belt moved her towards the block. Her fingers flashed a cheeky victory sign, and Chiaki hated that Enoshima was enjoying this.

Right as she came underneath the block, the machinery groaned, stalled. Chiaki inhaled and leaned forward. Surely she can’t be as lucky as Naegi-kun...

The world seemed to hold its breath. Seconds ticked by without anything happening. Enoshima’s eyes flickered open, a look of confusion replacing her smile. She glanced up—

And then the block fell with the justice of a headman’s axe, and Enoshima Junko was dead.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Aaaaaaaah, and such words never rang sweeter.

Chapters three and four were actually pretty empty, since so much of them occurs in that bathhouse, where there aren’t any cameras. A lot of Makoto and Kyoko’s sneaking around happens during Night Time, when the game isn’t broadcast, too.

Some of Junko’s dialogue near the end is taken from her Panic Talk Action. Makoto’s dialogue there is basically his thoughts externalized, since they seemed as good counters as any.
The aftermath of the Second Mutual Killing Game of Hope’s Peak Academy was a storm of activity and chaos. As soon as the students stepped outside, they were whisked away by the Future Foundation. Over the next few days the television blared with reports from vice-chairman Munakata Kyosuke, promising Class 78 was safe. Their memories had been restored to them, and they were currently undergoing therapy; they would be available for the cameras once they were ready. Shortly after, the corpses of the other victims of the killing game were extracted from the school, and there was a public memorial held for them a week after the game ended. It was broadcast live, and it was the first time the world had seen the six survivors since. They were all hovering close together, jumpy and tense, with every sudden noise making Naegi in particular flinch. But he was still able to go up and give a little speech about how much all his classmates had meant to him, and he only broke down crying after he’d left the podium.

A few days after that, Enoshima Junko’s death was publicly confirmed. It had taken the Future Foundation some extra time to uncover her corpse, hence the delay, and even longer to identify it—there simply wasn’t much left. Her remains had been missing pieces, such as an eye, an arm, and several organs, and her face had been so damaged as to be unidentifiable. But, Munakata said, the DNA tests had come back positive. It really was her, and she really was dead. Celebrations swept the globe when this was announced.

Soon, the survivors of Class 78 were constantly on television, being interviewed about their experience, their restored memories, their lost loved ones, their plans for the future. Naegi especially couldn’t get a day’s rest; Kirigiri’s proclamation of him as Ultimate Hope had quickly caught on, inspiring the public, and the Future Foundation milked it for all it was worth. He became a figurehead, an icon, perhaps frazzled and unprepared, but doing his best. The culmination of all these small victories meant there was finally hope for the world being restored, and it showed in the faces on the screen.

None of this mattered to Izuru. It was a predictable outcome to a disappointingly predictable ending.

The game had been mostly predictable too, nearly all the behaviors and actions falling within expected parameters, but there had been outliers here and there—Fujisaki using the second motive to grasp hope instead of crumpling into despair, or Asahina’s poor attempt at homicide, for example. Those rare occurrences had been enough to hold his attention, and he’d wondered if perhaps this would show him which of hope and despair was more unpredictable. Perhaps he would not need his plan after all.

And then Enoshima had to ruin it. Interfering, breaking her own rules, framing an innocent—rather
than letting hope triumph naturally over despair or vice versa, she’d attempted to force an outcome. And by doing so, she’d invalidated all potential data; an experiment’s results couldn’t be kept if there was outside tampering. Worse, he could perfectly predict the only possible result: the students would defeat her. Hope was going to triumph over despair not because of its merits, but because of despair’s own meddling.

He stopped paying attention after that. It had been slightly interesting when Naegi’s luck saved him, but that had only lent credence to his conclusion. Naegi was to his class what Nanami had been to hers: hope. As long as he lived, he would prevent them from falling into despair. They had the means to challenge Enoshima directly now, and when they did they would win. And indeed, everything unfolded exactly as he foresaw. It was so boring it actually made him angry.

He couldn’t even claim to be satisfied at watching that bitch die, because she’d enjoyed it. Leave it to Enoshima to find a way to spite him, even unintentionally. He was sure she would be laughing if she were still alive.

Involuntarily, he glanced down at his phone. He couldn’t say why he did such a pointless thing; there was no need to check for messages. He only had one, a time-delay text received the day after Enoshima’s death. It was short, simple, and he’d already memorized it: Don’t forget your promise, senpai!

He hadn’t. He definitely hadn’t. Now more than ever, now that she’d robbed him of his answer. The Neo World Program truly was the only way he’d find it. And besides…he couldn’t just let her get away with using him without repaying the favor.

There was just one caveat.

“Kamukura-kun!”

He slipped his phone into his pocket as Nanami rushed into his room. She was almost in tears as she blubbered, “I was watching the evening news, and they said—that Ultimate Despairs had been —my friends—”

Ah, so she’d seen the recent report on the strange new phenomena sweeping the globe: the mass suicides of the Ultimate Despairs.

It had now been a little under a month since the game’s end, and the proof of Enoshima’s demise had been the breaking point for her Ultimate Despairs. They had clung to the hope their leader had only faked her death, and once that was crushed, they became volatile and furious. She was a martyr for them, and for the past few weeks the world had suffered even stronger attacks in retaliation. Now that the surge of hate and the desire for vengeance had died down, many of them had decided to join their idol in death. Some had chosen otherwise, deciding that living with the despair of her passing and continuing to spread her legacy was the best way to honor Enoshima, but Nanami had no way of knowing who had.

Fortunately, he did.

“They yet live,” he said. “The Future Foundation keeps records of all they know or suspect of being Ultimate Despairs…or Remnants of Despair, as they are now being called. Your friends are still listed as ‘alive.’” He'd monitored the Despairs consistently, in case any approached this area, and Nanami’s classmates in particular; while he could have used any of Enoshima's pawns for his plans, he would have preferred it to be Class 77. It was only fair he allow her friends the chance of salvation, given it was her hope he would be testing.
She exhaled in relief, placing a hand over her heart. “Thank goodness… Would you mind showing me? It’s not that I don’t believe you, I just…”

“Desire visual confirmation,” he surmised, and got off his bed, striding to where his laptop was situated on his desk.

He took a seat, and Nanami leaned over his shoulder to watch him hack. It was evening, and though he hadn’t started getting ready for sleep, she was already in her pajamas. A small part of his mind peeled off to take note of the way they slipped off one shoulder, exposing a long strip of pale flesh. Although he had seen her naked skin a multitude of times before, those had been strictly for her good health. Without that layer of professional purpose, there was something far more intimate about it. And that was...distracting.

Izuru mentally chided himself for letting his attention wander. Even if the task was easy, it was still pointless to fixate on minor details, however alluring. He firmly chased such thoughts away and returned his attention to the computer before him, scrolling through the databanks for the profiles on Class 77-B. Nanami visibly relaxed as he pulled each of the relevant ones up to confirm their status. They were alphabetized, surname first; as he scrolled down to Koizumi, Mahiru, she perked up in surprise and tapped his shoulder, indicating he should go back. Her finger pointed to the katakana characters forming his name. “You’re in here.”

“As expected.” Although all the Future Foundation had was his name and a short summary of his history; the rest of his profile was filled with blanks and question marks. “To the best of their knowledge, I was responsible for the first killing game. Given how vital it was to the beginning of the Tragedy, it is only logical to hypothesize my association with Enoshima’s Ultimate Despairs.”

Though he couldn’t see it, he could perfectly envision her frown. “That’s not fair. I know trust isn’t exactly a luxury the world has anymore, but declaring you a terrorist just because of a suspicion…”

“It is not entirely incorrect,” he pointed out. “I was associated with her for a time, and they have no reason to believe I left.”

She still seemed bothered, but let it rest. Wordlessly, he resumed confirming her classmates’ statuses.

Nanami had handled the game as he’d expected her to—with difficulty, but persevering nonetheless. Anyone watching should have had the common sense not to get attached to any of the students, knowing what lay in store for them, but she had. She’d cried when they’d cried and laughed when they’d laughed. She was far too empathetic for her own good.

But then, that was a trait he would not have her lose. On Naegi, it had been boring, but on her it was...attractive.

Romantic attachments were still things he had trouble comprehending, the whys behind them inconsistent. Physical attraction made sense, it led to procreation and the continuation of the human race. But affection? Why did he feel that? At first he’d assumed it had been born of Hinata Hajime, and that was true, it had. But now it had grown and mutated into something of its own. The spike of anger and envy when she’d started praising Naegi, for example, had taken him off-guard. Hinata had never felt that, he’d never been in this situation. It was a feeling entirely Kamukura Izuru’s, not Hinata Hajime’s.

An unexpected occurrence. Something he couldn’t foresee. It was almost enough to change his mind. Almost.
But the truth was, love wouldn’t save him. Even Enoshima had loved someone, and it hadn’t saved her either. Nanami was interesting, but the rest of the world still was not. And now that he’d had a taste of not-boredom, he wanted it all the time. Not just when he was with her. And for that, he needed to find which of hope or despair was less predictable. Meeting Nanami had only solidified that belief, as well as his interest in her hope.

The last profile—*Tsumiki, Mikan*—was closed, the nurse confirmed as alive. Nanami wrapped her arms around him and squeezed tightly. Her head was pressed against his cheek, allowing him to smell the floral fragrance of her shampoo. He breathed it in slowly. “Thank you, Kamukura-kun. It takes a load off my mind to know they’re okay.”

“Even though they continue to terrorize the world?” he asked, briefly curious.

Her lips turned down into a sad moue. “Even despite that, yes,” she said softly.

After Nanami left, Izuru leaned back and pondered her condition. Her depression had been treated and the medication he produced for her was unnecessary. Though the symptoms of her post-traumatic stress disorder were unlikely to ever leave, she had learned the sufficient skills to live with it. She had also reached a point where she no longer needed the cane to walk, except for aid on the stairs. Soon, that would not be a requirement either. Her reliance on him was coming to an end, and then he would have no reason to stay. It made his chest feel odd, like part of it had been scooped out with a spoon.

The text Enoshima had sent reared its head, her gleeful giggle and sickeningly honeyed voice rising from the ghosts of memory to recite the words. *Don’t forget your promise, senpai!*

_I have not_, he thought, with a malice that briefly surprised him, _but you are not my first priority, Enoshima._

Her artificial intelligence could wait until he’d laid out contingencies for Nanami’s safety. He didn’t care if the rest of the world suffered from his plan, but she would be safe first and foremost.

Putting down the now-empty watering can, Chiaki smiled at the pansies in satisfaction. The flowers she and Kamukura-kun had planted together had bloomed the very day Enoshima was defeated, as if they knew it was a day worth celebrating. Even the withered sakura trees looked a bit less skeletal, and the regular ones were defiantly, vibrantly green.

Rising from her kneeling position, she cracked out her back. _Hard to believe it’s been a year…_

This time last year she hadn’t been able to even lift her arm. And now—now she was able to live again. All the things she’d taken for granted before, things like walking and eating, were back in her power. Even the gap between herself and Kamukura-kun in video games had been growing smaller, slowly but surely.

The sound of a sheet snapping out caught her ear, and she glanced at the other end of the yard, where Kamukura-kun was hanging up laundry. Involuntarily, she smiled again.

She was glad she’d met him. Not just because he’d saved her life, but because she’d become a better person from knowing him. Less naïve. People in power weren’t always benevolent or trustworthy, the good guys didn’t always win, and the bad guys’ legacies continued past their defeat. Hoping for the best sometimes wasn’t enough, and you had better be prepared to work and work and work when it wasn’t.

Idealism wasn’t foolish, of course not…just something exercised with caution. Something she’d
failed to grasp before, and almost died because of. But she had the chance to do differently now.

Approaching him, she called out, “Hey, Kamukura-kun…”

He turned, eyebrows marginally lifting in silent inquiry. A breeze picked up, lifting his hair and blowing it gently away from his face. And for a moment Chiaki slowed, eyes drifting across his features, admiring the line of his jaw and tallness of his nose. If she looked closely enough, she could make out a thin ring of paler red in his ruby irises, almost like a targeting symbol. It was fitting, considering that recently she felt caught in crosshairs whenever she met his gaze.

He really was handsome. She’d always known so, in a distant way, but hadn’t really acknowledged it. It didn’t feel fair, when she knew part of the reason she thought so was because of her feelings for Hinata-kun. But more and more often, she found the thought invading her mind, and not because of Hinata-kun.

And—and lately there’d been a feeling, fluttering delicately in her chest. A hesitant, not-so-little feeling that she’d been slowly growing aware of. When it had come into existence, she didn’t know, but it had been born sometime in-between the therapies and the gaming and the countless other things they did together. It was new and a bit frightening, complicated but still easily condensed into a single thought:

I think I like him.

Like wasn’t the right word, she knew; like was too weak and immature. Like made her think of schoolyard crushes and ten-year-old children and notes from secret admirers. But like was the word she was most comfortable using right now, so like it was.

Because—if she was falling for Kamukura-kun, it was nothing like falling for Hinata-kun. With Hinata-kun it had been fast and easy, as natural as breathing, a flurry of soaring feelings tempered by nervous excitement. With Kamukura-kun, it was more like…more like floating on the ocean. Deceptively comforting and slow, letting the waves gently bob you away until you looked around and realized you’d lost sight of the shore. Just so different it left her out of her depth, and like helped it seem less dizzying.

And then there were other questions, beyond the question of whether he returned her feelings or not. Questions like, could she expect him to be ready for that kind of relationship when even basic intimacy was strange to him? More importantly, could she expect herself to be ready?

She didn’t think she was, not right now. She didn’t know how to be a girlfriend, she’d have no idea what she was doing, and Kamukura-kun’s route was probably hard mode. She just wasn’t emotionally prepared for it; right now both a rejection and an acceptance scared her. So until she was at a point where neither did, she wouldn’t confess.

And until then, there were other things Chiaki wanted—needed—to do.

“I want to go to the Future Foundation,” she told him. “I have to do something to help the world rebuild, and help my friends. I think…I think I’m well enough for that, now.”

He didn’t look as if her declaration surprised him. He only gave her a considering look and finally said, “I also believe you have reached a suitable condition for your physical and mental health; however, a test would still be wise. If you show exemplary signs of recovery, I will consider you fit to leave my care.”

“Thanks.” Chiaki hesitated. The question she dreaded the most hung like a huge black shadow over
her mind, weighing down the air between them. *I need to ask it.* “What…will you do after?”

“I will stay nearby for a time to ensure your integration into the foundation is a smooth one. After…I suppose I will wander.”

“You, um…” She licked her lips. “You don’t have to go. You could stay.”

He did not answer for a long moment. “That is not possible. I will eventually need to concentrate my efforts on bringing your friends to the Neo World Program.” Kamukura-kun fixed her with a hard stare. “Understand, Nanami, that I am not being altruistic. I am not saving your friends. I am only giving them the chance to be saved, and I am doing it because I get something out of it.”

“What’s that?”

“An answer,” he said cryptically, and she knew he would say no more.

Chiaki nodded, quiet and solemn. She knew this was in his character. He was a neutral force, not a good one. But not an evil one either. *Even still…I think I like him.* “Okay…I understand. Will you stay in touch?”

Some of the hardness in his face smoothed out. “For as long as I am able.”

She passed the test, but they did not leave immediately. They needed several days to get everything sorted out. Future Foundation policy was that all potential employees go to the third division for human resourcing. That meant moving to a new city, finding a new place to live. And, for Chiaki, finding a new identity.

She hadn’t needed to ask why when Kamukura-kun told her. She’d understood.

Because the world thought Nanami Chiaki had died during the Parade, and that Kamukura Izuru was a Remnant of Despair. If it was known that a supposed Remnant had saved her life, and she’d then lived with him for a year, suspicion would fall on her. The Future Foundation’s vice-chairman was aggressively anti-despair, and just because they were doing good didn’t mean she could expect to be treated kindly if any of the people in charge found out about her relationship with Kamukura-kun. At best, she’d be imprisoned and interrogated about him, at worst outright executed.

So Kamukura-kun fabricated documents, birth certificates and school records and citizenships. Invented an entire history out of thin air. Made her memorize it until she could recite it as well as her real history.

It was…odd. Dissociative, in a way. It felt like she was existing separate from her real identity. But she told herself to think of it like an RPG. She was just slipping into the shoes of another character for now, and once it was safe—whenever that may come—she’d take them off.

Chiaki zipped up her last bag and looked around her now-empty bedroom. It was strange, to be leaving. This place had been her sanctuary, her home, for a year. She wondered what would happen to it. She didn’t know whether Kamukura-kun had sold it, or even if he’d properly bought it in the first place. Maybe someone else would come along and make it their home. Maybe it’d just sit here and collect dust and eventually be overgrown with weeds. The thought made her sad, and she patted the wall as if in apology.

“Nanami.”

Kamukura-kun was in the doorway, watching her. He must have just finished the last of the
packing; there was still a bit of soil on his sleeves from transplanting the pansies into pots. Ignoring how her heart skipped at the way he said her name, Chiaki turned and smiled at him, hefting the bags. “…I’m ready.”

The first time Nanami Chiaki crossed the threshold of this sanctuary, she’d been vegetative and had to be carried through the front door. The last time Nanami Chiaki crossed the threshold of this sanctuary, it was on her own two feet.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: No, Chiaki will not be the 13th division leader, I’m just going to say that right now. It would just be too difficult to justify, with Chisa also a division leader. Toss in the whole point of faking an identity being staying unnoticed, and it just becomes impossible.

But hey, at least she's finally recognizing her feelings!

So, just for fun, I decided to look up the meaning of the flowers I had Chiaki and Izuru plant. And it turns out pansies mean remembrance. I wish I could say that symbolism was intentional on my part, but it wasn’t. I picked out significant flowers completely by accident. It was such an awesome coincidence I just had to share.
A/N: Ugh, sorry about the wait. I wanted this to be up a while ago, but ff.net broke and I didn't want to give just y'all the update but not them.

Automatically brushing a strand of black hair behind her ear, a nervous gesture she’d adopted to cover up how she checked her wig was still in place, Chiaki glanced up at the doors to the third division building. It was situated on the corner of the street, and had been constructed to be similarly curved at the front, with a wide, triangular back. Tall and towering, it stood at least five or six stories high, pale grey brick and black glass windows. She flinched as someone whizzed by on a bike, centimeters away, and tugged her business suit jacket closer, as if to shrink away from the crowd pressing in on her; after a year in the country, she was struggling to readjust to the busy, high-speed nature of city life.

Chiaki hadn’t known where in Japan they’d been hiding out, and hadn’t particularly cared. Kamukura-kun, it turned out, had taken them all the way north to the Iwate Prefecture, near a town called Shiwa. Future Foundation’s headquarters were stationed back in Tokyo—a gutsy move, considering it had one of the largest rises of despair and death during the Tragedy. Rumor had it that Munakata Kyosuke had declared the Future Foundation was reclaiming the city for hope, and would not take a single step out of it until then. He and the other division heads had kept that promise, impressively managing to restore order to half the giant metropolis—and that was before Enoshima’s demise.

Since then, Future Foundation has established other division buildings—or branches—throughout Tokyo. The trip there had taken almost an entire day, rather than the normal six hours—they kept having to drive off the roads whenever the pavement suddenly broke apart in slabs, cracked and destroyed from the Tragedy. Kamukura-kun’s luck had ensured the ambulance’s gas held until they reached her new apartment building. He’d helped her move her things in, disposed of the ambulance, and left in the morning. But he’d given Chiaki a cellphone with his number in it, as well as the disguise she was wearing. It was easy enough that she could put it on without him, just a black wig and some fake glasses, but Kamukura-kun had promised it would be effective despite the simplicity. She hadn’t yet tried it out. She’d been hit by a sudden bout of nerves and fear, and now was paralyzed right outside the building. And her interview was in ten minutes.

Telling herself to stop stalling, Chiaki forced herself to take one step forward, then another, and another, until she was pushing open the doors and striding into the building. It was simple and clean, with white walls and the symbol of Hope’s Peak Academy emblazoned on the back wall. Beneath it was a large receptionist’s desk, the woman at it preoccupied by texting.

Chiaki approached her. “Excuse me?” she said. The woman glanced up, her nametag reading Yokono Shizue. “I’m here for an interview with Iguchi-san?”

“He’s up on the third floor. The elevator’s down the hall to your right.” She turned back to her phone.

The gamer swallowed, mouth automatically drying. “Um, actually, I need to take the stairs instead.
I can’t go in elevators. I’m sorry for the inconvenience…”

The receptionist looked up again, her face softening. “A trigger? Don’t worry about it, most people who survived the Tragedy have at least one. Can you walk past elevators? The stairs are little ways beyond them…”

“I…don’t know? If I don’t look at it or go in it, I should be alright, I think…”

Yokono-san slipped her phone into her pocket. “Alright, I’ll walk with you. I could use a reason to stretch my legs anyway.”

They set off down the hallway, and for Chiaki, it was like creeping through a horror game, distinctly aware of danger around you but not sure where or when. She refused to look left or right, instead keeping her gaze fixed on her feet, hoping no one was using the elevator, wherever it was, hoping that she wouldn’t have to hear it ding or accidentally see it slide open and get transported back to that betrayal or Enoshima’s sneer or the pain—

A hand on her arm. “We’re past them,” Yokono-san said, and Chiaki started; she hadn’t realized how close she was to hyperventilating. The other woman was looking at her with slight concern. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah,” she mumbled unconvincingly, and Yokono-san nodded and left. Chiaki only got up the first flight before she had to lean against the wall, pressing a hand over her eyes and breathing deeply. Don’t work yourself up over it. That’s almost as bad as seeing it. Just relax…if you know where they are, you’ll know how to avoid them.

And then: Is this what it’s going to be like every time I enter a building from now on? Worrying about whether each turn of the corner will trigger a flashback? What a disheartening thought.

But by the time she reached the third floor and was directed to Iguchi-san, she’d managed to calm herself down. She had to stop in the stairwell again and take an extra five minutes to breath, trembling, but she’d done it.

Iguchi-san was a tired-looking man in his late thirties, with several days’ worth of stubble and at least three cups of coffee on his desk. Still, he managed a warm smile and rose to shook her hand. “Watanabe Keiko, was it? Iguchi Tetsuya. Glad to make your acquaintance.”

Chiaki shook his hand and took the seat opposite. “Likewise. Thank you for meeting with me.”

He pulled out a binder and flipped it open, until he stopped at what Chiaki recognized as her fake resume. “Now, according to your resume, you’re twenty years of age. You graduated high school, but the Tragedy struck and you never got to go to college. Subsequently, you never received any training in the field of therapy. So.” Iguchi-san clasped his hands and met her gaze. “Tell me why, out of all the divisions you could have applied to, you picked the seventh?”

“I wanted to help others with the same problems I had.” Chiaki fought the urge to fidget, instead digging her fingers into her skirt under the desk, away from view. “It’s true I never got to go to college, but I used to be class rep, so I have some skill with people. My resume should have mentioned that.” Kamukura-kun had kept that part of her history intact, deeming it could be useful in landing her a job.

Looking intrigued, Iguchi-san glanced back down at the papers. “Yes, there it is. Class rep, hm? That’s certainly a start. Some degree of people skills is required for that position, and that’s something therapists definitely need. Tell me about what you did.”
“Well, I organized group activities on a near-daily basis and made sure everyone had some form of transportation on school trips. I brought my class’s concerns to the board and took charge on occasions we were away from our teacher’s supervision. I also did my best to protect my classmates during the Tragedy.” All true except the last. Because it was technically before the Tragedy, and because I failed...

Iguchi-san questioned her a few more times about her class rep position: why she’d earned it, what activities she’d planned, what her classmates had been like, and she answered them all, heartbeat pounding. With each word, she was afraid he’d somehow sense she was being false, or that he’d find some record that didn’t match up with what she said, and would declare her a fake and drag her away to be arrested on the spot...

But despite her fears, he never seemed suspicious, and the rest of the interview went smoothly. Being class rep meant she’d had to step up her game when it came to public speaking and speeches, so she kept her composure, even when questions she hadn’t expected came her way. Her fidgeting hands were hidden beneath the desk, and she didn’t let any other outward signs of nervousness show.

Finally, the man leaned back in his seat with a sigh. “Alright, Watanabe-san. I won’t hold the lack of a college degree against you, because thanks to the Tragedy, many people your age didn’t get to even go to college. So, here’s what I can promise.” Iguchi-san steepled his fingers. “I’ll allow you on as an intern for a trial of, say, a month. In that period, you’ll get some basic training and work as an assistant for a therapist. Should you show promise, you’ll become a permanent intern and commit to the training program.”

“Wait, I’m hired? Just like that?” she exclaimed in surprise, and Iguchi-san laughed.

“Well, I’ll have to speak to the seventh branch about finding someone for you to shadow, but I don’t doubt there’ll be people available; the seventh branch has been a little short-staffed lately. I’ll probably get back to you on that in a week or so. But yes, just like that. Any other questions?”

Chiaki remembered that she’d prepared some, but they all seemed to have flown out of her brain at that moment. So she just shook her head. Iguchi-san turned to his computer, typing something rapidly. “Alright—I’m printing out some pamphlets for you about basic Future Foundation policy, as well as a list of books on therapy to get you started and where to buy them...”

“So, yeah, they called a few days ago and said they found a supervisor for me. I’m supposed to start at the beginning of next week. I’ve been trying to study the material, but it’s kind of hard...” Chiaki glanced down where she was sitting cross-legged on her living room floor, books and papers spread out all around her. Yumigami sniffed inquisitively at a sheet, looking as if she was thinking about trying to eat it. Holding the phone against her shoulder with her chin, she moved them out of the rabbit’s reach and continued, “I mean, I was just okay in science and health classes. I was just okay in most classes, actually. Didn’t pay much attention...”

Silence from the other end. As expected.

“Still, maybe it’ll be the kind of stuff that’s easier in application? I hope so. I want to learn this.” Part of the seventh division was dedicated to finding therapy techniques to counteract despair. It was a noble goal, and she hoped to contribute to it for her friends’ sakes. Either by finding techniques to break the brainwashing in case the Neo World Program didn’t work, or learning how to guide them through their trauma once they were free. I can use what I learn here to help them... and in the meantime, I’ll still be making up for my mistakes by helping other people, too. “So, how are you? Where are you now?”
“Akihabara.”

“Oh, I love Akihabara! I used to go there all the time, they’ve got a great market for games. When I was younger I’d sometimes spend the entire weekend there, bouncing between the arcades and an internet café… It probably wasn’t very safe, but I never ran into trouble. How’s it doing?”

“It is on fire.”

She winced. “…Yeah, I heard the Remnants in that area got particularly vicious after Enoshima’s death. Apparently, some of the Future Foundation’s branch heads even got dispatched to try and stabilize it. You’re safe, right, Kamukura-kun?” From both the Remnants and the Foundation? went unspoken.

On the other end, he only gave a low hum of affirmation. Chiaki smiled fondly; Kamukura-kun was about as verbose on the phone as he was in face-to-face conversation, which was to say not much. But it was so, so good to hear his voice, to know he was doing okay and hadn’t left her completely. She called him almost every day. She couldn’t help it; she missed him with a familiarly painful ache. It was the same one she’d had when Hinata-kun had left. But much more manageable this time.

Insistently, Yumigami climbed into Chiaki’s lap. Scratching her absently, she looked about, grimacing at the state of her apartment. It was tiny, one room with an additional kitchen and bathroom, and such a mess. Her potted pansies and wig stand rubbed shoulders on a shelf, her table bumped up against her television, and her futon was pushed into a corner. Everything had been rabbit-proofed as much as possible since Yumigami had free reign. It was no wonder Kamukura-kun had to leave; it was barely big enough for her as it was.

Well, that’s the downside to having to find an apartment that allows pets… At least it was on the first floor, so she didn’t have to run up and down the stairs all the time.

“Are there any video games you wish me to obtain for you while I am here?” In the background, there was something like the sound of glass breaking. “…People are too preoccupied to notice.”

Remembering the ads about some of the newest games, Chiaki was tempted for a brief second, but she let it pass. “Ah, no, that’s okay…I don’t want you risking yourself over them.” Her brow furrowed. “Why’d you go there, anyway? Did you want to buy a game for yourself?”

“No. I was travelling to a nearby ward for supplies and happened to pass through when you called.”

Concern spiked. “Supplies? Are you running out of food? If you ever need something to eat you can always come here, you know.”

“I have no difficulties acquiring food for myself. They were for something else.”

“Something else?”

No answer.

She shrugged, softly cooing as Yumigami rubbed her chin against her fingers. “Well, you don’t have to tell me. I’m glad you’ve found something to keep yourself busy with. Just…”

Automatically, she frowned. “Please be careful?”

“I do not need to be careful.”
“I know, but I still worry.” *Especially because you don’t.*

“…Your concern is misplaced. I will be fine.”

She kept the conversation afloat for a few more minutes, but eventually Kamukura-kun pointed out that it was getting late and she should go to sleep. By that point her eyes kept drifting shut and she’d yawned more than once, so Chiaki didn’t protest. The gamer just mumbled a soft “Goodnight, Kamukura-kun. Get some sleep yourself,” and hung up.

When she woke up the next morning, she found he’d left a box with several of the newest releases on her doorstep anyway, and Chiaki was torn between squealing, because she was so hyped for them; getting exasperated, because she’d told him not to risk his life over them; and pouting, because if he were going to stop by anyway he might as well stay to visit.

Her internship was half school work and studying, half actual work. She shadowed her supervisor around, sitting in on therapy sessions and jotting down her own observations and notes. Sometimes she was sent to help patients with rehabilitation or physical therapy, just as an assistant. And twice a week she was required to meet up with other interns to share their experiences and formally study. It was very mentally taxing, not just the constant study of subjects she struggled to understand, but the living on edge, the hiding in plain sight, the false identity. Still, Chiaki pushed through it.

Near the end of her second week, she and the other interns were told to go to a conference room on the fourth floor. She was the last to arrive, panting slightly from running up four flights of stairs in a futile attempt to get there on time. At moments like this, it was difficult not to feel envious of everyone else’s blissful ease in just being able to pile into an elevator. Chiaki hastily closed the door behind her, turned, and waiting at the back of the room was—

“Gekkogahara-senpai?!” she blurted in surprise.

Gekkogahara Miaya had been in the year ahead of Chiaki at Hope’s Peak, a member of the last actual graduating class, Class 76. Even for an Ultimate she’d stood out, with her big, bulky wheelchair and the way she only spoke through that odd bunny avatar of hers. Chiaki had never really spoken to her, but she’d seen her around campus, sometimes with one of the guys in Class 77-A. Her impression of the therapist had been that she was a kind woman, especially compared to some of Chiaki’s other upperclassmen.

The blue-haired woman blinked, looking up from her laptop. Rather than respond directly, though, her fingers moved rapidly across the keyboard. A white rabbit dressed in a magical girl uniform popped up on the screen facing them, and a high-pitched voice emerged from the speakers. “Hello…Watanabe-san, was it? I suppose senpai does work, given my seniority here, but I prefer Gekkogahara-san.”

Chiaki quietly cursed her slip of the tongue as she hurriedly took a seat. “Sorry… Also, sorry for being late. I had to take the stairs…”

It was hard to tell with the scarf, but she got the impression Gekkogahara-senpai—san, she was going to have to think of her as Gekkogahara-san now—was smiling gently. “It’s no problem at all. The Future Foundation does its best to accommodate for its employees’ triggers, but unfortunately there’s a limited range of options for yours. Allowing you leeway for the extra travel time is the least we can do.”

She rolled over and handed Chiaki a glass of water, which she downed gratefully. “Thank you…”
Returning to the front of the room, Gekkogahara-san clapped her hands gently. “Well, now that everyone’s here, shall we begin?”

Happy music spilled from her wheelchair, a catchy, welcoming tune. The white rabbit on the screen smiled and spread its arms wide. “Welcome to the seventh branch! I hope your first few weeks here have been productive. If you aren’t familiar, I am Gekkogahara Miaya, the branch leader of the seventh division.”

Wait, she is?! Chiaki only knew that Munakata-san and Yukizome-sensei were branch leaders; the Ultimate Therapist was barely older than her. That’s a high position for someone so young…then again, she is an Ultimate.

“And this is my avatar, Usami.” Usami waved. “I’m a bit shy, so she’ll be doing the speaking for me. Though I do handle cyber security at the Future Foundation, I am mostly known for my primary talent: Ultimate Therapist. And that’s what I’ve called you here to speak about.”

One of the other interns tentatively raised his hand. “Um…Gekkogahara-san?”

“Yes, Honda-kun? How may I help you?”

The intern didn’t seem sure whether to look in Gekkogahara-san’s eyes or at Usami. “Um, no offense, but…if you are the branch leader, don’t you have more important things to do than speak with us?”

“…It’s true, I do have many things fighting for my attention.” The tinny voice was hard to ignore, and everyone’s eyes seemed to gravitate towards Usami rather than Gekkogahara-san. “And it’s because of this that I don’t get to work with many patients anymore. I’m too busy, you see.” Usami’s ears drooped.

“But therapy, counseling others, isn’t just my talent. It’s something I have a real passion for. So, I decided I would set some time aside to pass on my knowledge to new aspiring therapists!” The rabbit puffed her chest out proudly. “That way, I can still contribute to the field I love! So every two weeks I’ll be holding seminars and helping you through simulations.”

“…Simulations?” Chiaki couldn’t help but question.

“That’s right! It's a headset you'll use to interact with an avatar with various types of phobias and mental illnesses. It is rather limited, but I believe it’s a good way to help you gain experience without the risk of worsening a patient’s condition.”

She sat back as Gekkogahara-san turned to answer another question, frowning speculatively.

Learning from the Ultimate Therapist herself…that’s something not everyone can claim. Still…will it really be safe for me to be around her? We didn’t really talk, but we did spend a year at the same school…

Chiaki glanced at the front, where Gekkogahara-san was tugging her scarf over her nose as Usami babbled away. But it doesn’t look like she recognizes me…so I guess it’s okay. Kamukura-kun is good at what he does.

Maybe I can keep tabs on the Neo World Program through her, too…

Chapter End Notes
A/N: For Chiaki’s fake name, I picked a very common Japanese surname, and the
given name of Keiko Erikawa, co-founder of KOEI and an influential female figure in
the Japanese gaming industry. It only seemed right to make Chiaki’s fake name related
to her talent, somehow.

Speaking of, she was always planned to end up in the Future Foundation—I just could
not stand the thought of her spending the year-ish gap for SDR2 doing nothing but
waiting again—but deciding which branch was a lot harder. I wanted something that
would let her use her touted charisma, so though I also tossed around fifth and
fourteenth, seventh it was! Plus, I can now give some screentime to a sorely
underdeveloped character.

I put Miaya in Class 76 because this lets her be at Hope’s Peak at the same time as
Yasuke, so she can meet him, while still graduating and surviving. I figure she and
Yasuke would have discussed the Neo World Program theoretically, but not been able
to actually start it until he meets Chihiro the following year, possibly through Junko.
He’d then introduce him to Miaya, and, well, the rest is history.

I’m going to exercise some creative freedom with Chiaki’s therapy training. It won’t
be something she’ll learn instantly, but she will be going through it faster than you
would in real life. Then again, in DR’s universe a child can apparently become an
executive of a famous company, so… Also, given how the Future Foundation allows
kids (Mekuru Katsuragi), teenagers Komaru’s age (Misaki Asano), and high-school
dropouts (Seiko, Sonosuke, and Ruruka) in, and even puts the latter in high positions,
I’m inclined to believe they don’t care much for your formal education and just push
you through training as fast as they can.
Given the times they lived in, all able-bodied Future Foundation members were required to receive combat training, and once her trial period had ended two months ago that had extended to Chiaki as well. So, four times a week she went to the training room, an enormous room divided into two sections—one was the soundproof shooting range, the other was covered in mats and suited for hand-to-hand combat.

The latter was, Chiaki thought as she stared at the ceiling above her, gasping for air, perhaps even harder than studying therapy. She had never been a particularly active person; a life playing video games was a sedentary one, and the most energy she ever expended was for playing *Dance Dance Revolution*. For her first couple of training sessions she hadn’t even learned anything; the instructor had taken one look at her and made her do laps and push-ups and other exercises to build muscle and stamina, until her limbs felt like they were on fire.

On the other hand, all those video games, especially shooters, had made her quite a good shot. All she really had to learn was the proper stance and way to hold a gun, and that had been easy enough. After seeing how closely the bullet holes were riddled in her targets, the instructor had quickly decided she didn’t need much more gun training. Now she only spent one of her sessions in there; the rest were dedicated to learning proper hand-to-hand combat.

“Get up, Watanabe.” The combat instructor, a large woman named Hayami-sensei, nudged her with her boot, and with a groan she complied. The room seemed to spin around her—she must have hit her head too hard when she’d been thrown. Her sparring partner for the day, Honda-kun, gave her an apologetic smile from behind his faceguard as the instructor circled around her, correcting her stance with a sharp nudge here and there.

*I hate sparring*, she thought as Hayami-sensei finally stepped back with a satisfied nod. But as much as she hated sparring, her desire to get stronger was greater, and even greater than that was her fear. She never wanted to be as helpless and desperate as she had been in that maze, or when those muggers attacked, ever again. And unfortunately, the element of danger still existed.

*If Yukizome-sensei finds me, or the Remnants attack, or something…I’ll need to know more than just how to protect myself. I’ll need to know how to fight.*

Not for the first time, Chiaki thought about telling the Foundation about Yukizome-sensei’s brainwashed state. And also not for the first time, she reminded herself that she had no proof, that she was just an intern compared to her teacher’s high position, and that she would have to expose herself to do so. It didn’t stop the twinge of guilt, though.

Because the truth was, deep down, she didn’t really want to expose Yukizome-sensei. She was afraid that if she did, the Future Foundation would kill her. And her loyalty to the people she loved, she’d found out, would always outweigh civic duty. So she kept her silence and pretended those reasons weren’t also excuses.

A fist whizzed by her face, and only a reflex jerk back stopped her from getting hit. Chiaki realized the signal to begin again had rung while she was lost in thought, and quietly cursed herself for getting distracted. She danced back, avoiding another, and returned one of her own, trying to recall everything she’d been taught so far in the flurry of punches and kicks.
Stay on the balls of your feet, use your hips to add power behind your punches, if you get hit sway with the blow…

“You okay, Watanabe-san?” Honda-kun asked fifteen minutes later, having completely thrashed her in sparring. He pulled his helmet off with a crooked smile; he was all tousled blonde hair and dazzling good looks. “That last punch might leave a bruise…”

Chiaki gingerly poked at her arm, which already had a motley purple blot forming. “I’m fine. It’s good you didn’t hold back, really. In a real fight, they wouldn’t, right?”

He smiled, nodded. He seemed to smile a lot. “Good attitude to have. Hey, some of us were gonna go swimming later today. Wanna come with?”

She gave him a polite smile and shook her head. “No thank you. I think I’ll stay here and practice more.” The last thing she wanted was to get asked about the puckered pink scars on her arms, legs and torso…not to mention she didn’t know how well her wig would hold up in water.

Besides…it wouldn’t be fair to befriend the others in her branch. Watanabe Keiko was a lie. She could never be genuine with them.

He shrugged and walked away. Chiaki turned to some of the punching bags hanging from the ceiling, telling herself she didn’t really want to hang out anyway.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” Chiaki soothed, smiling. “But I’m here to listen, if you do.”

The woman before her was silent; she’d spent the better part of twenty minutes sullen, resisting Chiaki’s gentle attempts to coax her to talk. But her demeanor had gradually softened, going from stony resistance to wavering hesitance to reluctant consideration.

Finally, she sniffed, and Chiaki handed her a handkerchief. The woman dabbed at her eyes and mumbled, “I just feel so angry. All the time. It’s this dark, murderous thing, just—just this red beast eating me from the inside out. And it’s always telling me to go punch something. No, someone. Like I want to walk into a bar and start a fight and not stop until they go home bruised, or I do.”

“You shouldn’t do that, Ishida-san.”

“Why the fuck not?!” The woman leaped to her feet, sudden and violent. “Who’s gonna stop me, huh? Or are you gonna tell on me? Call up the police, or the rest of your Foundation buddies? I hear they’ll kill anyone they even think is a Remnant nowadays.”

“Th-That’s not—I wouldn’t betray your trust—”

“I’ve got all this anger inside me and I don’t know what to do with it!” The woman’s eyes were spilling over with tears now. “I don’t want to hurt anyone, but I can’t think of any other way to get rid of it! What am I supposed to do, then?!?”

Her brain scatted around, desperately trying to find the right thing to say. The right advice to give that would help this woman. But every time she thought of something, she flashed back to her little rallying cry to her classmates, how she’d led them astray. Indecision paralyzed her.

“Well?! Hurry up and help me!”

“I…I’m sorry, I don’t know what to say…”
The woman’s face twisted with rage, her sorrow disappearing with inhuman speed. “That’s it?! I came all this way, paid all this money for help, and all you can say is ‘I’m sorry’? I don’t want platitudes, I want to feel better! What kind of therapist are you?!”

Chiaki shrank back as blocks of color filtered across her vision, like the screen change in a video game. When they were gone, all that remained was the large VR room, tinted green from her headset. SESSION FAILED, the screen said; text began scrolling by, a transcript of what had occurred if she wanted to review, but Chiaki paid it no mind, shakily removing the headgear and setting it on her desk.

She looked around. A few of the other interns were still sitting in their chairs, eyes fixed on the virtual world playing out before them. Most had also finished, and judging from their slumped postures, they’d failed as well. Part of her supposed it was to be expected; it was the first time they’d been allowed to go through a session on their own, even if just in a virtual reality. Gekkogahara-san was quietly rolling around, speaking to those who were done; even as Chiaki watched the woman wheeled over to her.

For a moment, she was silent as she peered at her laptop, which the simulation would be sending the transcript to. Then she looked up. “Not bad, Watanabe-san. You made a mistake in telling her what she shouldn’t do; try asking her if she thinks that’d make her feel better next time. A bit of soul-searching usually works better, especially in cases like that.”

Chiaki was silent, and Usami’s ears drooped. “What’s wrong?”

“I failed. I couldn’t help her,” she mumbled, feeling wretched.

“Well, of course. This simulation is set up to fail.” She started, and Usami chuckled at the bewildered look on her face. Then her own grew serious. “You will never help anyone in just one therapy session, Watanabe-san. Scars take time to heal, and that’ll frustrate them. They’ll probably yell at you. The purpose of this simulation is two-fold: to introduce you to the emotional experiences of being a new therapist, and to show you what areas you need to improve on.”

“I guess that makes sense… Hadn’t it taken Kamukura-kun a while to help her with her depression? And he’d had the Ultimate Therapist talent, too! “So, what do you think I need to work on?”

Gekkogahara-san glanced at her laptop again. “Judging by your results here, you do a good job of getting them to open up to you…but when it’s time to offer advice you just freeze. Ueno-kun has also said you always seem hesitant about making suggestions. Could it be you’re afraid of saying the wrong thing?”

How could she not be, when her last ‘advice’ had gotten her entire class brainwashed? When all her attempts to say the right thing to Hinata-kun fell flat? “I just—what if I make things worse?” The right route was always so easy to find in games, a matter of trial and error and pushing the right buttons at the right time. Real life was so much harder, and so less forgiving of mistakes.

“I’m afraid you can never know for certain whether things will work out. You can only make the best, informed decision possible. Therapists do whatever is in their power to help others, and sometimes things are outside that power, or they don’t have the full picture. But a fear of failure shouldn’t stop you from trying.”

Chiaki sighed. “I know, but it’s just…scary.”

Usami hummed thoughtfully. “Do you want to hear a story?”
She blinked, taken aback by the sudden change in topic. But Usami looked earnest, and she sensed that she was going somewhere with this, so the gamer nodded.

“Ever since I was a child, I was always good at listening to people. The kids at my school always came up to me just to vent. But I was always too shy to work up the nerve to just…offer advice. Or even talk much at all.” Usami chuckled. “My mother used to joke that my ears and heart were so big to compensate for my voice being so small.”

Was that normal for parents to do? She had no idea. “What changed?”

The skin around Gekkogahara-san’s eye crinkled as if she were smiling under her scarf, a nostalgic look crossing her face. “I had this stuffed white rabbit that I brought everywhere, so I started to talk to them through her. Pretending she was the one counseling them helped give me words. I read books on therapy, studied as much as I could, and soon more and more people started unburdening themselves to me.

“Of course, a child carrying around and talking through a doll is fine, but that stops being acceptable when you get older. But by the time I was a teenager, Usami had become engrained as part of my image as ‘Magical Miracle Girl Usami’. So I got some programming lessons and learned how to make an avatar of her instead.”

“‘Magical Miracle Girl Usami?’”

“Look, I was young, and I was a fan of those magical girl anime, and it sounded cool at the time…” Usami laughed. “But I digress. What I’m saying is…everyone has some insecurity they wrestle with, some obstacle in their way. But if you don’t try to challenge it, you’ll never overcome it. I know it sounds cliché, but everything starts with belief in yourself. You must have had some, or you wouldn’t have joined the seventh branch at all, right?”

“…I guess…” Though wanting to help wasn’t really the same as believing she could, Chiaki thought privately. She hadn’t realized how much that failed rescue had shaken her trust in her own judgment until now. How could she even hope to regain it?

Gekkogahara-san patted her hand and began to move on, Usami’s final words trailing behind her. “Don’t be afraid of failure, Watanabe-san, or you’ll never even try to succeed. Just do your best—that’s all anyone can ask.”

Summer bled into autumn, and the weeks passed by uneventfully. Until one day, when Chiaki came home after work and almost jumped out of her skin at the sight of Kamukura-kun waiting outside her apartment door, still as a statue.

“Holy—!” she yelped, hand resting over her heart. “You startled me, Kamukura-kun.”

“It was not my intent to frighten you.” Which was as close to an apology as he got. “I came because I have a place to take you.”

“Whoa, hold on,” she chuckled. “It’s been four months! Can’t we take a few minutes to just…enjoy the moment?”

He looked at her blankly, but said nothing, which she took as a sign of acquiescence. The pink-haired woman looked him over carefully. While they had kept up their correspondence, this was the first time she’d seen him in person since he left. He looked no worse for wear for his time wandering the streets; even his suit was somehow still spotless, and his hair appeared as silky as ever. It was unnaturally hot today, and he’d finally made a concession for it, unbuttoning a single
button on his shirt and loosening his tie. It exposed his clavicle, and she stared at the skin there for far longer than it warranted. Who knew clavicles could be so distracting?

Finding him uninjured and in good health, she exhaled in relief. “It’s good you’re okay.” Impulsively, Chiaki darted forward and gave him a hug, a broad grin spreading on her face. “I’m so happy to see you again!"

He patiently waited the hug out, although Chiaki noted that his arms twitched a small fraction, as if he’d almost raised them to return to gesture before thinking better of it. She couldn’t help beaming against his chest; he’d never done that before.

“Well,” she said, stepping back, “Thanks for indulging me. Let me get changed into something more comfortable and then I’ll follow you.”

“Why’d you bring me here, Kamukura-kun?” she asked one train ride later, looking around. Her curious eyes trailed over the boats, all lined up at the dock they were standing on. The port of Tokyo was less active now that the work day was winding down, but there were still a few employees and sailors wandering about. The sharp tang of the sea breeze hung in the air, and the wind blew the black hair of her wig into her mouth. She spat the strands out in disgust and grimaced. It’s so hot… The light breeze wasn’t doing much more than spreading the hot, humid air around. She was sweltering in just her wig and casual clothes. How is Kamukura-kun managing with all that hair? He didn’t look bothered at all, as if unbuttoning one button was all he needed to cool down. Maybe it was.

Instead of answering her question, he posed one of his own. “Have you run into trouble with Yukizome?”

She answered in the negative, adding “You know I would have called you if I had. But she never drops by our branch. I think she’s too busy with her own.”

“As I predicted.” Then he said something unexpected. “Give me your phone.”

Chiaki raised an eyebrow, but handed it over. She found herself watching his long fingers as they darted across the screen, typing something in. “What are you doing?”

Kamukura-kun finished typing before answering. “I will not always be here, Nanami,” he said, “So I have deemed it necessary to create extra precautionary measures if danger arises.”

He handed her phone back, along with a set of keys, and pointed. Chiaki followed his finger to see he’d directed them over to one of the boats. She stared at it; her knowledge on sea vessels was nonexistent, so she really had no idea what type it was. There wasn’t a sail as far as she could see; didn’t they need that to work? It was maybe eleven or so meters, white, the name Second Wind emblazoned proudly on one side.

“This vessel is now yours,” Kamukura-kun continued. “That is the key for its engine, and your phone now contains the coordinates to a safehouse. Enter them into the navigational computer, and the auto-pilot will take you to one of the uninhabited Izu Islands. When you arrive, you will find a shelter stocked with enough food, games, electricity, and supplies to last a decade. Should Yukizome discover you, or should the Remnants' activity grow worse, you will have a place to flee to.”

Baffled, Chiaki stared, until everything finally sunk in. Her lips parted, forming a silent oh. “That’s… what you’ve been doing these past few months? Building me a place to hide in case the..."
worst happens?"

“Yes.”

“Kamukura-kun…” A fuzzy warmth was spreading through her chest. How did he even get a boat? Or all the materials he needed for this? It must have caused him a lot of trouble. “I’m very touched, but…you really can’t think I’d just run and abandon everyone if worst came to worst?”

“I calculated the odds of you doing so to be statistically low,” he admitted. “However, I was discomforted at the thought of you not having such an option available.”

She grasped his hands, looking at him beseechingly. “Don’t think I’m ungrateful, because…I’m not. Really. Thank you so much for doing this, all this.”

“Your thanks are unnecessary, but accepted.” He turned away, boarding the Second Wind decisively. "Follow me; you need to familiarize yourself with the ship and its controls if it is to be of any use to you..."

One head-spinning lesson later, he decided she’d memorized the basics well enough. With one final instruction to refresh her knowledge every so often, he brought her back to her apartment. It was long past dinnertime, and the moon was hanging in the sky; even at night it was still red. Chiaki managed to persuade Kamukura-kun to stay for some instant ramen noodles, then for a two-player video game tournament. He still beat her, but she didn’t care—well, okay, she was a little disappointed the strategies she’d crafted in his absence hadn’t worked. But Chiaki’s happiness to be spending time with him again outweighed that. Besides, reworking strategies was kind of fun too.

When they finished, Kamukura-kun remained seated on the floor, and Chiaki’s skin tingled from the feel of his eyes boring into her back as she cleaned up. “Do you want to stay here for the night?” she called over her shoulder, storing the last controller in its drawer. “I’m sure we can squeeze you in, somehow…”

“That is unnecessary. I will find a place to sleep.” He made no move to leave, though, and Chiaki thought that maybe Kamukura-kun wasn’t quite willing to go just yet. It sent another shot of secret delight through her.

“Alright then. Hey…what’d you think of these games? Did you like any of them?”

“You continue to ask that question even though the answer will always be the same,” he observed. “No. They were boring.”

“I keep asking because maybe someday it’ll be different.” She turned around and her lips quirked; Yumigami was nuzzling his hand, needling for attention. “I haven’t given up on that.”

“Stubborn,” he sighed. It wasn’t exactly an insult, but it wasn’t exactly a compliment either.

Yumigami started to nibble on his sleeve now, peeved at being ignored, and Chiaki quickly swooped in to pull her away. Kamukura-kun watched silently. “Tomorrow, I leave for Towa City,” he said as she placed the rabbit on the other side of the room.

Chiaki frowned. “Is that safe?”

He gave her a blank look, prompting her to continue, “Well, it’s just…a little while ago, Branch 14 asked my branch if we’d be willing to look over some hostages from Towa City. Relatives and
friends of Class 78. They’d been held captive by Enoshima, and the survivors were concerned about their mental well-being. But the Future Foundation members that were supposed to bring them never showed up, and then intel said they’d been captured and the city engulfed in violence.”

“The riots in that city pose no more threat to me than the ones here,” he dismissed.

“Even still, I—” A bolt of inspiration struck her. “Hold on!”

She jumped up and rushed to a small box she kept by her bed. Chiaki wore very little makeup or jewelry, finding them more troublesome than anything, but she was fond of game-related ones. Those she always kept safe. Pulling one in particular out, she hurried back to him and held it out. “Here.”

“…Your Gala Omega hairpin?”

Her cheeks felt warm; Chiaki hoped she wasn’t blushing too noticeably. “Yeah. It just struck me, out of nowhere, but—I want to give it to you.”

He looked straight at her and asked, “Why?”

*How was Kairi able to do this?* “It’s…safekeeping.”

“…Safekeeping.”

“Yeah.”

“Nanami, if you wanted to keep it safe, it would be better off with you.”

“Wha—no, no, I don’t want you to keep it safe. I want it to keep you safe.”

A tiny crease appeared between his eyebrows. “That is not possible. Even if I did not possess all the talents necessary to protect myself, it would still be a hairpin. It is entirely unusable for combat situations, environmental shelter, or medical aid.”

“No, I know it can’t be used for any of that. But like…think of it like a protection spell, or a charm. It’s my favorite hairpin, so you have to bring it back to me. And it’ll keep you safe until then so you can.” It was the sort of thing girls always did for their love interest in video games, but it suddenly sounded very foolish out loud. She swallowed. “I know it doesn’t make logical sense, but…”

“It does not have to, according to you,” he sighed. Kamukura-kun looked down at the hairpin again, then gently took it from her fingers. He held it like it was precious as gold, Chiaki noticed with a spark of delight. “Very well. I will hold onto it.”

“Good.” She scooted over to his side and dropped her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes. She was tired, and he looked comfy, and she’d missed him. “Because you absolutely have to come back.”

*There are still things I want to tell you…I’m not ready yet, but I will be soon.*

As she drifted off to sleep, the last thing she felt was the phantom sensation of his fingers threading through her hair.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Told you I’d remember that hairpin :D
It was only a few days after Kamukura-kun left that Gekkogahara-san called the interns and their supervisors to a meeting. It was in the same room she’d first met them in, the fourth-floor conference room with the large projector. Around Chiaki, the other interns were chatting, wondering what Gekkogahara-san could want this time. But there was fondness in their voices; the Ultimate Therapist’s slightly silly but gentle aura and the steps she took to personally know her employees had endeared her to many, to the point some of the younger ones actually called her ‘onee-san’. Though Honda-kun gave Chiaki a smile and a wave when she came in, everyone else ignored her.

Once Chiaki took her seat—last one in as usual—Gekkogahara-san clapped her hands for their attention. “As I’m sure many of you have heard by now, the crisis in Towa City has reached a conclusion. Togami-kun, who was being held hostage, has managed to escape, and on his way out he picked up many of the captives our forces originally went to save.”

Usami paused, her ears drooping. “Unfortunately, some were unable to be rescued, and Fukawa-san, who went in to save Togami-kun, has also not returned... Our intelligence has deduced they’ve all been captured again, so we can’t risk taking any further action against Towa City. That said, I’m sure we’ll eventually find a way to save everyone trapped, so for the time being please focus on doing your best.

“Our focus, now more than ever, must be on helping those rescued. Interns, consider this your first real case. You will each be assigned a Towa City captive to counsel, under supervision. I will email you the profile of your assigned individual once this meeting is concluded. Please review them with your supervisor later, and as always you can come to me for questions...”

Those memories were fresh in her mind as Chiaki looked at the picture of the girl she’d been assigned, that night in her apartment. She was still a teenager, maybe three or so years younger than her. Pretty, with short chestnut hair and pale eyes, but the heavy layers of makeup she wore were too reminiscent of Enoshima for Chiaki’s comfort. Nakajima Kanon was her name, cousin of Kuwata Leon. Also attached was a short psyche profile and extra notes, and she made a mental note to read them more thoroughly tomorrow morning.

Sighing, she put her phone back in her pocket and returned her attention to her pansies. Chiaki frowned unhappily as she gently fingered a thin petal. They’d started wilting yesterday, and nothing she was doing was perking them up. She supposed they were reaching the end of their lifespan; it was probably thanks to Kamukura-kun’s formula they’d lasted as long as they had.

Contemplating whether or not to buy replacements—she did like the color, but flowers were so hard to take care of compared to a rabbit—she threw on a Pac-Man t-shirt and a pair of shorts for the night. She’d just settled down to finish her latest rerun of Fire Emblem Thracia 776 when a knock came on her door. Chiaki hesitated, indecisive; she wore her wig and glasses everywhere,
even answered the door in them, just in case she encountered someone she knew. But she’d already taken them off for bed and didn’t feel like putting them back on.

You know what? She spent almost all her time pretending to be someone else. This was Nanami Chiaki time. Gaming time. They could come back at an earlier hour. She nodded firmly and decided to ignore the knocking. Let’s see, when she last left off she’d been marching on the Empire’s detention center…

She huffed in annoyance at a second knock. She’d just reached over to turn up the volume when a familiar voice spoke on the other side. “Nanami, open the door.”

Chiaki brightened, irritation instantly forgotten. Immediately she placed the controller down and rushed over.

“Kamukura-kun!” she chirped, throwing the door open. “Welcome ba—what happened to your hands?!”

She grabbed his hands and held them up for inspection. They were covered in bandages, red liquid slowly soaking through the fabric. It baffled her, the notion that he could bleed, that something could even hurt him. He always seemed so untouchable.

He was silent as she ushered him over to her table and fetched her first-aid kit. Taking a seat across from him, she started changing the dressings. “You had me so worried. You couldn’t pick up your phone, and I heard the fighting was getting worse and worse… And now you come home with your hands all banged up! What did you do, punch a Monokuma?”

“Something like that.” There wasn’t a single sign of discomfort or pain as she dabbed disinfectant on the half-healed cuts. His fingers didn’t even twitch. “This is unnecessary. I can change my bandages myself.”

Chiaki paused, unconsciously squeezing his hands. “I know, but…let me take care of you. Please.”

“...Do as you wish.”

“Thank you.”

In silence, she continued to work. It really hadn’t been all that long since he’d left, just a couple of days, but they had felt so scary. For the first time, she'd been unable to reach him, even on the phone. Even knowing that it was because Towa City's communications were jammed had done little to alleviate her greater anxiety. Her mind couldn't help spinning through a dozen different fears—he was captured, he was injured, he was dead…

She was relieved to see they had been unfounded.

As she finished pinning the last bandage in place, Chiaki's fingers laced with his. She studied them. They were much larger than hers, but elegant, like a pianist's or a doctor's. How often had she just grabbed these hands without really seeing? How often did she take it for granted that they would be there for her to hold another day?

She exhaled, slowly, and looked up. Kamukura-kun was watching her, his gaze very focused. They were so close together she could clearly see that crosshair in his eyes, framed by long lashes. Unconsciously, she licked her lips, and for the briefest second his eyes darted down to them.

“Kamukura-kun, I—”
“I will be departing soon.”

Chiaki’s mouth snapped shut. Outside, a siren wailed. “In Search of Victory” continued in the background.

“…To find my friends.” There’d been a note of finality in his tone. The joy of seeing him again drained out, leaving an odd mixture of feelings in its wake. Gladness her friends would soon get the chance to be saved, but hollowness too. She hadn’t expected he’d be leaving immediately. He’d only just gotten back… “When will you all be able to return?”

“By my estimate, it will be several months before I can gather your classmates and orchestrate our capture. Six at the minimum, but it is likely to be more. Perhaps even a year, or greater.”

Six months to a year, or more. Chiaki dropped his hands, feeling dizzy. A sudden feeling of déjà vu overcame her. Six months ‘til she saw Yukizome-sensei again after her transfer, a year ‘til she saw ‘Hinata-kun’ again, two years and counting since she last saw her friends—it felt like she did nothing but wait. History repeated itself in the worst ways.

She’d known this separation was coming, of course, but she hadn’t wanted to think about what it entailed. So she hadn’t. And now she was getting hit with that emotion full force.

“Okay,” she said, shakily. It was necessary. She wanted to ask if she could come, but no—this was the entire reason she’d joined the Future Foundation in the first place. In case this plan didn’t work, so there could maybe be other options, other ways to help her friends. That’s right…it’s for their sake. For Kamukura-kun’s answer, whatever question he’s having. You can afford to wait again.

…it just wasn’t fair.

God, how childish was that thought?

He studied her. “You appear distressed.”

“Well…of course.” She tried for a smile. “I won’t get to see you for such a long time… I understand why, but it still makes me sad.”

“I see.” He went quiet for a beat. “Before I depart, I request your cooperation.”

Chiaki blinked. “My cooperation?” What could I possibly offer?

“Izuru,” Izuru said. “There is a possibility the program will not work, or that it will backfire, or some other negative outcome will occur.”

Izuru had thought long and hard on how much he would tell Nanami as he walked away from the warzone of Towa City, one AI hard-drive in each hand. Calculating all her potential reactions and what certain information might drive her to do or not do. For the tiniest millisecond, he’d even considered leaving without telling her anything, but something buried deep inside him had rebelled against that. It would devastate her. He wouldn’t do it. It simply was not an option, like letting her die hadn’t been an option.

Still, he knew he was deliberately withholding the truth from her. No—he was outright lying, or at the very least letting her misunderstand. The Neo World Program was still untested, so there was a possibility it could go wrong, but the primary element of danger would only be there because he introduced it. There was an eighty percent chance it would work fine on its own, and he was
leading her to believe otherwise. The misdirection created an odd feeling, a twist somewhere in his
gut. Shame and a slight nausea. He thought this discomforting sensation might have been guilt, and
for a bizarre moment he felt the urge to confess everything.

But he had to forge on. From the moment he conceived this plan, he knew he could tell no one of
the entirety of it, not even Nanami. The odds of interference were too high. He would brook no
more sabotages, would tolerate no more delays in his search for the truth. So he suppressed that
feeling and continued, “Among those is a chance the subjects will fall to despair. And if I did, and I
knew you were alive, I would desire to harm or kill you. So, I must not know you are alive when I
enter the program.”

He stopped, searching her face for understanding. It was not there; perhaps she was simply in
denial about what she must know he was about to say next.

“Nanami, I must erase my memories of our time together.”

There was an uncomfortable pause as that sank in. Then her face crumpled, and his heart pinched
painfully in response. His fingers twitched, wanting to reach out and entangle with her own. He
kept them on the table. “Why?” she whispered, sounding choked.

“I just finished explaining why. To prevent—”

“No, I get that. But…” She stopped. Wiped her eyes and continued, voice trembling, “I thought—I
thought you’d just be bringing my friends there. Why do you need to go in with them? You aren’t
brainwashed.”

He had predicted she would ask that, but unreasonably wished she wouldn’t. “…I told you already.
An answer.”

Her eyes flashed. “That’s it?!”

“Nanami—”

“That’s more important?! Some vague answer is more important than—than our friendship?!”

…She was not going to let him speak uninterrupted. He decided to let her rant. And rant she did,
face flushed, tears beading at the corner of her eyes, and voice rising in volume.

“Look, I always knew you and I think on different wavelengths, and I accepted that. You’ve kept
your secrets, and I’m fine with that too. I’ve tried to be supportive, because I—I care a lot about
you, and I want you to be happy. But I can’t pretend to be okay with you wanting to erase your
memories of me forever for an answer to a question you haven’t even told me!” She slammed her
hands against the table. Izuru’s ears picked up a thump on the other end of the room, most likely
her rabbit starting in fright.

He waited until several seconds had dragged by, ensuring she would hear him. “…It would not be
forever.”

She stared uncomprehendingly, confusion mixing with the traces of anger and grief. Izuru
continued, “I will not be using Matsuda’s memory erasure techniques for the procedure. Instead I
plan to opt for self-hypnosis to lock away my memories. In the process, I will implant a command
for my brain to respond to a specific combination of words. Hearing them will reverse the
amnesia.”

Nanami’s brow furrowed. “Like that thing in spy games where someone uses a code word, and the
hero suddenly starts acting like an agent for the enemy side?”

Not an exact comparison, but the gist of it was similar enough. “Yes.”

Her voice shook, as if barely daring to hope. “So then…your amnesia wouldn’t be permanent?”

“No. And that is where you come in. If you are willing, I will give you the phrase to restore my memories. However…” He paused. “Nanami, you must be certain your friends and I are not in despair first.”

She frowned. “How would I do that?”

“I will allow Naegi Makoto to capture us.” Naegi was the only person naïve enough to try and help them. Gekkogahara might, but the probability was higher with the Ultimate Hope. “He will need to contact Gekkogahara about using the Neo World Program. If, after he does, he goes missing or is found dead, it will be highly likely that the program failed to rehabilitate your classmates.”

“Because they’ll have killed him,” she said sadly.

“Yes.” He supposed there was a chance Enoshima’s AI would let Naegi live, but trapping him in the Neo World Program forever was hardly a kinder fate. “The Neo World Program is likely to have its completion announced to the Foundation, given the possibilities it holds in countering despair. So pay attention to the program’s state, and pay attention to the events of the Future Foundation.”

Nanami took a deep breath and sat back down. Shakily, she rubbed at her eyes, avoiding his gaze. Silence settled, interrupted only by the occasional little hiccup from the young woman and the game’s music in the background. It was oppressive, and Izuru felt the rare urge to keep speaking, to break it.

Slowly, he extracted her hairpin from his pocket and placed it on the table. “…I will return this to you. I imagine you want it back.” It hurt, returning it. It didn’t make sense. It was just a hairpin.

But his chest had warmed to receive it, despite the triviality.

Her lower lip quivered as she stared at the little spaceship. Then her face morphed into a determined expression as she pushed it back over to him. “No. No, I’m not taking it back. Because — because it’s not finished doing its job!”

Izuru blinked as she stabbed a finger at him, trying to look firm despite the tearstains still fresh on her cheeks. “This isn’t an ending I like, so I’ll keep working hard until we can all reunite. Me and my friends and you. I don’t know what’ll happen after, but that is an ending I’d be happy with, because we’d all be together, and that’s worth fighting for. So I won’t accept that hairpin back until we reach it!”

It had been a long time since Izuru had heard her so resolute. Not since that maze. *Hope again…*

He…wanted it to win. He shouldn’t. He should remain impartial to the experiment. But that tug, that desire, for her to be right and hope to be the stronger side, was there. How odd.

“We up up down down left right left right b a,” he stated. “That will be the trigger.”

She choked out a laugh. “The Konami code?”

“It is both something that I am unlikely to accidentally hear and something you can easily remember.”
“It’s a good choice.” Nanami sighed. Slowly, she moved to shut off the console, leaving a sudden, stark silence as the music halted. For a moment she stood there, head bowed and fingers splayed over her eyes. Her body posture was slumped, a tiredness in the cast of her shoulders that had not existed a few minutes ago. It was a predictable reaction, high emotional whiplash tended to have that effect on a person, but it bothered him to see her so downcast.

Finally, she looked at him. “I’m sorry for yelling at you. It just…felt like our time together meant so little to you,” she whispered, and there was something so broken and sad in her eyes. “That I meant so little you thought nothing of throwing me away.”

That was not the message he’d intended to send. He had predicted she might misinterpret his initial words, but even so he still, somehow, felt troubled. He was responsible for inflicting that despair on her, and he would likely be responsible for more. That knowledge…it nauseated him.

“Nanami,” Izuru said, standing up and walking to her side, “I ran through every scenario, and this was the one with the highest probability of success. It is something I must do, for myself. But that necessity does not make our time together worthless in my view. Quite the contrary; the year I spent with you was the most content of my existence.”

She stared up at him, eyes very wet, and that was—the way she was looking at him—he couldn’t comprehend it. Something was very heavy in the air. He gazed back at her, distinctly aware of their close proximity and the increased pace of his heart’s beatings.

Finally, she rested her forehead against his chest and closed her eyes. “Just…tomorrow. Give me tomorrow.”

Izuru found himself unable to refuse her.

It was a good tomorrow, as long as Chiaki didn’t think about what lay at the end of it. By some miraculous luck—probably Kamukura-kun’s, actually—it was her day off, so she didn’t even have to call in sick. They stayed indoors, to remove the need for her disguise, so she could have one last day with him as herself. They did every activity Chiaki could think of: video games and watching comedies and hair braiding and anything that she could look back and smile at.

She did not think about how devastated she’d been last night, or how foolish she felt for thinking a normal, boyfriend-girlfriend relationship with Kamukura-kun was even possible. Those thoughts tried to creep in, but every time she shoved them down and focused on “the year I spent with you was the most content of my existence”. The fact he was trying to plan for a way to bring his memories back. The fact he trusted and relied on her.

She wouldn’t gloss over his faults, or the bad parts. She’d face them when it didn’t hurt so much. But she wouldn’t forget the good parts, either. Even though it hurt…she never wanted to forget him.

“One more game?” she pleaded, the back of her neck prickling with awareness of how late the hour was.

He shook his head slightly, fixing her with a hard, red stare. “It is time for me to go, Nanami.”

She slumped. “…I know.” Outside, the sun was setting, a single golden beam breaking through the cracks in her curtains and slanting on the floor between them. A phenomenon, in this day and age; times when the sky temporarily returned to normal were not unheard of, but quite rare. It was bitterly fitting that such a devastating parting be marked by such a special occasion.
Indecision warred in Chiaki as she followed Kamukura-kun to the door. There should be a goodbye here, right? Some proper speech, an affirmation of how much he meant to her before a long parting. A confession. That was how it worked in video games. But she didn’t want to. Because it would feel like an actual goodbye if she did.

*But what if it is? What if you don’t say anything and something happens and you carry that regret forever again?*

She bit her lip, wrestling with her fears as Kamukura-kun gazed at her a moment longer, something indiscernible in his eyes. Then he turned, placing a hand on the doorknob.

*If you just do it, things will turn out okay… But what if they don’t? What if this is the last time you ever see him? What if it’s just like—*

“I love you!” she blurted out.

He stopped. He did not look at her, and Chiaki fiddled with her fingers, half-wishing she could see his expression and half-grateful she didn’t have to. It made this easier. “I don’t really know what I’m doing, and I know you’re going to forget this, but I just…I just wanted you to know, okay? Because I don’t—”

“Hinata-kun!”

He paused, turning. The sunset cast his face in a sharp contrast of light and shadow, bringing out his green eyes. He looked so handsome then, touched by gold, and the words Chiaki wanted to say, the words to tell him how precious he was to her, stuck in her throat. She didn’t know why she suddenly felt the urge to confess to him; it was just a feeling. A feeling that he was going somewhere and wouldn’t be returning.

*But…if she said them out loud…she couldn’t take them back. And that was paralyzing. This wasn’t a video game where she could reload if she made the wrong choice. She wouldn’t get a do-over. She didn’t have a guide to tell when his affection meter was full. What if he didn’t feel the same, and then found it too awkward to hang out with her anymore?*

She chickened out. “…sorry. It’s nothing.”

*She was just imagining things, she told herself as Hinata-kun smiled, a little sadly. Of course he’d come back.*

*She’d tell him later.*

She stared, swallowing hard. “…I don’t want any more partings with things left unsaid.”

Finally, he faced her. Chiaki searched his expression for any emotion, but it was carefully blank, unreadable. But now that she’d gotten the biggest part out, she couldn’t stop. She didn’t know where the words were coming from; they just seemed to be bubbling up and out of an inner wellspring, uncontrollable and rapid. “I promise I’m not trying to change your mind, or manipulate you into staying, or anything like that. I just wanted you to know, because—there’s more to you than your talent. You’re patient. You’re reliable. You never hesitate to say what’s on your mind. You aren’t kind, but you’re capable of great kindness.”

Kamukura-kun still did not answer. She stepped closer, tilting her head back to look into his eyes. “You’re loved, okay? Not for your talent. For you.”

The wellspring ran dry. And actually…Chiaki felt kind of satisfied. Whether he returned her
feelings or not…he deserved to know he was a person who could be loved. Peace settled in her as he considered her words, his eyes half-lidded. And then the most amazing thing happened.

He smiled.

…No, not exactly. Calling it a smile was generous. It was really nothing more than a softening of his face, a bit of warmth in his eyes, an acute upturn of his lips. But though it was slight, it was the most beautiful thing she’d seen. Her heart tripped over itself, and she couldn’t stop a grin of her own spreading in response. *I finally did it…I finally made him smile.*

“…Thank you, Nanami.”

Then, to Chiaki’s surprise, he reached out and oh-so-gently touched her cheek, light as a feather. His eyes looked very far away. “I am not adept at emotions and expression,” he said, slowly, “But Hinata loved you. That I am certain of. I do not think I understood it fully when I first realized… even now I still do not quite understand. Still, those feelings continued to exist, and now they are mine as well. I would even estimate they have grown.”

Chiaki couldn’t even begin to describe the feeling that overcame her then. It was like…it was like she was flying. It was like she’d beaten the hardest game ever and all her friends were applauding. It was better than either of those. Her smile spread and spread until it felt like it filled her entire face. He’d had a very roundabout way of saying things, but she understood him perfectly.

“I’m glad!” she hiccupped. “I’m really, really glad… Even though I didn’t need to hear it back…I’m still glad I got to.”

And then, because she was riding on waves of jubilation and impulse and love, she stood on her tiptoes and took his face in her hands and kissed him. She was clumsy and fumbling and probably not very good. But his lips were soft and warm, and he was returning the kiss, one hand just barely touching her waist, and it made electricity race up and down her spine all the way to her toes. Her heart swelled until it felt like it would burst, because oh, she loved it. She loved him.

She was breathless when they finally pulled away. “Should I have asked?” she murmured, suddenly fearing her selfishness had caused her to disregard his own wants.

“No.” His warm breath ghosted over her face, and she shivered. His hair was falling like a curtain around them, creating their own little world. Taking advantage of him still being slightly stooped over—he was so *tall*—Chiaki leaned her forehead against his.

“This isn’t goodbye. We’ll meet again. …We’ll definitely make it happen.”

“The outcome may not—”

“We’ll make it happen,” she stressed. “Because…even if things turn out bad, we can change them. We’re in control of our futures. If we just try, things will turn out okay.” *It isn’t a matter of whether I believe that’s true anymore or not…rather, I have to believe it’s true.*

There it was again, that minuscule hint of a smile. “Then, I suppose…I’ll entrust that future to your hope.”

For a long, long moment they stood there, foreheads pressed together, gazing into each other’s eyes as the sun disappeared below the horizon.

“I’ll see you later, Kamukura-kun.”
“…See you later.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: That last scene was intentionally written to parallel Chiaki’s goodbye to Hajime in Episode 3, for those curious.

Yep, much as it sucks, it had to happen. Hajime’s speech in Side:Hope doesn’t work if he doesn’t think Chiaki is dead, and as wonderful as it would be to say “oh, the Neo World Program just messed with his memories”…it’s too contrived. And Izuru plans for every possibility. He knows there’s a chance he might come out of the program worse than he went in, and he knows what people in despair do to their loved ones. Erasing his memories was the only logical outcome. Hypnosis actually can do that, by the way! It’s not recommended since it doesn’t really solve the problem (subconsciously you still retain the associated feelings), but Izuru’s goal is just losing his memories of Chiaki, not his feelings for her.

But hey, at least Chiaki knows it’s not forever and got around to confessing. And even got the sentiment returned! Take what you can get? I’m so sorry for the pain cinnamon roll…
Chiaki sorely wished she hadn’t put off reading those extra notes. But she’d been too depressed to read them after Kamukura-kun left, and then it had been the next day, and suddenly she had an appointment at 10 AM she hadn’t prepared for. She scanned them on the subway ride over, toast jammed in her mouth, brain shifting through stock phrases and techniques to form some kind of game plan. Still, when she walked into the office, she felt the kind of dread that came from going up against a tough boss without any proper equipment.

The office was not hers, or at least not hers alone. It was set aside for the interns to share, and so none of them could personalize it. Therefore, it was rather plain, with beige wallpaper, cushy white chairs and couches, and a desk. Chiaki sat behind it, fingers jittering against her leg as she glanced at the clock. She wished she had one of her consoles to calm her down. She resisted the urge to take out her phone and play a mobile game—that wouldn’t make a good first impression.

After a few minutes, the door opened and Nakajima Kanon strode in, exuding confidence and command. Her heavy makeup was garish under the room’s bright lighting, and again Chiaki was reminded uncomfortably of Enoshima.

Swallowing down her nerves, Chiaki smiled at her. “Hi there! Make yourself at home. I’m Watanabe Keiko, therapist intern at the seventh branch, and—”

“They couldn’t even get me a real therapist?” Nakajima-san interrupted, eyebrows pulling down into a deeper scowl as she sank onto the couch. “That’s so wack.”

From what the notes said, Nakajima Kanon had been brought in as a tense teenage bundle of anger, hate, grief, and confusion. While Hagakure-kun’s report tried to paint her as nicely as possible, it had still admitted she held a dislike for the Future Foundation, and she’d been described as staring coldly at the employees on the helicopter ride back. With her arms crossed and body curled defensively into itself, that animosity seemed to have followed her in.

Antagonistic from the start went down on the paper, the pencil’s movement sharp and jarring with restrained vexation. “I may not have a license, but I did study and work hard for this position. And I have plenty of resources and people to help me handle your case. So while I have zero experience, I am trained.”

“Right…” The teenager fell silent. From her closed-off behavior to the way she seemed to be gauging Chiaki, it seemed Nakajima-san wouldn’t be the first to talk. So it was up to her.

She exhaled, slowly, telling herself to lock away her issues. Diplomacy was important. Another breath, and—okay. Okay, she could do this. How to start? All the questions she should ask seemed too personal. Oh god, I’m going to mess up. “You don’t seem very comfortable. Have you seen a
“No, I haven’t, and no, there isn’t.”

She took a guess. “Then, is it because I’m with Future Foundation?”

Nakajima-san’s eyes widened slightly. Then she nodded, face closed off.

Should she ask why? This was way too soon for that kind of question, wasn’t it? She tried anyway.

For a very, very brief moment she saw Nakajima-san tense. Her hands curled into fists and her eyes flashed dangerously. She almost looked like she was considering attacking her. Chiaki swallowed, throat drying. Patients assaulting their therapists wasn’t unheard of, and there was a panic button under her desk for if she ever felt in danger. She told herself she wouldn’t need it, she’d learned self-defense for exactly this reason, but the report had painted Nakajima-san as such a strong warrior...would she really be able to protect herself? Despite herself, her finger strayed towards the button.

Then the younger girl visibly, forcibly exhaled. The tension in both their bodies drained away. “Mind your own business.”

Okay. Sore subject, then. “Alright, we don’t have to talk about it if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You’re not gonna push me?”

“No,” Chiaki said, surprised. “Why’d you think I would?”

“Because therapists are super nosy and self-important, right? And Future Foundation’s super nosy and self-important. So you combine the two…” Nakajima-san spread her hands. “You get a totally wack double-whammy.”

“That’s an interesting phrase.” Her hand jotted down the slang and the jab at the Future Foundation. The notes weren’t lying...she really does have a problem with us. “Well, I won’t lie—I am here to ask questions. That’s my job. But it’s also my job to help you, and forcing you to talk won’t do that.”

A derisive snort. “Yeah, but your inexperience doesn’t do onders-way for my onfidence-cay.”

Should she put her foot down? Probably. She needed to be polite but not a pushover. Chiaki let just the tiniest bit of steel enter her tone. “Nothing will get done if you don’t even give me a chance, Nakajima-san.”

Silence. Then a sigh. “Fine. I did promise that idiot I’d give it a try.”

Chiaki smiled. “Thank you! So, first I’ve got a questionnaire for you to fill out, just some basic information…”

The session went…alright, Chiaki thought. Deciding not to ruin the fragile trust she was trying to build, she had steered the conversation away from any topics related to the Future Foundation. Instead, she asked about Nakajima-san’s captivity and how she was readjusting. ‘That idiot’ Nakajima-san had mentioned turned out to be Hagakure-kun, who she’d met in Towa City. She’d given only a vague account of how they’d met and their adventures, but it seemed like they did have an odd sort of friendship. By the end of the session, Chiaki’s papers were covered with notes on everything from Nakajima-san’s verbal tics to the cocky relish she’d described destroying
Monokumas with.

“Well, we’re done here,” she smiled. “Thank you again for your cooperation. I’ll see you next week, same time?”

“I guess,” Nakajima-san muttered, shrugging. She’d remained reserved throughout the session, but at least she wasn’t actively antagonistic anymore. Still, Chiaki couldn’t stop remembering that brief moment when she thought the younger girl was going to attack her, the fear that had seized her body.

When her client had gone, Chiaki made her way to her supervisor’s office to review. It was an orderly room, with diplomas hanging on the walls, alphabetized bookshelves, and steel-stained filing cabinets. Ueno Fumio was a man in his late forties, obviously not entirely Japanese by his much darker skin and broader features. Chiaki had heard more than a few scathing comments directed at him for his mixed heritage, but most didn’t say it to his face; he had a notoriously sharp tongue and a high rank. They weren’t particularly close; they didn’t have a lot in common, and he was too impersonal. But she did trust his experience and insights.

She sat down across from him and waited. He was filling out some more notes, and Chiaki fidgeted, trying not to feel like she was sitting before the principal. After a few more minutes of his pen scratching the paper, Ueno-sensei placed them aside and crowned his fingers, peering at her over the tips. In his hoarse voice, he said, “So, you just got back from your first session. Congratulations. How did you feel?”

“She scared me,” Chiaki confessed, flushing with shame just for saying it. “It felt like just mentioning the words ‘Future Foundation’ was inviting an attack. I had to dance around that, and then I got unsure of what else I could bring up, so I just ended up playing it safe.”

Enoshima’s face flashed through her mind’s eye again. Stop. Stop associating Nakajima-san with Enoshima just because of her makeup. It’s not her fault…

Ueno-sensei raised his eyebrows. “Is that going to be a problem, working with her?”

Chiaki knew what he was offering—to refer Nakajima-san to someone else, if she felt like she couldn’t handle her. But it was her first case, how bad would it look if she wanted to quit after just the first session, just because she had issues? “…No sir. I’m just worried about how well I can do this, especially if she hates us.”

“You’re trained. You’ll do fine. I’ve told you before to stop second-guessing yourself. You’re the therapist, she’s the patient. You need to be more assertive.” He stood up, briskly picking up a sheaf of paper and handing it over. “Now, your schedule for the rest of the day…”

And so her first official therapy began. Once a week, at 10 AM, Nakajima-san would come in and Chiaki would spend fifty minutes trying to get her to open up. She was difficult to work with; Chiaki did have some experience with bossy, aggressive people—of her classmates, Saionji-san especially had been hard to win over, and even she had to take her in small doses—but complicating things were her own feelings towards the girl. She was ashamed to say she couldn’t help feeling afraid of her, and the uncertainty of a first case and fear of messing up made her slow and cautious. Other than that, there was only one other change in her schedule.

Covering a yawn, Chiaki’s eyes trailed dully over the words on the screen. The seventh division’s archives were stored digitally and accessible to anyone with clearance. Her internship pass didn’t allow much, though, definitely not enough to take a look at current projects. She was starting to
think there really was no way to track the Neo World Program until its completion was announced. Guess I can give up any hope of joining...though if they're as late in production as Kamukura-kun said, they’re probably getting into specialized territory, so I doubt I could offer much...

“Watanabe-san? Why are you still here?”

She jolted up, twisting so fast in her chair she almost fell over. “Gekkogahara-san! What are you doing here?”

The room was completely empty; she must have been absorbed to not notice the Ultimate Therapist rolling in. Although the seventh division’s computer lab was public and she hadn’t really been doing anything wrong, she still couldn’t help feeling an instinctive rush of guilt.

Gekkogahara-san arched an eyebrow. “I was leaving, and I saw through the open door. Your shift is over, right? Shouldn’t you have gone home by now?”

“Well, has the seventh division made any progress on that?”

The other woman hummed. “You have a particular reason for wanting to know, don’t you?”

Her heart almost stopped, but Gekkogahara-san’s tone wasn’t accusatory. Just gently inquiring. **She probably just senses I have hidden intentions, even if she doesn’t know what they are... therapists are scary sharp.** Exhaling, her fingers twisted the fabric of her skirt. “I-I just worry sometimes. What if what we’re doing isn’t enough? What if our only option is more violence, and things degenerate again?”

Gekkogahara-san's response was immediate and certain. “I don’t believe that will happen. I believe there’s always a non-violent solution, if you look hard enough. I can’t give you any specifics on our projects, but rest assured we do have several promising ones in the works. Hypothetically, they could revolutionize anti-despair therapy as we know it, and by doing so stop the Remnants in a peaceful manner!”

“So you’d give even the Remnants a second chance?”

She seemed to choose her words carefully. “Let’s say...I’d give them the benefit of the doubt. But that’s the reason I agreed to become branch head—because I wanted to help explore every avenue of possibility for dealing with them.” Usami laughed. “It sounds silly to say, but I guess you could say what I’m working on...is my hope. And once it’s done, it’ll be shared with the world. So don’t you worry! We’ll definitely find a way!”

*It sounds like Kamukura-kun was right, and she will be announcing the program’s completion after all...I figured the odds of him being wrong were low, but it’s still a relief. And it’s also reassuring to know my friends will be at the mercy of people like her and Naegi-kun. “I see... you’re a good person.”*
“No more than anyone else here. But thank you.”

As Chiaki logged off the computer and stood, Usami’s voice gave her pause. “Are you happy, Watanabe-san?”

She turned, blinking in surprise. The Ultimate Therapist was gazing up at her, eyebrows furrowed in a look of intense concentration. “Why do you ask that?”

“Every time I see you around, you’re always alone. And recently you’ve looked very sad. The other interns haven’t been shunning you, have they?”

“Oh. No, I just like being alone.” Untrue. But her fellows had noticed that she was never accepting their offers of hanging out, and eventually stopped asking. “And, um, recently, I’ve had some… personal stuff going on. That’s it.”

Thinking of Kamukura-kun was a double-edge sword. It sent her heart soaring every time she remembered their time together, his admittance of his own love for her, their kiss—she swore her lips were still tingling from that. And then, her heart would clench painfully when she remembered he was gone and had no idea she was alive. She missed him, and she was so afraid she’d mess up again.

We’ll see each other again. We have to.

Usami hummed. “I see. You know our therapy services extend to our own employees, right?”

“I-I know. I’ll sign up if I need to.” Hopefully that would reassure her. Because holy crap, the last thing Chiaki needed was being forced into therapy. Passing the requisite psychiatric evaluation, to see that she was suitable for her job, hadn’t been too bad, but having to consistently lie her way through therapy sessions would be a nightmare.

“Well, alright.” Gekkogahara-san turned away, rolling over to the door. “Have a good evening, Watanabe-san.”

She’d had a thought, a tentative one, for a while now. Something she had found while browsing the archives stuck in her mind, and after accepting that she wouldn’t find anything about the Neo World Program, Chiaki had started to hunt down resources about this new idea instead. Finally, a few weeks after her talk with Gekkogahara-san, after more failures to pull anything from Nakajima-san, Chiaki decided to put it into effect.

“What’s that?” Nakajima-san arched an eyebrow as Chiaki broke routine to sit next to her on the couch. She reached into the bag with her and pulled out her Game Girl Advance. Flicking it on with a smile, she turned it around so Nakajima-san could see the screen.

“It’s the first Power Pro Kun Pocket Baseball! I’ve been doing research about video game therapy, and since you were a baseball team manager, and your cousin was the Ultimate Baseball Player, I thought you might enjoy playing something about a familiar subject.”

The subject of video game therapy had fascinated her the moment she stumbled across it, that a talent she had once regarded as useless could not just make friends, but be beneficial to people. She’d been leery of bringing her games out, but she figured as long as no one saw her playing and realized how good she was, it’d be fine. It wasn’t as if the only people who liked video gamers were Ultimate Gamers, after all. Her excitement about her favorite subject had even chased away the unease she usually felt around the girl.
Nakajima-san seemed unimpressed as she looked at the title screen, with its cutesy series mascot and large kanji. “Like, how old is this thing? This stuff is so lame.”

“It’s not lame!” Chiaki barely bit back and you’re one to talk, using slang that dead. “It may just be a spin-off from the main series, but it helped pave the way for a very successful franchise, with fourteen entries! It combines baseball mechanics with RPG elements for seamless gameplay and has a storyline with multiple endings! It’s an amazing series!”

Nakajima-san’s eyes widened. “Whoa, geez, don’t get so defensive-day about it.”

Chiaki exhaled, trying to reign in her irritation. She could never get defensive when people mocked things she loved, whether it was games or people. But…ugh. She should really know better than to be so emotional. She was the therapist here, for goodness’ sake.

Shame for her conduct and another breath calmed her down. “You’re right…sorry. That was unprofessional of me.”

“I really didn’t expect you to be the type to like this stuff.” Nakajima-san’s eyebrows furrowed as she gingerly took the console. “Is this seriously what you want me to do this session? Just play wa—play video games?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“I think you’ll have fun, and it’ll help our relationship.” She smiled softly, remembering how much easier it had been to connect to her classmates, Hinata-kun, and Kamukura-kun once she started playing with them. “Even if people don’t play together, or if one person always wins…I feel they can still connect through video games. Give it a try!”

With a shrug, Nakajima-san started up a new game. Chiaki leaned in to watch her play, practically bouncing to talk about how great it was. She was certain the younger girl would love—

The brunette gave her a withering look. “Uh, personal boundaries, have you heard of them?”

And just like that, she recalled Enoshima, her mocking words and cutting tone as she ran that maze. All her excitement and joy drained out, and without meaning to, she shivered. Chiaki scooted away until there was a respectable distance between them. “Sorry.”

It didn’t work out the way Chiaki hoped. All the baseball genes must have gone to Kuwata-kun, because Nakajima-san was awful at it even in fiction. The RPG elements of this game added another layer of difficulty for her, having no experience with the genre. Chiaki’s coaching attempts grated on her nerves, and she snapped and got even more agitated, and that made her do worse, and—it was just bad all around.

By the end of the session, Nakajima-san had stormed out in frustration, and Chiaki was tiredly looking over all her meticulous notes on video game therapy, wondering how she could do so well with her friends, and so awfully here.

“It’s because you did it wrong,” Ueno-sensei scolded, sounding impatient when she told him about it. “Recreational types of therapy aren’t a ‘method of bonding’ or however you described it, they’re techniques to help with meeting therapeutic goals. This isn’t what I meant when I told you to be more assertive.”
“Sorry,” was all she could say, head ducked. She’d just gotten so excited, to hear about the possibilities of using her talent with her job… “I thought if she could relax, she’d have an easier time talking to me…” And maybe I’d find her less scary, too…but that backfired.

“While creating a relaxed atmosphere is important, you can’t treat her like a friend. She’s your client.”

She hunched over. But…I don’t know how to handle people I’m not friends with… It had worked in the simulations, thinking of them as friends, so…why not here? If she’d tried playing games with the simulation patients, would this have happened too?

Ueno-sensei sighed at her silence. She got the impression her slowness was irritating him. “Do you even know what goals you’re aiming for?”

“Helping her and the Towa City rescues to recover from their ordeal,” she defended. “I’m trying my best, but she won’t open up!”

“Then focus on that. I know you want to help, but don’t try to force it. After, if you think it would be beneficial, your client agrees and you can find a game she’d like, you can try your video game therapy again. If not, there are other methods available.”

“So, New Years’ is coming up. Do you have any plans, Nakajima-san?”

“That loser and his mom invited me to go to a shrine with them.” She was reading a fashion magazine today. Ever since that failed video game therapy attempt a month back, these sessions too-often devolved into awkward silences. The other girl had actually started bringing things to fill the time. “Don’t really have anything else to do, so I said yes.”

Celebrating a festival with a friend instead of her family…does that mean she has a poor relationship with family? Or…? “If aren’t going with your family, Nakajima-san, are they…?”

A long pause. Nakajima-san was staring very intently at her magazine. Then: “Yeah.” Though the word was said sharply, there was hollowness in it too. “They died in the Tragedy. I only found out after I got out of that city.”

The only family Nakajima-san ever talked about was her cousin, ‘Leon-oniichan’. Though he was dead, she was clearly filled with admiration for him; she could and had spent entire sessions just babbling on about how wonderful he’d been. Chiaki got the feeling she was a little too attached to him. But she was here to help, not judge, and there probably wasn’t any harm in her feelings since Kuwata-kun was dead.

But for all she spoke of her cousin, Nakajima-san devoutly avoided talking about her immediate family. For her to finally confess something like this…it meant real progress, right? “I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, you and everyone else who hears that.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

She scoffed, forcefully flipping the page. “Who would I talk to? Hagakure? You?”

That stung. “It’s what I’m here for.”

“But you’re intimidated by me.” Chiaki flinched under the weight of the accusation. Nakajima-san set the magazine down and glared. “You do a pretty good job of hiding it, but you are. I can tell. So
why should I trust someone who doesn’t trust me?”

She’s sharper than she lets on… Chiaki lowered her head.

“…You’re right, Nakajima-san. I have been wary of you. Scared, even, at times. Part of that is because of some old ghosts, part of that is because you make it very clear how little you think of the Future Foundation. And as a member, I can’t help but fear if that animosity extends to me. But it was wrong of me to let those unprofessional emotions get in the way of my job, and I apologize.”

A moment of silence. The younger girl sighed. “…Look, I don’t…I guess I can see why you’d think that. I have been pretty vocal about how much I hate the Future Foundation, but I’m not some wack thug who uses violence for everything. And you seem like an okay person. Really weird at times, but okay. So I wouldn’t, like…attack you or anything.”

Chiaki exhaled, feeling some indescribable knot in her chest loosen up. It felt…good to get that out in the open. It really was her fault for letting that distrust hang over them for as long as it had. Maybe now that they’d cleared the air, they could finally move forward as a proper therapist and patient. “I’m glad to hear that. Out of curiosity, Nakajima-san, why did you keep coming to these sessions if you didn’t trust me?”

Nakajima-san shrugged. “I dunno. I guess… I thought I didn’t really have a choice? Like, you’re the one the big wigs assigned, so it’s you or bust.”

“You don’t want to ‘bust’?” That was a good sign.

“I dunno,” she repeated. “That idiot’s mom—she likes keepings tabs on us—thought it was a good idea, and she’s got her head on straight, so…”

“Well, if you really want, I can help you look for another therapist, so you can talk to someone you actually trust. …I’ll understand if you decide to do that, after what I just admitted.” Though knowing it was because of her own failings as a therapist would stay with her for a long time.

For a scary moment, Nakajima-san looked as if she were considering it. Then she sighed and shook her head. “No…it’s fine. I think you, at least, are trying to be a good person. I still haven’t made up my mind about the rest of this organization, but I guess I can try trusting you a little more.”

“And I can try being less unprofessional and prejudiced moving forward. So,” Chiaki clasped her hands and leaned forward. “now that we’ve decided to start over: do you want to talk about it?”

“Nah.” But maybe she really did, because a few seconds later Nakajima-san continued, voice cracking, “It’s just wack, you know? Because you think Mom and Daddy are waiting for you when you get out, and it turns out they were murdered so some crazy cult could control the TV channels, and you ew-blay your last bit of money on some dumb fortune telling, but hey, no worry, you get everything from them, right? You’re set for life! It’s, like, so wack…so, you know, no point thinking about it.”

Empathy flooded Chiaki as she listened. Maybe that’s why she came to the Future Foundation… because she had nowhere else to go. “I think you should think about it, Nakajima-san. I mean, does bottling up your grief make you feel better?”

“…Not really,” Nakajima-san admitted in a low voice.

Another thought struck Chiaki. “Do Hagakure-kun and his mother know?”

“Yeah. That idiot wanted a reward for helping me, so he was one of the first to try and find my
“She scoffed, a bit of old fire returning. “He’s so lame, he never considered my parents might be dead… I’m sure the only reason he’s letting me stay now is because he’s hoping I’ll be grateful enough to pay him myself.”

“Really? You don’t think it might just be because he considers you a friend?”

“Yeah, right. Not after—” Nakajima-san broke off, looking away guiltily. Chiaki weighed whether to press her or not, and decided against it. At this point, she knew that pushing Nakajima-san would backfire.

“…How about an assignment, Nakajima-san? Before our next session, I want you to open up to Hagakure-kun, or his mom, or any friends you have, about your parents. You don’t have to say everything… just share a bit of the pain you feel and see what happens.” She still wasn’t entirely sure what she was doing, or what Nakajima-san’s grudge against the Future Foundation was…but she did have a goal now. If Nakajima-san saw that people around her cared, that would help, right?

“…I’ll ink-thay about it.”

This time, when the year ended, there was a celebration. She’d closed the windows to try and muffle the sound of fireworks to make things easier on Yumigami, but her poor rabbit was still shaking like a leaf. Through her curtains, there was the occasional flash of red or blue or green, exploding into existence as fireworks popped, before fading away. Chiaki hummed absently, popping mochi ice cream purchased from the street vendors into her mouth as she mashed the buttons on her controller, eyes trained on the zombies on her television screen.

The last New Year’s she’d really celebrated had been with all her friends. Running from stall to stall, playing games together, watching the fireworks, it had created such a happy memory. She’d been tempted to go out there tonight and relive the experience, but it was too lonely to go by herself.

During the countdown to midnight, she paused her game, went over to her fridge, and pulled out a cupcake. Placing it on the table, she added the picture she’d taken of herself and Kamukura-kun together so many months ago. Chiaki sat and tapped her fingers against her knee, unconsciously following the movements for the Konami code as she trained her eyes on the clock.

When the clock struck midnight and the ringing of bells filled the air outside, she said to the picture, “Happy birthday, Kamukura-kun.”

Then she blew out the candle on the cupcake and ate it, looking at the picture and hoping he was safe, wherever he was.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: UGH Kanon why do you have to use so much slang and Pig Latin do you know how annoying it is to write

Since this is Chiaki’s first case, I wanted to convey how her inexperience and, at the core, human nature, would impact it. While I do believe she’d try her best to get along with everyone and has the same kind of mellow personality as Makoto to generally succeed, I also believe she’s not immune to prejudices or snap emotions, and that her
overenthusiasm for certain things and social unawareness could grate on people less patient than Izuru. Not to mention, Kanon is kind of abrasive, hates Future Foundation, and is a gyaru, which I imagine Chiaki would subconsciously associate with Junko. It’s a recipe for tension. Hopefully y’all found everything in-character.

You’ve also probably noticed I’ve been gradually introducing some OCs, first in the background and now in some scenes. They aren’t going to take over the story, but I wanted the seventh division to feel like it has more people than just Chiaki and Miaya, so I hope y’all don’t mind.
Being an intern in the Future Foundation meant a huge shortage of free time. If you weren’t working, you were training. If you weren’t training, you were studying for your license. They got exactly one day off a week, and that was all that kept Chiaki going sometimes; she was still an introvert at heart and desperately needed her alone time.

At first, she’d tried to use her evenings to recuperate, but after one too many nights of oversleeping because she’d stayed up ‘til two in the morning playing video games, she’d been pulled aside and politely, to come in on time from now on. So she shifted things around until she only played for three or so hours in the evening, and all day on her day off and holidays, and that was just enough.

That said, while the bustle of her job was exhausting, there were things she loved about it. Helping people was an obvious one, but she also quite enjoyed getting to practice her marksmanship. There were two main places to train with a gun in the Future Foundation’s seventh division. The first was the shooting range, which was an ordinary room with the usual cardboard cut-out targets. That was where the interns had first learned the basics of shooting and gun care.

Beyond the range, on the same floor, was the combat simulation room. It was large, hexagonal, and five of the walls were covered with screens for near 360 degrees. On the sole blank wall by the door, hanging from hooks, were virtual reality headsets, modified from the ones Gekkogahara-san had the interns use for therapy simulations; weapons hooked up to the simulation, so it could register when one was fired; and a small computer to turn the entire thing on.

Rather than burning time and resources on constantly building and rebuilding training drones, the Future Foundation had decided combat simulations were a better way to hone one’s marksmanship. The ninth division’s R&D department had pulled from similar, existing technology and collaborated with several talented programmers to make it happen. It was ultimately a success; the simulation was even equipped with pain settings to make the experience more authentic, if one wanted, although there were safety precautions in place to prevent the brain from thinking it was dying. Still, Chiaki never used them. There was such a thing as too realistic.

That said, the simulation did have its limitations. The screens could only be interacted with by guns and Hacking Guns, meaning those who preferred melee weapons or even other ranged ones had to train elsewhere. It also wasn’t very good for actually testing weapons, seeing as everything, including the ammunition, was virtual. She’d heard that certain branches had access to actual robots, such as the ninth division, for trying out new weapons, and more combat-oriented divisions like the sixth. They also apparently had more elaborate combat training grounds, but she was just fine with this one. It already left her a bit awed as is.

“Watanabe!” was called, jolting her out of her thoughts. Right—they were in a training session. Stepping forth, Chiaki took the headgear from Honda-kun and strapped it on. She knew, without looking at the monitor on the wall, that its screen was playing the options available. If she were on
her own time, she could choose a number of waves to fight, she could set a timer and aim to ‘survive’ until it ran out, or she could even play out certain scenarios, like a hostage situation. But today, Hayami-sensei was controlling the program, and she wanted them to do waves. Five in total.

“It’s a go,” the scarred woman said, stepping away from the monitor. “Ten seconds, Watanabe.”

Chiaki took position in the middle of the room, finger flexing around the trigger of the gun as she mentally counted down the seconds. Exactly as she reached ten, the screens all around her lit up, the background a ruined urban area. She turned, watching a Monokuma blink into existence on a screen only three meters away. It immediately fixed its attention on her and, wasting no time, lunged, her headset making its movements appear 3D. It would actually reach her if she let it. *The wonders of technology…*

The red eye. The red eye was a weak spot. Trial and error had taught her that. This entire set-up was so close to a video game she could fall into the calm, singularly focused mindset of a shooter. Everything else faded away as she zeroed in, raised the gun, pulled the trigger—

*Bullseye.* The Monokuma exploded. No time to celebrate, the next one was already rushing her, jaws gaping and claws extended. She turned twenty degrees, aimed, fired, and turned away as it exploded too.

Moving slowly around in a circle for as wide a field of vision as possible, Chiaki brought down Monokuma after Monokuma. There were ten per wave, at first just coming in twos or threes, but soon they’d start rushing all at once. Occasionally one or two slipped past her notice, and the headset would beep loudly to inform her she’d been ‘hit’, a small display popping in the corner of her vision with the location in question highlighted in white.

At the end of each wave was a generic Remnant of Despair, eyes glowing red as it raised a gun. Those were the hardest for Chiaki to shoot, too human, too close to shooting her friends. But all she had to do was plaster Enoshima’s face over the Remnant’s, and the trigger would suddenly be much easier to pull.

When the last wave was through, she lowered the weapon and watched the results roll across the screen. Her accuracy rate was getting pretty close to ninety percent now, she noted with satisfaction. Briefly placing the gun down, she flexed her fingers once, twice, working out the stiffness.

“With scores like that, you should be in a combat division,” Hayami-sensei said pointedly as Chiaki stepped away. The older woman was leaning against the door frame, arms crossed, salt-and-pepper hair pulled in its usual tight braid.

This was an old argument—the grizzled combat instructor would nag at her to put her sharpshooting skills to better use, and Chiaki would politely refuse. The odds of encountering them were slim, tiny, almost non-existent…but the thought of running into her friends or Kamukura-kun, and being ordered to fight them, was too unbearable.

She pulled the headset off, careful not to catch it on her wig. “I don’t have the aptitude for it.”

“You can be overly emotional,” Hayami-sensei acknowledged. “But that can be trained out.”

“No thank you. Besides, I like giving therapy.” She thought of Nakajima-san, the subtle signs of improvement in the few weeks since their agreement. “It’s fulfilling work.”

A reluctant grunt. “Suppose I can’t argue with that. I’ve seen too many ghosts, and seen too many
friends with their own, to not respect the work you therapists do.” Hayami-sensei, from her understanding, used to be a member of Japan’s military before the Tragedy. A head injury had left her blinded in her left eye, so she’d been pulled off the front lines and reassigned to teaching. And that was where she’d stayed, even once she joined the Future Foundation.

Chiaki handed the equipment to the next intern and took her place along the back wall. Hayami-sensei moved over and asked, in a lower tone to keep the conversation private, “So, if you aren’t gunning to move to a combat division, why do you train so hard? I’ve seen you put more effort into these sessions than almost everyone else here.”

She watched the intern—Matsumoto-san, she thought her name was—go through the motions of the virtual combat. “Even if I don’t want to be a soldier, I still want to be able to protect the people who matter to me.” Then, quieter: “And I won’t be helpless again.”

_Maybe I can’t do anything for my friends now…but I’ll prepare. So if the day comes where they do need me to protect them, I can._

And just maybe, if she trained hard enough and got strong enough, she could stop seeing that maze and hearing Enoshima’s taunts when she slept.

After more consulting with Ueno-sensei, Chiaki had decided that her primary focus would be helping Nakajima-san through her grief. Whatever other issues the girl had, this was something she felt confident tackling. Ever since Nakajima-san had confirmed she’d confided in Hagakure-san—Hagakure-kun being ruled “too lame” to share her pain with—she’d seemed a little lighter. And though that fear kept briefly seizing her whenever she saw the makeup, Enoshima’s grin dancing before her eyes, Chiaki was doing much better at not letting it affect her.

“…Mom’s eyes popped when she saw the price tag, but Daddy was all ‘honey, it’s nothing if it makes our princess happy’. God, she was always so wack about stuff like that. Always went ‘but we need to save it just in case’ even though we had, like, more yen than I could count.”

It was a crisp, late January morning. Though a chill wind blew through the streets outside, Nakajima-san was wearing a short skirt and halter top under her winter coat. She was certainly determined to keep to what was fashionable, even if not exactly warm. “Hm, so you were closer to you dad than your mom?”

“Well yeah, but it’s not as if we hated each other or anything. My first attempt at makeup? I thought it was super hot at the time, but it was really sooooooo awful. Mom’s the one who taught me to do it properly.” Nakajima-san stopped, breath hitching.

Chiaki nudged the box of tissues closer. She was sitting on the couch with Nakajima-san today, at a respectful distance. The younger girl waved the tissue away, staring very firmly at the floor, hands fisting around her skirt. She’d been a bit more receptive to talking about her parents; Chiaki hoped that by encouraging her to share stories about her family, she could maintain a healthy connection to them while dealing with her grief.

Deciding it was time for a change in subject, she brought up her client’s wardrobe. “Well, I admire your dedication. Fashion must mean a lot to you if you’re willing to wear those heels every day.”

“Actually, not really.” _That_ sent Chiaki’s eyebrows rising, and Nakajima-san elaborated, “Believe it or not, but I used to be one of those totally frumpy types. Couldn’t tell Egoist from EMODA.”

Chiaki decided not to mention she didn’t even know what those were. “Oh really? I never would
“Leon-oniichan,” Nakajima-san answered with a sigh, a dreamy smile spreading. “He thought this type of girl was cute. And he was my most important person, so it was no oblem-pray switching up my attire for him.”

“I…see.” Chiaki frowned, a concerning thought occurring to her. “Did he ask you to do that? Pressure you somehow?”

“I wish,” she said mournfully. “But nothing I’ve ever done got him to look at me like that. All I could ever do was follow him and become his team manager and confess.”

“It sounds like he didn’t accept.”


She blinked in surprised. “You confessed more than once?”

“Well duh. I wasn’t going to let a little rejection stop me.”

That little bit of concern grew exponentially. Sure, she’d heard Nakajima-san’s thoughts on Kuwata-kun before, and she’d guessed her feelings for him by now. And she was hardly going to judge, she was sure people would regard her feelings for someone they thought was a terrorist unnatural, but…listening to how much Nakajima-san’s life was influenced by her cousin, how persistent she was about him…

It wasn’t…it wasn’t healthy, to revolve around a single person that much, was it?

Nakajima-san must have read some of her thoughts in her face, because her expression became defensive. “Hey, don’t give me that ook-lay! It’s natural to want to be around the one you love, isn’t it?!”

Chiaki started, pen drawing a sharp black line across her paper. “Well, yes, but not all the time. I mean, you should make some time for yourself, too.”

A snort. “Oh, trust me, I have nothing but that now.”

“That’s not what I meant… I meant you shouldn’t define yourself entirely by your relationship with one person.”

“Why not?” Nakajima-san asked plaintively. “We’re defined by our relationships and our emotions anyway, right? What does it matter if it’s just with one person-pay instead of a group?”

“Because—what’s left for you, if something happens to that one person?”

Nakajima-san’s eyes darkened. “Something already has. And I’m fine, aren’t I?” There was an edge to her tone, and, sensing danger, Chiaki bowed away. Changed the subject to something harmless, an inane question about how Nakajima-san’s attempts to go back to school were.

But on her clipboard, out of Nakajima-san’s sight, she hesitantly wrote and underlined, *romantic feelings border on obsession? May eclipse sense of personal identity?*

A bit of anxiety gnawed at Chiaki when Nakajima-san didn’t show up for the next session, but she forced it down. She was going to trust the younger girl wasn’t skipping. She might have just gotten sick and forgotten to call. Smartness might be one of Nakajima-san's strengths, but common sense
was not.

When the second week came and she still didn't show, Chiaki decided to try calling her. Her worry grew when Nakajima-san didn't pick up. Emails went unanswered, and all other calls went to unanswered voicemails.

As the third session approached, she finally changed tactics and emailed the only person she knew Nakajima-san was in contact with—Hagakure-kun. And from him, she learned Nakajima-san had told him and his mother her therapist had released her from the sessions. Chiaki couldn't exactly describe the feeling that settled over her then. Shock, first. Then hurt because she'd honestly thought they had agreed to move past this, and hadn't things been better for the past month? Then anger.

Once she cleared it up, Hagakure-kun had reassured her he'd get Nakajima-san in for her next session, but still, Chiaki was skeptical. He didn't exactly seem the reliable type. But he came through, because next week the teenager was back in her office, her arms crossed and her face a sharply drawn portrait of hard lines.

Deciding it best not to start on a sour note, Chiaki smiled, but didn't let it reach her eyes. “It’s good to see you again. But we need to talk.”

The girl shifted and did not respond.

“Hagakure-kun said you told him and his mother I’d released you from the sessions. Why did you lie?”

“I want to quit.”

Though Chiaki had guessed that, it was still unpleasant to hear it in such a blunt manner. “Why’s that?”

“Cause I do.”

Just like they’d stepped back in time. Chiaki fought the sudden surge of irritation at her client’s childishness—she thought they’d been doing better. “Nakajima-san, if you think you’ve met your goal, we need to talk about that to make sure. And then I need to prepare you for the post-treatment experi—”

“It’s got nothing to do with that,” the girl bit out. “I want to quit because you want me to forget Leon-oniichan!”

Of all the things Chiaki had been expecting, that wasn’t it. Startled, flustered, she asked, “What—”

Nakajima-san leapt to her feet, stabbing a finger accusingly. “I figured it out last time I was here! All those questions, that discouraging, you were trying to make me forget Leon-oniichan! Don’t try to deny that!”

“I haven’t, I promise! I was just concerned about how devoted to him you are!”

The younger girl wasn’t listening, or maybe she was just ignoring her. “It’s bad enough you Future Foundation posers failed to save him, but to try and make me forget my feelings? To try and make him less important? That’s unforgivable! How dare you?!”

Clarity struck Chiaki right then. “Is that why you hate the Future Foundation? You blame us for Kuwata-kun’s death?”
“Of course that’s why!” Nakajima-san spat. “You paraded yourselves as ‘saviors’, and then when the time came you couldn’t even rescue a group of high school students!”

“Nakajima-san, the Foundation tried its hardest to save Class 78. Enoshima’s defenses were just too much.”

“Bullshit! You could have tried harder, or been faster, or smarter, or…or something! You could have done something differently!”

“Nakajima-san—”

“And after you let them sacrifice and kill each other, you welcomed the murderers into your ranks with open arms! You’re all a damn bunch of hypocrites, liars and failures!”

“None of them wanted to kill each other—”

“Shut up! Just shut up!”

She finally got a word in edgewise. “Why are you so intent on hating the Foundation?”

“Because if I don’t, I won’t have anything left!” Nakajima-san shrieked. “Leon-oniichan died because of the Future Foundation, a-and he was my entire world, and now I don’t have anything! Not Mom and Daddy, no friends, nothing!”

“What about Hagaku—”

Nakajima-san stormed over, grabbed her by the lapels of her blazer, and screamed in her face, “I tried to murder him! Do you understand, you stupid therapist? I tried to murder him! There’s no way he’d consider me a friend after that!”

Silence. Her heart was racing in her chest, the forgotten fear of her client resurging. Without realizing it, her hands had already come up, one reaching over to grab Nakajima-san’s far wrist, the other raised to bring the elbow down onto her arms and break the grip. She didn’t even have to think about it. Just: danger, defend.

It should probably be comforting that she knew these maneuvers well enough to do them instinctively, but instead Chiaki’s mind was churning over what her client had inadvertently confessed.

Nakajima-san…tried to murder someone?

How did you respond to that?

The girl before her had tried to kill someone in cold blood.

If she’d tried to kill a Future Foundation employee, wasn’t that grounds for arrest? No, forget that, trying to kill anyone was a crime.

What was she supposed to do? Turn her in? But that would break her confidentiality, wouldn’t it?

What do I do?

As her silence dragged on, the younger girl’s gaze dropped, running over Chiaki’s defensive posture. Surprise crossed her face, as if she hadn’t even realized she’d grabbed her. Her grip loosened and her head bowed. Nakajima-san’s voice shook as she croaked, “I tried to murder him because he’s Future Foundation. A-And instead of getting mad like a normal person, he had to be some lame weirdo and s-save my life, a-and his mom’s so nice, and so are all the other refugees...a-
and even you lot! You Future Foundation lame-os a-aren’t so lame after all, and do you know how wack th-that is? Because…because…"

Chiaki stayed very still, something deep inside her whispering not to interrupt. Slowly, Nakajima-san released her completely and stepped back, one hand rising to clutch the pale flesh of her other arm. She seemed like a deflated balloon, shrunk up and small.

“…Because if I’m wrong…” she whispered, “i-if the Future Foundation isn’t responsible for Leon-oniichan’s death… I’ll have nothing. My r-revenge…the only reason I could keep going…will be…no…thing…”

A choked noise escaped her throat, and she turned her head away, sinking down against the couch and wrapping her arms around her knees. Guilt, Chiaki realized, watching her shoulder shake with silent sobs, she’s being eaten alive by guilt. Guilt for attempting to kill Hagakure-kun, and guilt for beginning to heal from her grief, and just maybe guilt for knowing, deep down, she was wrong to want revenge.

She didn’t know whether the right thing was turning her client in. She didn’t know if Nakajima-san was all that stable right now, or if it was safe to approach her. But she did know she wanted to help. Quietly, Chiaki asked, “Is it okay if I hug you, Nakajima-san?”

She was crying too hard to respond. So, swallowing down her fear, Chiaki went over and wrapped her arms around the younger girl. “You wouldn’t have nothing, Nakajima-san. You have people who care about you. Remember when I asked you to confide in someone you know? They supported you, didn’t they?”

Nakajima-san glanced up at that. Her mascara was running, leaving black watercolor streaks across her cheeks. Shaking her head, she insisted, “It’s…just because of my money…”

“Are you so sure, Nakajima-san? Have any of them asked for money, or expensive gifts, or tried to coax a reward out of you?” God, she hoped none of them had. Messing up here would probably leave Nakajima-san even worse than before. Sweat broke out on her forehead at that realization, but she managed to keep her voice gentle and steady.

The younger girl slowly shook her head again, and inwardly Chiaki sighed in relief. “See? People help you because they care about you. Hagakure-kun isn’t mad because he’s probably forgiven you. Past mistakes don’t define our futures.”

“Are you gonna tell the Future Foundation? About me trying to kill him?”

Damn, she was hoping for more time to figure that out herself. “…I won’t tell them what you’ve confided in me. But if you’re still going to try revenge, I think I’ll probably have to. I can’t let other people get hurt.”

Her client was disturbingly quiet. Chiaki pleaded, “Please don’t keep going down this path.”

In a small voice, she protested, “But if I don’t try to take revenge, a-and if I try to move on, it’s dishonoring Leon-oniichan and my parents!”

“Why do you think that?”

“B-Because I’m not as sad anymore, when I think about them! That’s wrong of me!”

“No, Nakajima-san, it’s not. That’s just a part of the healing process. You never stop missing them, but the pain goes away.”
Releasing her, Chiaki smiled and passed her a tissue. Nakajima-san stared at it as if it held all the answers to the universe. “You can move on without forgetting your loved ones, Nakajima-san. It’s not a dishonor to them. I’m sure they’d want you to be happy.”

The younger girl just blew her nose. “But I don’t…”

“You don’t what?”

“I don’t know how, okay? I don’t know how, without Leon-oniichan.”

“And that’s what I’m here for. To help you learn how.” Chiaki smiled, best she could. “I can help you decide for yourself what to live for. Find things other than revenge and game overs.”

When her silence continued to drag out, Chiaki encouraged, “How about for next week, you come up with two lists? On one, I want you to write down things you enjoy in your life. It can be anything from people to hobbies to even something like your slang.” Nakajima-san let out a choked, gurgling laugh. “On the other, I want you to write down any ideas you have about what to do. You were a baseball team manager before the Tragedy, so—”

“No.” Nakajima-san shook her head. “No, I—it was only because of Leon-oniichan…I can’t go back to that when he’s—gone. It’d…it’d just remind me of him too much.”

“Alright. That’s okay. But anything you think you’d like to do. Skills you want to learn. Places you want to go. Even if you think it’s silly or impossible, write it down anyway. Because if you just do it, things will just work out somehow.”

“Oh my gawd,” the teenager sniffled, “that’s so cheesy it’s wack.”

Chiaki grinned—Nakajima-san must be starting to feel better if her snippiness was coming back. “Hm, maybe. But I feel there’s a grain of truth in it. You can always pick yourself up and start again if you’re alive.

“So, will you do the lists?” At the shaky nod she continued, “Then next week we’ll look them over and talk about them. Okay?”

Another nod.

“Please don’t go through with revenge, or…anything else. I want to see you here next week, healthy and not in jail or a hospital. Okay?”

“…Okay.”

It’d be okay. Somehow, in the end, it’d be okay.

“…But I think this obsession is the root of all her problems,” she surmised, and waited for Ueno-sensei’s answer. After sitting with Nakajima-san and comforting her for the rest of the session, she’d immediately sought her supervisor’s advice. Client details were shared, it was a requirement, but he also had a confidentiality contract and lacked full details on Nakajima-san’s personal information. It protected her privacy as best as it could while giving him enough to help Chiaki.

Ueno-sensei nodded from his position by the open office window, rolling a cigarette in his fingers. He took a long drag, looking down at the streets below. “So, what do you think you should do about it?”
She sighed, twisting the straps of her purse around in her hands. “I…honestly don’t know. I don’t even know where to begin tackling something like that.”

Her supervisor took another drag from the cigarette. From what Chiaki could see of his face, it seemed pondering. “In my opinion, it sounds like it’s time to refer her to someone else.”

“Ueno-sensei!” Chiaki protested. He shot her his ‘be quiet and listen’ glare, stepping back and tossing the cigarette in the ashtray on his desk.

“I’m not saying do it right away. What you’re doing? Helping her find reasons to live? Helping her through her grief? That’s excellent work, and that’s work that will still take more time.” He sat down, clasping his hands together. “But you’ve admitted you don’t feel ready to handle a deeper issue like an obsession. The best thing to do, for your patient, is to refer her to someone who can once you’re done with this.”

She bit her lip. “…It feels like that would be abandoning her.”

His face softened. “You are not, I promise. You’re helping her get the help she needs. That just happens not to lie with you. You’re still starting out—there’s no shame in accepting your limitations.”

*And not accepting them might lead to harm*, she thought, involuntarily flashing back to that miserable rescue mission. And that was the last thing she wanted.

She sighed. “It’s hard, finding a balance. I want to help, but…”

“Who said you haven’t?” Chiaki looked up, surprised. Ueno-sensei was considering her, a slightly impatient look in his eyes. “You’ve gotten her to open up and trust the Future Foundation more, and put her on the path to recovery. Without that, the chance to help her further might never have opened up.”

She ducked her head, cheeks coloring under the praise as her supervisor finished, “Honestly? For your first case? I think you’ve done a good job, Watanabe-san.”

Touched, she started to smile. “Thank you—”

“But you still have a ways to go, so don’t rest on your laurels just yet.” He waved a hand dismissively. “Now get out of here.”

The following weeks and months were a different type of difficult. Her birthday came and went, and was celebrated alone, in her apartment, with Yumigami and video games and a photo. Chiaki broke down and cried then because she just *missed* everyone so much.

She continued her work with Nakajima-san, but the limits of her abilities were becoming apparent. She was afraid what Nakajima-san would say when she told her, but the girl didn’t get angry. Just mulled it over for a bit and then agreed, saying she trusted her judgment. And so, on a sunny April day, they held their last session.

“Hey, Watanabe-san,” Nakajima-san said when it was done, using her supposed name for the first time. She still had a long way to go before she would be perfectly okay, but looking at her now, Chiaki could see how her yellow eyes were less despairing. She could feel proud of what she’d done to help. “I know I’ve been difficult-day, so…thank you.”

Ultimately, after looking over and discussing every option Nakajima-san had liked, she’d decided
she wanted to be a soldier. Chiaki had been alarmed at first, wondering if it was an elaborate attempt at suicide, but Nakajima-san’s reasons had been simple: she liked destroying Monokumas, she was good at it, and it seemed like a job that both she and her deceased family could be proud of.

Chiaki smiled and shook her client’s hand, feeling the rough calluses against her own. “Take care, Nakajima-san.”

After Nakajima-san, she had other patients. Her second quit after just two months, her third also needed to be referred to someone else eventually, but her fourth was the first time Chiaki succeeded on her own. Ueno-sensei surprised her by treating her to a nice lunch to celebrate, but her heart ached throughout, wishing sorely Kamukura-kun and Yukizome-sensei and everyone else were there to celebrate instead.

Throughout it all, Chiaki resolutely threw herself into her work, her studying, her training, but always kept an ear out for news of her friends or the Neo World Program. The New Year came again, and so did her birthday.

Her worry and fear had started to resurge, a black wave ready to swallow her whole, when finally, a year and a half after Kamukura-kun left, a smiling Gekkogahara-san gathered her branch together and announced that the Neo World Program had been completed.

And on the exact same day, Naegi Makoto received a call from an unknown number, the soft, flat voice on the other end calling himself Hinata Hajime and claiming he and his classmates needed rescue.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Future Foundation must have some rad training programs if Byakuya Togami is running into buildings, Hacking Gun blazing, just six months after DR1.

I like the thought of Hiroko just adopting all the Captives, but especially Kanon. I think she might be able to relate to being a broken, troubled teenage girl, and (as far as she knows) Kanon only ever protected her baby boy in Towa City.

Soooo the timespan between DRAE and SDR2 is really, really vague. Killer Killer takes place before SDR2 and starts a full year after DR1, so that’s at least six months, but beyond that? Nothing. No details, except for Episode 8 in Side:Future mentioning DR1 occurred “years ago”. Seeing as no one looks that much older, I decided to choose a year and a half gap between DRAE and SDR2, bringing the total time since the first game to two years.

Initially I was just going to timeskip after Izuru left, but I decided I wanted to explore Chiaki’s first counseling session and Kanon more. I do think there are limits to what Chiaki could do for her first ever client, and that it’d take people more experienced than her to truly help someone with Kanon's scale of issues. But it was still important for them both, and once it was over? Timeskip away.
To say Kirigiri Kyoko was unhappy when Naegi-kun told her he planned to meet up with some supposed refugees, alone, was an understatement. She found their claims of being afraid of Future Foundation, of only trusting the Ultimate Hope and wanting to meet with just him, suspicious. Innocents had nothing to be afraid of, after all, and Naegi-kun was probably the Remnants’ most hated person. It seemed all too likely to her this was a trap. They’d argued about him going for a long time.

Eventually Kyoko managed to compromise—no guards, as the callers had asked, but she’d go with him, and Togami-kun would stay with the helicopter, ready to fly if needed. Maybe she couldn’t stop Naegi-kun from walking into danger, but she could certainly walk into it with him.

The meeting place was Hope’s Peak’s now ironically-named “new” school building, the one destroyed by the Reserve Course. Unlike the old school building, converted into a shelter, it had lain in disrepair for years. Kyoko’s first thought, when they stepped inside the entrance hall and saw their upperclassmen spread around, eyes gleaming bright red, was a grim I knew it was a trap.

She reached for her phone to call Togami-kun. But when her eyes registered what they were actually seeing, she paused. None of Class 77 had made moves to attack, or were in positions suitable for an ambush. They were lounging about, some chatting, some eating, some sparring. One of them was even lying down, eyes closed, attended to by the Ultimate Nurse. It took her a moment to catch a glimpse of white hair and recognize him as Komaeda Nagito.

They looked…disturbingly normal.

At the sound of their entrance, thirteen heads snapped over in a single, eerie motion. One of the Remnants, a dead-ringer for Togami-kun except fatter, stepped forward. His talent was impressive; even though she knew otherwise, Kyoko had to consciously remind herself that this was the Ultimate Imposter, not her classmate. “So you’ve finally arrived. It’s about time, we’ve been waiting awhile.” He fixed Kyoko with a searching stare. “And I see you brought a friend.”

Naegi-kun smiled his famously disarming smile. “Just Kirigiri-san and Togami-kun—er, the real Togami-kun, that is. He’s outside. They only came because they were worried about me; I promise no one else is around.”

The Imposter tilted his chin at Nidai and Pekoyama. “Sweep the area. Make sure he’s not lying.”

As the two nodded and moved off, Kyoko stepped forward. “Is Hinata Hajime here?” Though her tone was steady with practiced cool, her skin crawled, distinctly uncomfortable by how outnumbered and surrounded they were. Almost instinctively, she began calculating escape routes if things went south.

“The brooding one said he would be at the zenith of this place, amidst ruins that held memories dear to us,” Tanaka boomed. Kyoko noted the four small coffins hanging from his belt, but otherwise there were no signs of his usual animal army. She marked that as a point in the “not a trap” category. “He imparted we send you his way when you answered our summons. Then, like a bolt of lightning, he disappeared, leaving nary a breeze behind…quite a good trick.”
Upstairs, in a classroom, then. Naegi-kun must have worked it out too, for he immediately hurried to the stairwell. Kyoko hesitated, torn between following him to protect him and staying to watch the Remnants. She still wasn’t entirely certain this wasn’t a trick of some kind.

“You can relax.” the Imposter said, seeing her indecision. “Our call was genuine. We have no interest in fighting you, as long as you were true to your word.” As if to punctuate his point, the other Remnants finally turned back to their activities, dismissing her as unimportant.

It sounded reasonable, but Kyoko wasn’t ready to let go of her doubts just yet. “It’s odd this supposed Hinata is the one who called us, yet he’s not here…and you seem to be handling the leadership role instead.” If the Imposter could mimic anyone, it was entirely possible to fake being Hinata, wasn’t it? She’d never seen his name mentioned in any of Future Foundation’s files, after all.

Perhaps she should have gone with Naegi-kun.

An odd smile crossed the Imposter’s face. “Hinata is…complicated. He gathered us together, but he prefers not to be around people. Therefore, I take the manacles of command unto myself in his stead. I suppose you could consider me a lieutenant, of sorts.”

She turned at the sound of footsteps to see Pekoyama and Nidai returning. “The perimeter’s clear,” Pekoyama said, immediately heading to Kuzuryu’s side. His eyepatch was in his hand, gently being cleaned, and when he glanced at Pekoyama the motion brought a single, bright blue eye out of the shadows of his fedora. Kyoko’s mouth tightened almost indiscernibly.

The Imposter nodded at Kyoko. “There, you see? You haven’t betrayed us, so we won’t betray you.”

Kyoko frowned, but dropped the topic. It appeared she could trust them…for now. Still, the sooner this was over, the better.

As they waited for Naegi-kun and Hinata, a hacking cough tore from the corner of the room. She turned her head, regarding Komaeda. “…He’s sick. How badly?”

“K-Komaeda-san had a fever when Hinata-san found him,” Tsumiki said breathily, glancing up. “He’s b-been swimming in and out of consciousness…”

The mop of white hair lifted, glassy red eyes peering up at Kyoko. “Ah, senpai!” he exclaimed in an oddly chipper voice. “I’m so sorry about that trouble with the bomb. It’s awful that someone as worthless as me was merely suspended, while you—”

He broke off into fits of coughing, and Tsumiki hurriedly pushed him back down onto the blankets. “…and he’s delirious,” she surmised, as Komaeda’s eyes fluttered shut. “I d-doubt he even remembers Hinata-san fetching him, o-o r us all gathering together. But his condition is improving, so I think in a few days he’ll recover.”

It was unnerving. All of this. The Remnants were hanging out as if they were friends relaxing after work, not despair-filled terrorists. Tsumiki was acting exactly like a concerned nurse and classmate, fretting over the health of her patient. She was even holding Komaeda’s hand, stroking it over and over to provide him some comfort. It was almost sweet, until Kyoko took a closer look and saw—

Revolusion coursed through her. It wasn’t his hand, but a woman’s; small and delicate, with long fingers topped off with sharp red nails. Tsumiki had a wide smile and deep blush on her face,
looking at it with the reverence of one gazing upon a holy relic. Her motions weren’t ones of comfort, but of longing, fingers dancing over the skin possessively.

Kyoko turned away, briefly tasting bile. That hand, Kuzuryu’s eye, there was no question who they’d belonged to. It was grotesque. She didn’t doubt Naegi-kun would still want to help them, but...could they even be helped?

As if her thoughts had summoned him, Naegi-kun returned, lips pursed in thoughtfulness. Kyoko’s relief at seeing him alright was only temporary, overshadowed by unease as the long-haired man on his heels. It wasn’t so much what she saw in him as what she didn’t see. His face, his eyes, his body language, all of it was blank. It was like trying to read a corpse.

No, not even; corpses had truths to them too. It was like trying to read a foreign language. Encoded.

“Kirigiri-san,” Naegi-kun said, stepping over. “This is Hinata Hajime-kun. He says he used to go to Hope’s Peak, but he was in the Reserve Course.”

That would explain why she hadn’t recognized his name. “You and your classmates requested clemency.” She wasted no time getting down to business. She sensed no malicious intent from him, but this entire situation was still too tense for her liking. Best to resolve it as swiftly as possible.

Hinata inclined his head so slightly she might have missed it. “And Naegi has promised it.” His voice was rough, as if disused, and barely audible.

She crooked an eyebrow at Naegi-kun, who gave her a sheepish smile. It was endearing, but she wouldn’t let herself be distracted. “Has he?”

Reading her unspoken question, Naegi-kun threw Hinata an apologetic look. “Hinata-kun, would you mind if we had a few moments alone?”

He just blinked indifferently. Taking that as a no, the two hurried to a corner as far from the Remnants as possible. “Naegi-kun,” Kyoko whispered, aware of the eyes fixed on their back. “You do know they’re—”

“Remnants of Despair,” he finished. “I know. I knew the minute I saw them. And I know you’re going to say this is a bad idea, but I still think we should help.”

Exasperated affection flooded her. “Naegi-kun, I don’t know if that’s possible. The things they’ve done can’t just be waved away with words.”

“I know that! But they want to be cured of their despair. And that’s what we do, isn’t it? Save people from despair?”

The depths of Naegi-kun’s compassion and optimism never failed to astound Kyoko. She’d seen them be thrown in his face, she’d seen them pay off. No matter the outcome, though, he never wavered. It was impossible to be around that and not be even a little affected. She wasn’t sure if she believed an actual group of Remnants could turn themselves around, but if anyone could help them, it was Naegi-kun.

Whether they deserved the chance, well, that wasn’t important now. What was, was her and Naegi-kun’s safety. She doubted they could just leave. If they tried to go back on their word now, the Remnants would probably attack them. Bringing them in, where they had a controlled environment, was substantially safer. But then there was what came after...
Mistaking the pensive look on her face, Naegi-kun added, “If you’re worried about getting in trouble, Kirigiri-san, don’t be. I’ll take full responsibility—”

“That’s not it,” she sighed. “We will effectively have to go rogue for this. Even if we cure them, it’s very likely we’ll face opposition from Munakata-san. We’ll have to conceal them until we finish rehabilitation, then persuade the rest of the foundation of our innocence afterwards. It’ll be a difficult task, and I only want to make sure you know what we’re getting into.”

Surprise etched itself on his features. “‘We’?”

Her lips twitched. She didn’t know if she’d ever met anyone simultaneously both so intuitive and so oblivious. “You didn’t think I’d let you go through this alone, did you?”

His face brightened, a dazzling, broad smile stretching from ear to ear. Her chest warmed at the sight. “Thank you so much, Kirigiri-san!”

She brushed a strand of lavender hair behind her ear. “It’s no trouble. Now, I’ll get Togami-kun and convince him to at least fly the Remnants out of here. Then we can sit down and brainstorm ideas on how to help them.” Gekkogahara-san had sent out an email to all branch heads about the completion of some virtual therapy project, hadn’t she? Perhaps they could start with that.

“SURPRISE!”

**Chiaki squeaked at the unexpected shouts, her finger missing the D-pad on her Game Girl Advance and dooming Link to death. Her head jerked up, eyes growing rounder at the sight before them. Her classroom had been transformed, party balloons and streamers hanging from the ceiling. A table in the center held assorted snacks and a large, fluffy cake. And in the center were her smiling classmates.**

Intelligently, she asked, “Huh?”

“You’re running a little late,” Koizumi-san said disapprovingly. Her face morphed into concern. “Is everything alright?”

“Sorry,” she said automatically. “No, everything’s fine. I was just...doing something else.” They’d asked her to meet here two hours after school, but she’d been waiting for Hinata-kun before then. She knew most people would call her foolish for clinging to old sentiment, to her feelings for him, but the thought of abandoning him made her stomach roil. It felt like admitting he wasn’t important to her after all, and what kind of friend would she be then? What if the day she wasn’t there was the day he came back?

She wondered whether she should tell her classmates about him, ask them for help—but they looked to her as class rep. It wasn’t right that she burden them with her troubles, was it? She had to be a good role model.

“If people are going to go to this effort for you, you could at least show up on time!” Saoinji-san snapped, tossing her ponytail haughtily.

“Sorry...”

“S-Saoinji-san,” Tsumiki-san said timidly, “it’s only by about fifteen minutes—”

“Who asked you, pig barf?!”
“Who cares? Now that Nanami’s here, we can start eating!” Owari-san didn’t even wait for a response, just dove for the food and began shoveling it in her mouth.

“OWARI!” Nidai-kun bellowed. “Show some respect! It’s Nanami’s birthday!”

“Haffy erfday ‘anami!”

She was still feeling a bit slow on the uptake. Chiaki looked around in amazement, her Game Girl Advance almost slipping from her fingers. “You guys…you all set this up?”

“That’s right,” Sonia-san smiled. “I admit I am nervous, I have never planned a Japanese birthday party before! They are so different from those in Novoselic…I hope you aren’t too disappointed by my first efforts.”

“I think you did wonderful, Sonia-san!” Soda-kun interjected, eyes starry at the chance to support the Ultimate Princess. “Beautiful and graceful as always—”

But she’d already turned away, blushing at a muttered compliment from Tanaka-kun, which Chiaki couldn’t quite catch.

As Soda-kun sulked, a lump lodged in Chiaki’s throat. Nobody had ever celebrated her birthday before. She sniffed and dabbed her sleeve against her wet eyes. “Guys…thank you all so much.”

But before they could start the fun, there was a knock at the door. “Oh, that must be Hinata-kun,” Yukizome-sensei smiled, and that was odd. When did she get here? She should still be in the Reserve Course, right? “Why don’t you let him in, Nanami-san?”

That also struck her as strange. Hinata-kun was…somewhere else, wasn’t he? But eagerness to see him again eclipsed that niggling voice of concern. Grin widening, Chiaki bounced over to the door, throwing it open—

And found a stone hall lined with monitors.

That was the moment she realized that she was dreaming. Panic set in, and she tried to turn away. But a hard push sent her stumbling out. The door slammed shut. Against her will, Chiaki’s feet turned down the path she’d trod so many times before.

She gritted her teeth, trying to force herself to go in other directions, to step differently, to not trip the first trap that would slice a thin line of fire along her arm. But it was like she was in a video game and being railroaded to follow the plot; she had no control. Tears filled her eyes as pain jolted through her nerves, as Enoshima’s gleeful laugh rang out.

Wake up! You know it’s not real, you’ve already been here! Wake up!

Running. Running. She recognized this part too, knew where the pressure plate was. Nothing she did directed her feet away from it, and she watched in frustration as it sank under her weight, as the spikes shot from the ground and pierced her right foot. Her momentum lost, she fell back, scraping the palm of her hand against the stone floor as she threw it out to catch herself. She couldn’t stop the scream tearing from her throat or the renewed wave of tears.

Wake up! Wake up! WAKE UP!

She didn’t. She only got up and continued trudging on, through a seemingly endless wave of traps. Some she managed to avoid, others she didn’t. And no matter how much she tried to force herself to wake up, she kept running the maze.
Chiaki spared a moment for a quick glance over her shoulder, checking how far ahead of the boulder she was, then turned her gaze back front—

And choked as an iron grip clasped around her throat, lifting her into the air by her neck. The force of it made her vision swim, but she could still recognize the person holding her up. Baffled, because this was different from all the other times she’d dreamt about this place, she stammered, “Kamukura-kun? W-What are you doing here?”

His red eyes were steely and cold and utterly unfamiliar. “I found my answer. And it does not lie with your beliefs. You failed, Nanami Chiaki.”

She clawed at his hand, trying to get just a little bit of breathing room. Her feet kicked, dangling in the air. Stars winked in front of her eyes as she choked out, “Ka…Kamukura-kun…”

“Your hope is boring.” His fingers tightened, and she gagged as her windpipe started to crumple. Faintly, she could hear something ringing. “And so are you.”

Chiaki jerked awake with a sob, tears spilling over her eyes. The ringing was still present, loud, annoying. Her alarm clock. Her blind hand groped about, slamming it off by pure coincidence. Gasping for air, she stared up at the ceiling. She was safe. It was just a nightmare. She was safe. Inanely, a memory came back, snuggling into Kamukura-kun’s chest, safe, safe, safe. The contrast between the memory and the nightmare was so sharp, it almost brought an ill-timed laugh to her lips.

On shaky legs, she staggered out of bed and over to Yumigami’s. Her rabbit knew the drill by now, blinking awake at the hands pulling her up, but otherwise unsurprised. She nuzzled her comfortingly as Chiaki pulled her close, chasing away the remnants of the nightmare with the tactile softness of fur.

Her dreams about that place had gradually decreased in frequency, but they still lurked in the shadows of her mind. Every time she started to think they were gone for good, they’d come back. It was an old, tired dance, and she was sick of it.

Eventually, Yumigami squirmed, and feeling somewhat calmer, Chiaki put her down. The rabbit hopped over to her water bowl, dipping her head to drink. With a sigh, the Ultimate Gamer glanced at her clock. 7:10. She had to get ready to leave.

Grimacing, she began to get dressed, pulling on the stark black blazer, skirt and tie of her uniform. Then she clipped up her hair, which had grown out to partially down her back, and reached for the wig, throwing it a resentful glare. She hated the thing. She hated everything it symbolized. She was tired of pretending to be another person. She was so lonely she thought she might choke on it. She missed her friends. She missed Kamukura-kun. Tears bit at the corners of her eyes again, but with a shaky breath she wiped them away.

Her thoughts drifted back to his presence in her nightmare as she put her shoes on. She swallowed, remembering the harsh nothingness in his eyes. Dreams are not omens, like in video games, she told herself. They’re just your subconscious thoughts and emotions coming to the forefront of your mind. Nothing is wrong with Kamukura-kun and the others. Don’t—don’t think like that.

It was impossible not to worry about them all, though. It had been three days since Gekkogahara-san had announced the Neo World Program’s completion, and she hadn’t heard anything about her friends or if Naegi-kun was using it.

She really needed to start planning what she was going to say to him, didn’t she? If the Neo World
Program worked, she was sure he’d announce its success. Fifteen Remnants of Despair, cured and renounced to good? That would be such a strong message of hope to the populace.

But how could she come forward? “Hi, I’m Nanami Chiaki. I’m back from the dead, could you please let me be the therapist for my entire class? Or at least not throw me in jail? I know I was saved by a former Remnant, I know I’ve been hiding things from the Future Foundation for two years, but I’m honestly not an enemy!”

She sighed, rubbing her forehead. Nothing had changed from when she first joined up. There was still no reason to believe the Future Foundation wouldn’t be suspicious of her. And, she was forced to admit, she hadn’t exactly won herself any friends in her time here. There weren’t many people to support her claims of character.

Shaking those thoughts away, Chiaki grabbed her standard issue Future Foundation gun—handed over once she’d passed the necessary test and obtained a license—from its hidey-hole under her bed. She went through the process of checking the safety and bullets before stowing it in its holster. Then, determined to do her best again today, she stepped outside to go to work.

It was a special occasion, after all; she didn’t want to be late.

It was an odd combination of meeting and graduation. But then again, their internships had been an odd combination of college-level studying and working. At the end of the work day, Gekkogahara-san had, unsurprisingly, called the interns and their supervisors to their usual conference room for the speech.

“It’s been almost two years since you guys joined the Future Foundation. In that time, you’ve been hard at work as interns in our therapy training—trying to accumulate practical hours, studying the field, and learning basic combat. As of today, you have all gathered the requisite number of hours and passed my final test. Your internships are at an end.” Usami raised a party toy, confetti shooting out of the end. “Congratulations! As full-fledged members of Future Foundation, you enjoy several benefits, such as an increased pay and more opportunities. However, you still have one more test to pass before you can become practicing therapists.

“That’s right, it’s the board exam for your license! The next one will be held in two months, and starting from today you have two weeks to submit your application. As you’re no longer under supervision, you will not be able to take on clients until you pass, so I recommend taking it as soon as possible.”

Usami smiled. “That said, you don’t have to worry about your jobs—we still have plenty of assistance work for you in the meantime. So don’t be stressed, and do your best!”

Applause filled the room. Chairs scraped back as people milled about, chatting and offering compliments. Chiaki remained seated, eyes far away. She had never really thought about actually getting her license. Oh, she’d supposed it would happen eventually, in a detached way. But now, now it seemed real. It could be real in just a few months, if she tried for the exam.

She shook herself. It wasn’t a matter of if she tried—a matter of if she passed. She’d be taking that exam. She had to get that license as soon as possible. If she couldn’t take clients until she got it, she wouldn’t be available to help her friends.

Nodding to herself, she made her way to the door. Most of the other interns had paused on their way out, stopping to chat with and thank their supervisors. Ueno-sensei was chatting with a coworker, rolling an unlit cigarette between his fingers. “Congratulations,” he said drily when she
stepped up. The man he’d been speaking to nodded at her politely and left.

“Thank you for your guidance, Ueno-sensei.” She bowed.

He waved a hand. “Don’t get a swollen head, you aren’t there yet.” He narrowed his eyes. “Take this last piece of advice: even when you get your license, you won’t be done. There’ll still be things for you to learn, and you’ll still make mistakes. You will be chasing ‘there’ all your career. Understood?”

“I think so.”

“Then think on it harder until you know so. I expect to be hearing good things about you.” It was half-compliment, half-order.

Just then, Gekkogahara-san rolled up, crinkles around her eyes indicating a smile. “Oh, don’t be so grouchy, Ueno-kun! Let her celebrate. She and the other interns have worked hard.”

“I am not grouchy,” he sniffed. “And I’m not saying she can’t. Just that people should never be complacent.”

“Learn to relax! Go home. Find a girlfriend.”

“Stop trying to set me up with people. I’m perfectly happy as a bachelor, thank you very much.”

“But it might do you some good to blow off some steam.”

Chiaki choked on her spit. Ueno-sensei rolled his eyes and brought his cigarette to his lips, though he still didn’t light it. Gekkogahara-san turned to Chiaki. “Congratulations, Watanabe-san.”

“Ah, thank you. I just hope I can make you and everyone else proud.”

The smaller woman patted her arm. “Don’t worry about that. If you can be satisfied by what you do, that’s enough. I think the world would be better if people stopped dwelling so much on lofty standards and took pride in themselves.”

She thought of Hinata-kun, and her heart pinched painfully. “…Yeah. Me too.”

Three weeks later, Chiaki was having lunch in the seventh division cafeteria; even though the entire branch ate at the same time, the noise level was low. Most people didn’t want to talk, especially not about work. As she poised pork into her mouth, the cafeteria doors opened. This was nothing unusual and she would have ignored it, if someone nearby hadn’t gasped and squeaked. Then she glanced up and dropped her chopsticks.

Impeccable in all white, Munakata Kyosuke stood in the cafeteria entrance, surveying them. A sheathed katana was held tightly in his left fist; rumor said he’d personally killed one hundred Remnants with it. Other rumors whispered he’d fought the Ultimate Swordswoman to a draw, and still others claimed he’d pried the katana from the grave of a famous samurai. However, the one thing all rumors agreed on was this: Munakata Kyosuke’s hatred for despair knew no bounds.

And he was walking right towards her, Chiaki realized in horror. Her heart began beating a panicked staccato as her imagination ran away—he’d found her out, he was going to arrest her, he was going to try to make her betray Kamukura-kun—

He stopped and stared down at her regally. “Where is Gekkogahara? I don’t see her here.”
Oh. He’d only come over because she was closest. Chiaki felt at once foolish and relieved. “Um, Gekkogahara-san doesn’t eat here on Tuesdays. I think she has lunch with her mother instead.”

“When will she be back?”

“Soon? Lunch started thirty minutes ago…” His scowl deepened, and she made a snap decision. “I can show you to her office. You can wait for her there.”

Munakata-san considered her, and she tried very much not to squirm, feeling like a bug under a microscope. But he jerked his head up in a short nod. Hurriedly gathering her things and stashing them in her bag, Chiaki threw away her empty bento box. Then, murmuring “this way”, she led Munakata-san down the hallway. He raised an eyebrow when she hurried past the elevator, pushing open the door to the stairwell instead, but didn’t comment. Perhaps he simply thought it was out of order.

The seventh division building had six floors. The first floor was open to the public and had basic places like a receptionist desk, archive, some offices, and the cafeteria. The second was where all therapy was held; the third was for those working in the cyber department. The fourth, more offices and conference rooms. Fifth, combat training. Sixth, well, Chiaki wasn’t sure what was there. Top secret stuff probably. Gekkogahara-san had opted against having an entire floor to herself, stating she wished to be close to her employees. Her needs and status meant she did have a larger office than normal, though, and actual privacy.

“Thank you,” Munakata-san said curtly when they arrived. “You may leave now.”

She nodded. Continuing down the corridor, Chiaki left him standing in front of Gekkogahara-san’s door, looking impatient. Once she was around the corner, she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

What she was considering was unbelievably stupid. She couldn’t even imagine the trouble she’d be in if she was caught. But there was something deep inside her telling her this was important. What could make the vice-president personally visit the creator of the Neo World Program only weeks after its release? It was a slim hope, but she couldn’t shake it. And lunch wouldn’t end for another half hour. She had time.

Twenty-five minutes later, she was weighing the pros and cons of staying versus leaving when she heard the telltale squeak of wheels and a surprised, “Munakata-san? What are you doing here?”

Peering around the corner, she saw the vice-president’s back as he addressed a surprised-looking Gekkogahara-san. “Gekkogahara,” he greeted in clipped tones. “We have matters to discuss.”

“They must be important if you came here to speak to me directly, without even arranging a meeting.”

“Critically. I’ve only just obtained this information, and it can’t wait.” His head turned, scanning the hall, and Chiaki ducked back behind her corner. “Let’s take this inside your office.”

Usami made a vague noise of assent. There was the sound of a door opening, then closing. Chiaki stepped out from behind her corner and stared at it. It was just a door, she knew, but it seemed imposing and ominous in that moment. Fear briefly seized her, but she thought of her friends, of Kamukura-kun, and her spine straightened.

She licked her lips. Glanced around again. The hallway was still empty—of course it was, everyone was still in the cafeteria, though that’d be changing soon. Chiaki pulled her glasses off
and placed them on the floor. Then she dropped down, pressing her ear against the crack in Gekkogahara-san’s door.

“—Naegi-kun?” Usami’s voice was loud and easily recognizable.

Munakata-san’s baritone was somewhat more muffled. “He’s been absolutely silent for weeks. Given what I’ve recently learned, I suspect him of treason.”

“Treason? I can’t imagine someone like him—”

An angry thump, like Munakata-san had pounded his fist against a table. “Fifteen Remnants of Despair have been whisked away from right under our noses! I’ve received reports that suggest he was the one who captured them, yet he failed to bring them in for extermination. What else can it be, if not treason?!”

A stunned silence. Munakata-san spoke again, sounding calmer. “I’m here because you’re in charge of the foundation’s cyber security. You must have a way to find his location. Trace his emails, hack his phone, something.”

“Yukizome-san can’t—”

“Yukizome's looking too, of course, but I want all bases covered. Can you find him?”

“...I might already know where he is.”

To Chiaki’s frustration, the voices grew lower and hushed. Fighting back a growl, she pressed her ear harder against the door and closed her eyes to focus—

Footsteps. She scrambled away, pushing up onto her hands and knees. She pretended to be searching the floor just as the Acting Head, Akagi-san, rounded the corner, flipping through papers. He stopped when he saw her, blinking in surprise behind his spectacles.

“Um…what are you doing?”

“Oh, I just dropped my glasses.” ‘Accidentally’ bumping her hand into them, she let out a triumphant “Ah-ha!” and plopped them on. She bounced up to her feet, hoping her smile wasn’t too strained.

He gave her an odd look, but for once her isolation was a blessing—he didn’t know her well enough to press the issue, nor care. “Al…right.” Stepping up to the door, he knocked, calling for Gekkogahara-san. The voices inside stopped, and Chiaki discretely made her exit before anyone could think to ask what she was doing here.

Her legs were shaking as she retraced her steps. She could scarcely believe she’d just pulled that off. Part of her expected Munakata-san to run after her, grab her arm and yell that he knew what she’d just done.

But the only footsteps in the hallway were her own. When she was far out of sight, she rested against the wall, closed her eyes, and reviewed what she’d just overheard.

Fifteen Remnants, Munakata-san had said. It had to be her classmates and Kamukura-kun. Then… was it likely they were at the Neo World Program? Her heart briefly soared, before sinking. Munakata-san’s tone indicated Naegi-kun was in trouble for what he’d done. And his faction of Future Foundation politics, the extremists, favored harsh punishment and absolute extermination.
But surely Munakata-san couldn’t get away with executing the Ultimate Hope? If—when—her friends were cured, the rest of the Foundation would have to understand that his methods weren’t the only way to remove despair. And with fifteen former Remnants confirming what had happened to Yukizome-sensei, Future Foundation would have no choice but to believe them. Then she’d get the help she needed, and the organization would have to be more lenient about Despairs, or else be hypocrites. Everything would be alright, somehow.

Feeling somewhat reassured, she set off with a bit more spring in her step.

When Munakata-san left, Miaya sighed and closed her eyes. While she greatly respected him for what he’d done, she would be lying if she said she wasn’t frightened as well. His zealotry had only increased over the years, to the point she sometimes felt she didn’t recognize the man who’d first approached her as the Tragedy rained down, asking her to help him create a future for the world.

Sometimes she felt she didn’t recognize the Future Foundation either. It was sad, but the reality was that they were a house of cards, teetering on the brink of a cliff, with Munakata-san’s extremists a strong wind that could knock any of them off. Though the extremists were not the only faction in the foundation, they were comprised of some of the branches with the most power, such as the second, fifth, and sixth. The rest of them simply couldn’t match up.

And she’d just pointed him in Naegi-kun’s direction. Guilt dropped in her belly again like a stone. He’d told her it was okay to save herself if she was asked about her involvement, that she could lie and claim to not have known his intended patients were Remnants, that he would take all the blame. Still, Miaya wished she’d been braver. She’d never been very brave—not brave enough to learn to talk without Usami, not brave enough to try surgeries to help her cerebral palsy, not brave enough to stand up for someone else she respected. She hadn’t even been brave enough to go to Jabberwock with Naegi-kun and his friends.

But if she’d pretended not to know, and Munakata-san later found out she was lying, she’d earn his wrath as best. At worst, she’d end up pronounced guilty of treason as well. And if something happened to her, what would become of her mother, ailing and alone?

I’m sorry, Naegi-kun. I hope you finish rehabilitating the Remnants soon, before Munakata-san tries to arrest you…

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Some of you might be disappointed Chiaki didn’t go to Jabberwock, and this was something I thought long and hard over. But in the end I decided I couldn’t justify it. Makoto, Kyoko and Byakuya were clearly acting as rogue elements; I can’t imagine them bringing an entourage with them, much less an intern from another branch. In fact, what seems most likely to me is that it was just the three of them there, with very few others knowing at all.

It’s never actually said where Makoto caught the Remnants, but I’m assuming it was in Hope’s Peak, since there were desks and the patterns on the destroyed doors matched the ones in the new building.

Cerebral palsy, which Miaya briefly mentions, is a group of disorders that affects one’s movement and muscles, and is my headcanon for why she’s in a wheelchair.
There were footsteps coming down the hall. He listened to the striding, the brief pause between one foot coming down and the other lifting, and by that alone he could deduce the person’s height. Running through a list of everyone on the island narrowed down the suspects; then there were time and potential motives to evaluate; and in a matter of seconds he had pinned the most likely owner: Naegi Makoto. He lifted his gaze from Nanami’s hairpin, curling his fingers around it protectively, just as the door opened and Naegi walked in, exactly as he’d predicted.

Izuru was not fazed by this. Hajime was freaked out.

…I no, it was more accurate to say the Izuru part of him wasn’t fazed, and the Hajime part was. He wasn’t two people, he hadn’t had any periods of blacking out and waking up elsewhere with no memory of how. He was one person, but with two sets of memories, and those memories have their own distinct personalities attached, and those personalities have bled into each other, mixing so he couldn’t tell where one ended and the other began. Ergo, creating moments where he sometimes experienced two different reactions to the same situation. He was one person, just confused.

When he’d woken up, he’d spent a long time trying to decide what to call himself. He thought he might like “Hinata Hajime” more than “Kamukura Izuru”—the only memories attached to that name were bad ones. Still, discarding it completely felt wrong. As if he were trying to discard responsibility. By the time he’d scrutinized himself a hundred times over, he’d concluded he could never go back to who he once was. He was too emotional and empathetic to be just Izuru, but he was also too talented and analytical to be just Hajime.

So, a compromise was in order. He wouldn’t forget either of his selves. He wouldn’t object to Kamukura, but he’d prefer Hinata. That consensus had been pleasing to him, and just yesterday he’d informed the others of his decision.

Waking up from the Neo World Program was…disorienting. He blinked gummy eyes open to the pod’s lid, scattered memories spinning around in his head before falling into place. In the seconds between waking up and the pod opening, his brain examined and deconstructed all available information, reporting that not only did he have Hinata Hajime’s and Kamukura Izuru’s memories, but memories of his time in the Neo World Program. That had not been something he’d predicted, and for a moment he was pleased.

And then the scope of everything he’d done hit him like a truck.

It was like being blind for years and suddenly seeing the sun. Hajime’s lost morals had returned, and they gaped at everything Izuru had allowed—you could have saved Nanami, you could have saved the world, you could have saved everyone—and Izuru’s intelligence started mapping out all the ways he could have stopped Enoshima. And amidst this storm of guilt and horror, he realized—

He’d been missing the point all along. Hajime’s obsession with talent, Izuru’s obsession with watching hope fight despair, those had been so wrong. Hope, despair, talent, those weren’t the end goals. They alone wouldn’t make life interesting or enjoyable. It was the memories and bonds you made with people along the way.

How had he not thought of such an obvious answer, as Izuru? How had he missed what was staring...
him in the face, as Hajime? If he’d stopped being so full of himself, stopped thinking he was absolutely right, for one iota of a second—

He lay there, frozen and overwhelmed, as silent tears spilled over his cheeks and around him the survivors of Class 77 began to wail.

It took the Class 78 trio an entire day to calm them—primarily through sedatives. But even in that state, none of them had wanted to be away from their comatose classmates; as the Neo World Program’s main building lacked dorms, several closets had hastily been converted into sleeping spaces. Hajime had immediately locked himself in his room, his head too tumultuous and his heart too knotted for him to interact with others, and tried very hard not to have a panic attack.

A week had passed since then. His emotional state still hadn’t approached anything resembling ‘alright’. But yesterday he’d taken the first tentative steps to speak with his friends, rather than continue hiding. They didn’t seem to hate him for his actions, and the gratitude and relief their acceptance brought was overwhelming. He knew there were still hurts to deal with, but they all seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement to get to those in time. Until then, they would support each other.

Naegi smiled at him, as he always did, and placed a tray of breakfast on his bed—there wasn’t room for a table in the tiny room. “Good morning, Hinata-kun. How are you feeling today?”

He answered as he always did. “As well as can be expected.”

Every morning, one of the three Future Foundation members would come by to deliver breakfast and check how they were doing. But today something was different. The nails on Naegi’s hands were freshly chewed to the quick. His face was lined with concern. He was fidgeting, tapping one foot errantly. Hajime read all this and concluded, “You didn’t come here just for pleasantries.”

“Aha, no, not this morning.” He paused, rubbed the back of his neck, seemingly searching for words. “You see, I’ve been receiving a lot of messages from Future Foundation recently…”

“You’re in trouble.”

Naegi winced. “…Yeah. One of the higher-ups, Munakata-san, has been giving me orders to return to the mainland and explain myself. He’s made it pretty clear he wants me to bring you all back with me, as…I guess as one last chance.”

“But you aren’t going to?”

“No. He’ll just execute you.” He paused, looking a little sad. “I’m sure this’ll be the nail in the coffin that gets me officially put on trial, but I truly feel you guys deserve a second chance. And you’ve all made a lot of mistakes, but I trust that you guys really want to turn yourselves around.”

A lump bobbed in Hajime’s throat, and his chest fluttered with warm gratitude. He had to consciously remind himself to smile and convey that. It was—so strange. Showing emotion was so strange. His face had been a porcelain mask for so long that expressions seemed no longer natural, and his neglected facial muscles throbbed painfully when he did remember to use them. But he was trying. “Thank you.”

A thought occurred to him. Future Foundation. Yukizome-sensei. He should say something about Yukizome-sensei, shouldn’t he? Naegi, Kirigiri, and Togami had risked so much to help them. Perhaps that could be the first step in paying them back, in making things right.

“You should know, Future Foundation has a mole—”
“Please don’t.” He blinked. Naegi-kun was holding a hand up, his face pale and strained.

He took a moment to collect himself. “I know… I know there probably is one. We’ve had too many bad streaks for there not to be. But... I don’t want to worry about that right now. I don’t want to have that knowledge weighing me down while I prepare a defense.” He chuckled. “A repeat of Ogami-san’s incident is probably best avoided.”

He wasn’t quite sure what ‘Ogami-san’s incident’ referred to. Ogami Sakura had been from Class 78. The Second Killing Game, perhaps? Oddly, his memories of watching the Second Killing Game weren’t very clear; he just had a vague sense of being furious with Enoshima.

In fact, much of his memory between the Parade and a little after his trip to Towa City was spotty. He’d analyzed these remaining gaps and concluded he’d removed the memories himself. For what purpose, Hajime was not sure. He wanted to investigate them, but there was too much going on. He had to fix his mistakes and help the rest of Class 77, first. Then maybe he could do something about his few missing memories.

“…Naegi, this information is important.”

“I know,” Naegi repeated. “But what could I do with it now? I’m heavily suspected of treason. If I accuse someone else of being a traitor, things’ll either devolve into wild accusations, or the higher-ups will take that as more proof that I’m a double agent. …No, it’s best to focus on one thing at a time. I’ll go, clear my name, clear you all, and then you can come forth and tell the rest of the Future Foundation about the mole.”

“…You believe things will work out that way?”

“Of course.”

He said it so simply, as if it were as fact as the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. There was no ounce of deceit or guile in his tone. Just pure conviction. Hajime wasn’t quite sure whether Naegi’s decision was foolish, naïve, or a testament to his optimism, but found the other man respectable nonetheless.

“…You’re a lot like Nanami.” His heart twisted every time he thought of her, and there was a bittersweet taste on his tongue. This was the first time he’d spoken her name out loud since... before he went through with the Kamukura Project, if you didn’t count the Neo World Program. He’d grieved her, as best he could with no memories and stunted emotions, during the Tragedy, but he didn’t think he’d ever really come to terms with her death. Even now, it still didn’t seem real.

Naegi reddened, but his smile was small and grateful. “That’s high praise. She… must have meant a lot to you all, for the AI to take her form.”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t think he had the words to describe what Nanami had been to him. She was more than just the woman he loved. She was what inspired him to start his plan for the Neo World Program, the one who showed him an alternate possibility to despair. In a way, I suppose you could call her my hope.

The shorter man coughed, aware of the awkward silence stretching. “Anyway, that’s what I came here to tell you. Kirigiri-san, Togami-kun and I are leaving tomorrow. You and the other four just need to sit tight for a while. The island has plenty of supplies, so you should be fine until I can get this sorted out. Is there anything else you need, before we go?”

Inspiration suddenly struck. Almost without thinking, he tugged at his long strands of hair. “…Do
you have scissors? I’d…like to start over.”

Naegi gave him an understanding look, and said of course, and hurried off to get a pair. Hajime looked back at Nanami’s hairpin. For a brief moment, he could envision it back in her hair, her uplifted face as she smiled at him. Then the same pin, lying in a pool of blood. His fingers tightened around it until the edges bit into his skin.

*I’m so sorry, Nanami…to both of you. But I’ll fix my mistakes. I promise.*

In the two years since Enoshima Junko’s death, things had improved in most of the world. Industries were up and running again, urban areas were being repaired, resources were being restocked, and violence was declining. Not so for one unfortunate city. All its civilians had been killed in the constant fighting; the only inhabitants left were combatants. Smoke, yells, and the sounds of battle rang across the city at all times of day and night. The wind carried it all up and into a tall tower on the outskirts, the flickering green lights on the front proclaiming *Monaca.*

Inside her base, Towa Monaca popped another chip into her mouth, wrinkling her nose as the stenches of Towa City wafted through a window. Life had never been kind to her, but it had taken an especially poor turn lately. First her game was ruined by Komaru-oneechan and her smelly friend, then her half-brother’s resistance had gained momentum, and finally she’d had to live with Komaeda-oniichan for over a year. Over a year!

It had been fun for a little while, as he taught her new methods to bring despair and fulfill Junko-oneechan’s wishes. But then. But *then,* the *talking.* The *speeches.* The blathering about hope and despair. It went on and on and on and before long she wanted to claw her eardrums out rather than listen to one more word. But she was an actress, had acted all her life, even better than Kotoko-chan, and she knew better than to cut ties with her only remaining ally. So she’d smiled and nodded and agreed and tried not to scream as months dragged by.

Then Komaeda-oniichan got sick, and Monaca found herself at a conundrum. Did she help him get better, or did she let him die to save her sanity? Before she could make a decision, some weird long-haired guy came with a bunch of other Demons and took it out of her hands. Her eager wave goodbye as they’d left with Komaeda-oniichan was one of the few genuine shows of emotion she’d ever displayed in her life.

Being Junko-oneechan’s successor wasn’t as appealing anymore, if it meant ending up as unhinged as Komaeda-oniichan. Now she spent her days watching her city burn to the ground, contemplating the futility of it all. Maybe she should just go somewhere else. Australia, maybe? Antarctica? Space?

As she yanked open another bag of chips, one of the laptops she’d set up for surveillance beeped. Monaca swiveled her chair around, green eyes zeroing in on the screen; *incoming video conference request.*

The number was from the Future Foundation.

She considered this. Monaca couldn’t think of many reasons why Future Foundation would call her; they’d given up on negotiating for Komaru-oneechan and that other chick’s safe passage, she didn’t have anyone they could hold hostage, and she’d already spurned Komaru-oneechan’s surrender terms. So what, then?

In the end, it was boredom and curiosity that had her answering. A call screen opened, showing a woman with copper hair and green eyes and a bright smile. “Hello, Monaca-chan!” she chirped.
“I’m Yukizome Chisa, with the fifth branch of Future Foundation. I’ve been reading reports about you for some time, and they all say such glowing things. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” she responded, saccharine sweetness automatically lacing her words. “How’d you get Monaca’s number?”

“I’m in charge of intelligence,” Yukizome-san said, waving a dismissive hand. “Finding out this sort of thing is no big deal for me. But I’m more interested in you. Are the rumors that you’re trying to become Enoshima-sama’s new successor true?”

Monaca thought quickly. She had been making business transactions since she was young; she recognized the patterns at play here. Yukizome-san had made first contact, paid compliments, and was fishing for information about her status; she was interested in an alliance of some kind. Being the one called on put Monaca in a position of power, so she could afford skepticism and haggling. Finally, Yukizome-san had called Junko-oneechan ‘Enoshima-sama’, so she was obviously affiliated with the Remnants of Despair. She snorted in amusement. Future Foundation put a Remnant in charge of their intelligence? The irony there is so rich it’s pathetic.

She wasn’t interested in that successor stuff anymore, but it was best to keep her cards close to her chest. “Maybe,” she sniffed haughtily, in her best Junko-oneechan impression. “Monaca’s time is important, though; she can’t just spare it for everyone.”

“I’ll be brief,” Yukizome-san assured. “Recently my students asked for my help in a rather daring plan to revive Enoshima-sama. Nothing big, they just wanted me to make sure the vice-chairman didn’t find out Naegi-kun captured them. And at first I went along. The despair Enoshima-sama’s return would bring would be unimaginable!

“But eventually I realized something. The Ultimate Hope assisting the Remnants of Despair? Isn’t that also despair-inducing? I’d dare say it’s even more so! Once I thought of that, it seemed only natural to quietly feed Kyosuke evidence implicating Naegi-kun’s guilt. I was going to just give him a trickle at a time, let my students wrap things up before telling him where Naegi-kun was, but he ran off ahead of me and Gekkogahara-san ended up spilling it instead. I had to do some pretty fast damage control to persuade him to leave my class be and focus on bringing just Naegi-kun in, lemme tell you!”

“This isn’t ‘brief.’” While Monaca was secretly impressed by Yukizome-san’s cunning, a huge boulder of disappointment had crushed her chest upon hearing the plan to revive Junko-oneechan had failed—for surely it had failed, otherwise Junko-oneechan would have contacted Monaca by now. It was another constant reminder of life’s nihilism, and she was sick of it.

“My point is, I don’t know what became of my students’ plan; I’ve lost contact with them. But this has opened even better opportunities. See, Kyosuke’s on the warzone; he wants to put Naegi-kun on trial. It’ll take him a few weeks to convince the other branch heads and put everything together, but I have no doubt it’ll happen. He’ll make it quiet but major. Gather everyone in one isolated location.” Yukizome-san paused, as if to check if Monaca could see where she was going.

She could. “Making them perfectly poised to be taken out with a single strike. You want me to attack them?”

“Yes and no. I know someone else is planning to set something else up, but I thought you might like to get your kicks in too.” Oh—Monaca recognized that look in her eyes. It was the insane one Komaeda-oniichan sometimes got when he was too deep in his philosophy talks. “Imagine—multiple attacks coming from different directions! The branch heads turning on each other, each suspecting the others of betrayal! Everyone wiped out except Kyosuke! It’d leave him in such
Monaca twirled a lock of hair between her fingers. It sounded very nice and thorough, yes—but not interesting. She didn’t care much for spreading despair anymore. But Yukizome-san’s plan offered the chance of getting her a glimpse of Naegi Makoto, the only thing she really wanted nowadays. Maybe, if this mysterious other participant removed Yukizome-san, she could get away with just observing, not participating.

“I like it,” she decided, tapping one of her chips against her chin. “But I can’t afford to leave Towa City now, I’m afraid.” She was not stupid enough to walk into the hazard zone the Remnant was setting up.

Yukizome-san frowned for the first time, but the girl continued, robot schematics dancing before her eyes, “But Monaca’s a genius, and she’s already thought of a way to infiltrate the meeting! She just needs some information about your branch heads…”

The stress of her job and upcoming exam kept Chiaki from worrying too much about the Neo World Program—her friends were there, they’d be fine, she was sure of it. She mentally rehearsed how she would confess everything. Not to the entire Foundation, just Naegi-kun, she’d decided; if he was keeping her friends safe, she was sure he would keep her as well. Probably Gekkogahara-san too, to get permission to help Class 77.

The date for her exam came. It went by oddly mechanically, like test days back in high school. She woke up. She worried. She went in. She took it. She was told she would receive the results in ten days. And she left.

And then she found her unoccupied mind turning back to that singular question—when will they be done? When can I see them again? Impatience to be reunited, to not be alone anymore, wiggled in her chest. And underneath that, fear. Fear that they wouldn’t want to see her. That her friends hated her for her role in their brainwashing, that Kamukura-kun had gotten bored of her and moved on.

Still, Chiaki was sure she could have waited days or weeks more for the results from the Neo World Program, if it weren’t for two incidents.

The first was three days after her exam. Late evening, sitting on her bed finishing up her no accessories, no Materia Hard Mode challenge run of Crisis Core. Items were allowed, but only because the fights with undodgeable attacks would be impossible to beat without Remedies or Cure materia. A smile pulled at her lips as she lost herself in the enjoyment of gaming, cutting down the literal army of soldiers one after the other. She loved games on any difficulty, whether there were no restrictions or as many restrictions as possible, but she had a special fondness for beating challenges. It gave a heady feeling of triumph, victory, power, and that was something she needed lately.

Playing Crisis Core again brought back memories of one time she’d loaned the game to Sonia-san, who had taken a liking to Final Fantasy 7 and wanted to play the others in its storyline. The Ultimate Princess had stormed into her room when she’d beaten Crisis Core, sniffling and hitting Chiaki’s shoulder when she laughed, repeating “you evil, evil woman! You knew! You knew how it would end!”

“So did you,” she felt compelled to point out, patting her friend’s shoulder to take the sting out of her laughter. You were told Zack died in Final Fantasy 7.

“That is beside the point! You did not warn me I would get so…so…”
“Attached?”

“Yes!” Sonia-san’s eyes were bright. “He had kindness, courage, energy, strength…true qualities that would earn him a monument in Novoselic! He deserved better than…than to perish in the rain a traitor! It is most unfair and tragic!”

Chiaki nodded solemnly. “He was a true hero...with the heart of a puppy.”

The reminder of Zack’s nickname had gotten a giggle out of Sonia-san. But—something was wrong with that memory. Something hollow, something missing. Chiaki frowned, searching.

Sonia-san had giggled, and…and she couldn’t remember what it sounded like.

Her breath caught. She paused the game, something she rarely did. Frantic, Chiaki dug through her brain, and—she couldn’t find it. It wasn’t there anymore.

She shot out of her seat, rushing to the other end of the room where her books were stacked in a small pile. Tossed them aside until she found the red leather cover she was looking for. Chiaki tore it open, shaking as she stared at the pictures within, tracing her eyes over the treasured faces.

It was a fruitless search for a lost puzzle piece. The photo album had preserved things over the months. The shape of Nidai-kun’s nose, the exact color of Komaeda-kun’s hair, the location of Tsumiki-san’s beauty mark. Though she didn’t have any photos of Hinata-kun, his resemblance to Kamukura-kun kept his face mostly alive in her mind’s eye. Not an exact image, age had changed it somewhat, but enough.

But—there were things the album simply couldn’t hold. Nothing big, most would say, just details. The sound of Pekoyama-san’s voice. The exact way Hanamura-kun smiled. Mioda-san’s singing. Try as she might, she just couldn’t recall those things.

She was losing her friends, not to despair or the Future Foundation, but to time, her memories slowly weathered down. The realization made her feel like she’d been punched in the gut.

She put the album down. Tried to resume playing. Put the game back down too and curled up, wrapping her arms around her knees. The cutscene of Zack’s quiet demise in the rain was coming up, and it just—she couldn’t watch it. Not now. It resonated too deeply with her, a man separated from his loved ones, trying to get back to Aerith only to succumb to his wounds literally outside Midgar. Aerith, left hanging for years, clinging to the past until it started to choke her and she had to draw the line—

Stop! She yelled at herself, still trembling from that awful knowledge. Just stop. That’s not going to happen. You’re all going to see each other again. You’re going to make things right. You have to.

But she was starting to forget—

I can’t take this anymore.

It was whispered, quietly, by a small dark voice in the back of her head. It was a horrible, horrible thought, and guilt overcame her the moment it passed through her mind.

But—it was true. Or, well, to an extent. She hadn’t given up on Kamukura-kun and her friends. She wouldn’t. She just...didn’t know if she could endure waiting anymore. It had been different before, when she was waiting for Hinata-kun, because she’d had her friends with her then, their support, and she’d still been—naïve. Innocent. Bad things happened, but to other people. Not the ones you cared about. And if they did, they could be overcome like in a video game.
Now she was alone, and she knew bad things could happen to anyone, taking them away from you so suddenly you were left wondering what happened. It had been a long, hard year and a half of uncertainty and loneliness and fear. Then impatience and anticipation for a reunion, rearing and having to be restrained like wild horses. And now this—losing bits and pieces of her precious memories—

She squeezed her eyes shut, pressed her forehead into her knees, and tried not to scream.

The second incident, and the day her resolve crumbled, was the day she received an envelope with her exam results. She squealed, clutching it to her chest, when she saw the papers within informing her that she’d passed the exam. The proclamation of her now being a licensed therapist. The key to finally being able to help her friends.

She knew she’d promised Kamukura-kun she’d wait, but after her latest realization, she just couldn’t. But she couldn’t just rush off recklessly, she reminded herself. She still had scars on her body and heart from the last time she had. Besides, she probably—no, she’d definitely need permission from Gekkogahara-san. Still, Chiaki went to sleep that night with a smile on her lips, and for once her dreams were pleasant, images of happy reunions playing out in her head.

“Congratulations, Watanabe-san!” Usami exclaimed when Chiaki proudly displayed the license to her the next day. Gekkogahara-san always kept her office open for an hour a day, for anyone to come in and talk, if they wanted. Luck was with Chiaki that day—no one else was there to speak with the Ultimate Therapist at the time, and she’d just put down the phone when she entered. “Not many of your fellow interns took the exam this soon, but all those who have, have passed thus far!”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she smiled. Even if she barely knew them, being able to achieve a dream you worked hard for was always something to celebrate.

“You look like you have something else you want to say.”

She nodded, straightened up, trying to look as formal and polite as possible. “I want to ask permission to collaborate on a project with Naegi Makoto of Branch 14.”

Gekkogahara-san’s eyebrows rose. “You want to start a project? So soon after getting your license? Why?”

Chiaki opened her mouth. Closed it. For the briefest moment, she thought about confessing everything. Just telling her who she was, how she’d survived, why it was so important she help Class 77. Gekkogahara-san had a more lenient stance on Remnants, she knew. Maybe she’d understand Chiaki’s reasons and help her.

But she remembered the snippets she’d heard of Gekkogahara-san’s talk with Munakata-san. How she’d seemed willing to help him catch ‘traitors’. Chiaki was sure the woman had good reasons—she was too gentle to do something like that out of malice—but if she’d done it once, who was to say she wouldn’t do it again?

She just…didn’t know for sure. And she was too afraid of acting rashly again. So Chiaki fudged the truth. “Um, I’d rather not say too much about it right now…but if he doesn’t agree, there’s no point. But it’s very important to me.” Hating that she was about to manipulate the other woman, she added, “It’s…a dream of mine.”

Gekkogahara-san steepled her fingers, eyes lost in thought. She sighed. For a long time, the only sound was the ticking of the clock and the quiet whirr of Gekkogahara-san’s laptop.
“There is an important board meeting being held tomorrow,” Usami finally said. “All of us branch heads are attending, as well as Naegi-kun. So you won’t be able to speak with him anytime soon, I’m afraid. However, I can give you his contact information so you can try to arrange a meeting with him. If he agrees to work with you, you can come back to meet with me, and we can talk resources.”

Equal measures of relief and guilt shot through Chiaki. “Thank you. That’s—this means a lot to me. Thank you.”

Gekkogahara-san was quiet. “Wait until after you speak with Naegi-kun to thank me. Depending on how that board meeting goes…” She stopped short, shook her head. “Well, he might be… inconvenienced, for a time.”

Suddenly, Chiaki realized what Gekkogahara-san had said. That Naegi-kun would also be attending the meeting. Did that mean the Neo World Program’s rehabilitation was over? So, maybe...the meeting is to discuss the results? The spark of hope she’d been nourishing caught flame in her chest. If he was able to go to a meeting, then her friends hadn’t hurt him, which meant they weren’t in despair anymore, right? That had to be it.

Then, memories of Munakata-san’s fury towards Naegi-kun reared their head. And Gekkogahara-san’s tone had sounded worried. Her mouth briefly dried at those implications, before Chiaki forced them down and focused on her mantra: everything will be alright. Everyone will work their hardest and everything will be alright.

“Before you go, can I ask you a favor?”

Chiaki blinked, a little surprised. What favor could she do? Well, it wasn’t like she was going to say no just after being granted her own. “Um, sure. What is it?”

“My mother lives with me,” Usami explained. “Recently she was administered to the hospital for a broken ankle. They just called me and said they’re releasing her tomorrow, but as I said, there’s a board meeting that day, so I can’t bring her home. Would you mind doing that for me instead? Normally I’d ask my personal assistant to do this, but she’s already got a prior engagement. I’ll pay you extra since it’s on such short notice and it’s not part of your duties…”

“Oh, it’s no problem. What’s the address and time?”

Smiling gratefully, Gekkogahara-san gave it to her, and she nodded, jotting it down in her phone. As Chiaki left, she was only thinking about getting to speak with Naegi-kun soon, rehearsing what she’d say, and anticipating the reunion with her friends that was sure to happen.

If she’d known that would be the last time she ever spoke to Gekkogahara Miaya, she would have said more. “Thank you for everything”, perhaps.

But she didn’t know, and she didn’t say those words, and her regret for that would stay with her the rest of her life.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Unanswered questions I had after DR3: why did Class 77 not tell Makoto and co about Chisa? Why did Monaca know about this super-secret Future Foundation
meeting? How did she get in position to kill Miaya?

Chisa helping her students by hiding their presence at the NWP is a headcanon I’ve had for a while, but I’m still not sure how much she knew about Tengan’s plan. Like we saw her give him the videos, so she was banking on him using them eventually, but was she actively conspiring with him to arrange the Final Killing Game? Did she get betrayed? Or was she counting on dying all along? It’s one of those things I think works better ambiguous, so in the end I had Chisa be vague about the details. How much she and Monaca really knew about Tengan’s plan is up to you.

Finally, there’s nothing to indicate how long passes between SDR2 and DR3. Probably not too long, Kyosuke would want to jump on that treason problem fast, but probably more than a couple days—organizing a big meeting would have taken time, and I don’t like the thought of the SDR2 cast waking up “instantly”. A month sounded right to me.
A quick phone call to the hospital and talk with her direct superior sorted out when Chiaki would pick up Gekkogahara-san’s mother. Avoiding rush hour—a nightmare ordinarily, never mind when escorting someone with a broken ankle—meant either getting up even earlier than normal, or leaving her shift sooner. Fortunately, everyone agreed to the latter, and so, at the end of her work next day, she headed over.

Gekkogahara Emi was a woman who had once been beautiful, but had it worn down by time. Her hair and eyes were several shades lighter than her daughter’s, so pale blue as to almost be white, nearly indiscernible from the fine silver streaks winding through her bun. She was very sweet and well-humored, cracking bad jokes about her broken foot and thanking Chiaki as she helped her with doors. Neither her crutches nor her big black boot seemed to hinder her energy and cheer. She also talked a lot.

“It’s always just been Miaya and me,” she said as they boarded the subway. “So we’ve always been a little overprotective of each other. It took me the longest time to trust her to get to school on her own…”

“I couldn’t be prouder of Miaya for what she’s accomplished,” she babbled as they left the subway. “Her peers always said she’d never make anything of herself because of her disability, but look at where she is now…”

“We didn’t always live in Meguro,” she chatted as they walked through the neighborhood. “Not until Miaya graduated Hope’s Peak and started getting a bunch of high-paying job offers. It’s a nice change, that’s for sure!”

Fortunately, she didn’t seem bothered by her companion’s polite “mhms” and awkward silences. It was a bit uncomfortable, being told all these personal details about her boss, and that made conversation exhausting. Chiaki couldn’t imagine how someone so chatty could be related to someone as shy as Gekkogahara-san.

The Gekkogaharas had a house, which Chiaki was beyond grateful for—she would have cried if Gekkogahara-san had one of those fancy penthouse apartments. It was a nice blend of modern and traditional, with stone-walled gardens and hipped roofs. It reminded her of her parents’ house. They’d lived in in Den-en-chōfu, in a far grander house, a far emptier house. She would spend all day there, alone and subdued, parents nowhere in sight, turning up the volume on her games just so the silence wouldn’t be so stifling…

Chiaki shook her head, as if the past was an annoying, buzzing fly that could be scared away. Emi-san, as she’d insisted on being called, smiled at her as they stepped up to the front door. “Thank you for escorting me. And for humoring my chatter. Not many have the patience for that
nowadays…”

Now she felt guilty for her earlier discomfort. “It was no trouble.”

Chiaki took the keys from Emi-san’s fumbling hand and filtered through them until a nod indicated she’d found the right one. Turning it in the lock, she held the door open. “Will you need me to grab you anything before I leave? Water, trip to the bathroom?”

The old woman shook her head as they stepped into the entrance hall. “Just help me into my room. I’ll just stay in bed and read a nice book until someone else gets home. Don’t bother kicking your shoes off,” she added, seeing Chiaki bend to do just that. “There’s no point when you’re leaving right away.”

That made sense, but it was still weird to walk through someone’s house with her shoes on. She helped Emi-san take her single shoe off and put it in the shoe cabinet. They shuffled past each other, and Chiaki opened the living room door.

What lay beyond was unexpected.

Then again…change, disruption, death…disturbances in one’s daily routine were always unexpected.

At first, she didn’t quite understand what she was seeing. The room beyond was a mess, tatami scuffled and furniture overturned. Gekkogahara-san was resting there, right at her feet, and her light blue eyes were staring up at Chiaki’s, and that shouldn’t be possible. Because—she was lying on her stomach, but looking straight up. And your head couldn’t turn completely around on your neck. It just couldn’t.

Not while you were alive, at least.

As soon as she had that thought, the rest of the world rushed back. The coppery smell of dried blood hit her nostrils. A scream of “Miaya!” ripped out from beside her. Emi-san’s crutches fell to the ground with a clatter. Automatically, Chiaki reached out and grabbed the other woman as her legs crumpled, holding her up, trying to keep her weight off her bad ankle.

Emi-san didn’t seem to care about her ankle. She flailed, shrieking her daughter’s name over and over, face a wild mask of hysteria. “No! Let go of me! Miaya!”

Chiaki didn’t answer. She couldn’t stop staring at those empty eyes. She’d thought the bodies in the Killing Game were horrifying, but this was so much worse. Here, there were smells and the glare of the lights and the sensation of sweat under her arms. Every one of her senses seemed to be magnified, drawing the room into horrible crystal clarity. “Gekkogahara-san?” she whispered.

“Miaya! Miaya, honey, answer me!”

The cogs of her brain finally, mechanically, grinded up. “I…I don’t think there’s anything we can…”

“Don’t say that! My baby needs my help—”

“We can’t touch her body!”

The word body rang through the air like a deep, ominous bell. At the sound of it, the fight drained out of Emi-san. She slumped over, weeping with enough force to shake her entire body.
But Chiaki couldn’t seem to make a sound. *Shouldn’t I be more disturbed?* Her boss was dead right in front of her. *Shouldn’t she also be screaming and crying? Why was everything just going numb instead? Had her life really become so full of death…so full of pain, so full of despair…that something like this was no longer shocking? That wasn’t comforting at all.*

A detached thought floated through her head. *We should go outside. Emi-san doesn’t need to look at this any longer than she already has.*

“C’mon,” Chiaki murmured gently, pulling the other woman up. “Let’s go somewhere else while we call for help…”

“I c-can’t…I can’t luh…leave her!”

“We won’t be far, I promise.”

She escorted Emi-san away, one hand dialing the police on her cell as the old woman’s heartbroken sobs filled the air.

The world crawled by at a dreadfully slow pace as they waited for the police to arrive. Emi-san was inconsolable, her crying terrible to listen to. Chiaki sat on the steps to the house, knees curled to her chest, gaze transfixed on a ladybug crawling across her shoe. She still couldn’t believe what she’d just seen.

Gekkogahara-san…she’d been so kind and welcoming. She never hesitated to loan an ear to her employees, and she’d been a staunch advocate for peace, someone working her hardest to find non-violent methods to despair. Her creation of the Neo World Program might have saved the people most important to Chiaki. She could surely have done even greater things in the future.

But she wouldn’t, because her life had been tragically cut short.

*I was just talking to her yesterday…*

Her chest clenched painfully, the numbness starting to wear off. Chiaki buried her head in her arms. A light breeze ruffled her hair. In the distance, there was a high-pitched wailing, growing louder until it filled her entire head. Sirens. The police.

Everything sped up again, a whirling rush of footsteps and voices and people. Chiaki was jostled away from Emi-san and interrogated. She told them what she’d been doing and gave them the name of Emi-san’s nurse at the hospital, to support the story. Her voice cracked throughout the report.

While the police compared her account to Emi-san’s and checked their alibis, another body was found, further inside the house. Female, identified as Gekkogahara-san’s personal care assistant. As more people hurried to make more calls, a cab pulled up. A suited figure stepped out. Chiaki would later remember that Future Foundation had ties to the police, but at the time she had no idea how they found out. All she knew was that suddenly Ueno-sensei had arrived, his dark face several shades paler and his hands lighting a cigarette as he spoke to an officer.

“Damn,” was all he muttered when he sat beside her. “Damn it.” He blew out a stream of smoke.

“What are you doing here?”

“We got word that Gekkogahara-san was killed. Akagi-kun sent me to check things out. The police didn’t give your name, so we didn’t know someone was already here…” A bitter smile twisted his
lips as he added, like an afterthought. “I’ve been promoted to new Acting Head. Hooray.”

She accepted the news with a solemn nod. “The coroner arrived a little while ago…I think they’re almost done.”

His eyes looked her over. “Are you alright, Watanabe-san?”

*Gekkogahara-san’s snapped neck is imprinted on the back of my eyelids. I’m fine.*

The pathetic conversation stuttered to a halt. Ueno-sensei waited with her quietly as the police continued to search and the coroner examined the bodies. Chiaki couldn’t have said how much time passed; her sense of it seemed to have melted away.

Eventually, the coroner announced that the two women had been dead for hours. Estimated time of death was sometime late last night or early this morning. No crime weapon was found at the scene, but judging from the wounds on their bodies, he deemed that the assistant had been taken off-guard, stabbed in the throat, and died instantly. Signs of a struggle indicated Gekkogahara-san had either fought or tried to run, as best she could, before being killed. The police’s search for how the intruder got in, another officer explained, had revealed a broken window near the small, private garden in the back. Unfortunately, the stone walls had prevented the neighbors from seeing anything, or even realizing anything was amiss at all.

“You’re free to go, ma’am,” the young, freckled officer finally finished, the police apparently having decided there was nothing more to be done here.

Chiaki rose slowly, knees popping. The sky was perpetually red, so there was no way to know for sure how long she’d been sitting on that pavement. But it felt like hours. It just might have been; her stomach was rumbling, a telltale sign it was past dinner. Ueno-sensei had gone through almost an entire box of cigarettes as he’d waited, and the ground by their feet was littered with the orange butts.

As she stretched, Ueno-sensei approached her, having stepped away briefly to take a call. His phone was clenched fiercely in his hand, his mouth drawn into a harsh, slanted line. “I’ve just received a call from Akagi-kun. I’m sure you want to go home, but we need to go back to the division building.”

She glanced up. “Why?”

“Officially? Akagi-kun wants to hear the first-hand account himself. Unofficially?” His eyes darted around, and his voice lowered. “There’s an emergency.”

A chill ran up her spine, and she nodded without further protest. They passed Emi-san as they left. One of the neighbors, a young man, had come over to investigate the commotion. He was now sitting near her, trying to coax her into drinking some water. He’d wrapped her in a blanket and propped her broken ankle up on a pillow. Emi-san was shivering; her eyes were hollow, and she hadn’t spoken since giving her account to the police. Chiaki glanced at her, pity settling in her stomach. “What about Emi-san?”

Ueno-sensei followed her gaze. His brown eyes softened in rare sympathy. “Future Foundation will put her under protection and find a place for her to stay. I doubt she wants to sleep in that house any time soon. But we need to go now.”

She chewed her lip, gaze darting back to the forlorn figure. “Gimme a minute,” she decided.

Without waiting for an answer, she hurried over to the old woman’s side. Her neighbor glanced up,
his eyes wary but not unfriendly. Crouching, Chiaki licked her lips. “I’m sorry.”

Emi-san just blinked at her.

Chiaki searched for more words. She wished she had something more to say, something deep and profound and insightful. But that was all she could offer. Just “I’m sorry”.

Gekkogahara-san’s voice, a ghost from a memory of one of her seminars, floated through her head, “Sometimes, offering condolences is all you can do for your client. And that’s okay. It’s better to be simple and honest than give fake advice.”

It didn’t feel like it was enough. It never felt like it was enough.

She waited a heartbeat, but Emi-san didn’t respond, just lowered her head. The gamer rose quietly, smoothing out her skirt. Then she hurried away and followed Ueno-sensei to a cab.

The seventh division building had been closed to the public. But the interior was a bustle of grim activity and nerves, the employees antsy and the air crackling with tension. Chiaki was escorted immediately to Akagi-san, who looked to be reeling from his unexpected promotion, where she was quickly told to impart everything. And so, for the second time that day, Chiaki gave her account of events.

Akagi-san looked even more weary and drawn when she was done. He ran a hand through his mullet, then pulled his glasses off and pressed his face into his palm. His voice was a little muffled when he spoke. “They were sure it was her?”

“Positive.” Chiaki nodded. “Her mother was there, she identified her right away…the poor woman was hysterical…”

He swore lowly. “Damn it. Gekkogahara-san being murdered would be bad enough on its own, but now with all this…”

Chiaki looked between them. There was a bleak ambiance in the room, a certain tightness to the two men’s faces. Grief was normal in a situation like this, of course, they’d all loved Gekkogahara-san, but this…this was a different type somehow. Not the sort that came from hearing bad news…rather, the type that came from having pieces of bad news dropped on you one after the other.

“What’s happening, sir?” she asked tentatively.

Ueno-sensei and Akagi-san exchanged glances. “She’ll find out soon enough anyway,” the latter finally sighed, just as his phone started ringing. The tired sloop of his shoulders grew as he glanced at the number. “Can you explain it to her, Ueno-kun? I need to take this…”

As the redhead walked out, her former mentor turned back to her. “There’s no easy way to say this,” he said after a short pause. “Gekkogahara-san’s murder is such a shock…moreso of a shock, rather…because we senior members saw her off this morning.”

Chiaki blinked. “What?”

“We saw her off this morning,” he repeated. “She got on a helicopter and flew to the meeting. I was there myself, I spoke to her. I…” Ueno-sensei shook his head, voice trailing off. A shaking hand withdrew a box of cigarettes from his pocket and flicked it open. He muttered a low curse when he saw it was empty.
Icy claws of dread dug into Chiaki’s skin. “If Gekkogahara-san is dead…who went to the meeting?”

“That’s the big question,” he sighed, forcefully throwing the box in the trash. “But that’s not even the worst part. We can’t get in contact with anyone there. Phone calls, emails, texts, nothing’s going through. If one leader was killed…”

She filled in the blank. “The others might be in danger too. Gekkogahara-san’s murder and this blackout…they have to be connected.”

“Exactly.”

“So, what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

Chiaki frowned. The honest answer was not what she’d expected, nor wanted. She’d wanted reassurances. A plan of action. Something. Anything to alleviate the nervousness itching in her chest.

“…Is there anything I can do to help?”

Ueno-sensei pressed his fingers to his forehead, rubbing in small circles. “Stay in the building and wait for Akagi-kun’s orders. Everyone’s on overtime until this is resolved.”

It was late at night when news finally came. Chiaki had called her neighbor and asked them to feed Yumigami; grabbed a quick bite from a snack machine; and then, rather than go to her small office, curled up in a chair in a third-floor lobby. Her phone was in hand, her fingers tapping at Battle Cats. It felt strange to be playing games while in such a state of tension, but the familiarity of it was calming.

“Hello everyone.” The entire room jumped at the sound of Akagi-san’s voice; it had been deathly quiet for so long that the blare of the intercom was as startling as cold douse of water. As one, their heads tilted towards the ceiling, expectant.

They were not long in waiting. “As I’m sure you’re all aware of by now, our beloved branch leader, Gekkogahara Miaya-san, was murdered sometime yesterday or today. Someone wearing her face has gone to the board meeting in her stead, and all attempts to reach those there have failed.

“I’ve been communicating with the other divisions, coordinating our efforts to get to the bottom of all this, and Togami Byakuya of Branch 14 recently informed us of several things. First, that he suspects Gekkogahara-san’s murder was incited by Towa Monaca; second, that he already has agents on Towa’s trail; and third, that he was finally able to establish a connection with Naegi Makoto and Asahina Aoi, who were at the meeting.”

Smiles and applause broke out around the room. Chiaki waited quietly. She’d had a nagging fear that it was her classmate, the Ultimate Imposter, who’d killed Gekkogahara-san, and it was a relief for that to be dispelled. But she sensed there was a catch coming up. And she was right.

“The news is dire, I’m afraid to say.” Akagi-san paused. “Those at the meeting have been trapped in a killing game.”

It was almost comical how quickly the mood shifted. A stunned, disbelieving silence descended on everyone. Empathy for Kirigiri-san, Asahina-san, and Naegi-kun surged through Chiaki. She had
an awful enough time reliving that maze in her nightmares; being in the exact same situation all over again, for real, must be horrible beyond words for them.

“We were able to trace the call, but we know very little about the situation, so for the time being we are treating it as if it were a repeat of the Second Killing Game. That is, as if they are trapped in an enclosed location with outside defenses. A rescue mission is of utmost priority, and we reached a decision that Togami-kun will lead an advance force to scout while the rest of us mobilize.

“Though we are not a combat division, we have received military training like every other branch, and as such we are required to send aid. Twenty people from the cyber department and twenty people from the therapist department have been selected to go. Those remaining here will be on standby until the situation changes.”

A pause. “I’m sorry for conscripting, but this is an emergency. If you hear your name called, please report to Room 622.”

Everyone in the lobby seemed to hold their breath as name after name was recited. Chiaki listened, biting her lip, so filled with hope and expectation she could barely stand it. A single thought, a single resolution, had exploded into her head ever since the full situation was explained, and that was all she was centered on.

I’m sorry Kamukura-kun, but I have to help. I hope you aren’t angry with me for hoping I can.

There was a spark of fear in her chest, of course. This mission would likely be dangerous, and she’d had her life’s fill of danger. But this wasn’t a matter of what she wanted. Because Yukizome-sensei must have attended the meeting, must be in peril. Even knowing the risks, knowing what Yukizome-sensei was and had done to her, Chiaki couldn’t abandon her. The events of the past week—her memories fading, obtaining her license, and now Gekkogahara-san’s murder—had sparked a fuse in her chest. A desire to no longer stand on the sidelines, but to be actively partake in working towards a reunion.

Please, please let me get the chance to do something to help...

“—Watanabe Keiko, therapist department. Honda Michio, therapist department—”

Thank you.

She immediately hurried to the stairwell, running to the once-forbidden sixth floor with a burst of determined energy. As she passed through it, she could tell why it used to be restricted access: the rooms she caught glimpses of were hives of technology and weapons, a reminder that Future Foundation was more than just a simple restoration or research company; it was a military force as well. Fittingly, the best way to describe the huge Room 622 was ‘war room’. The back half of the room was elevated, the walls covered with large monitors and computer equipment. Shadowy figures crouched over them, hard at work. The front half was dominated by a large, circular table; several of the chairs were already filled with the senior members of the division—Akagi-san, Hayami-sensei, Ueno-sensei...

Her former mentor instantly spotted her and stepped over. “I hope you’re up for this, Watanabe-san,” he said. “I told them you’d never been in the field before, but Hayami-san was adamant you come—”

“She has some of the highest marksmanship scores in the division,” the combat instructor called, sounding irritated. “And it’s not like we’re throwing her on the front lines. A rescue mission’s a nice, safe first mission, and she’ll be in the reserve squad.”
So that was what got her assigned to the mission. But, more surprisingly… this was the second time today Ueno-sensei had hinted at concern for her. She couldn’t help feeling a little touched. “I’ll be fine,” she said firmly. “Part of me’s glad, honestly. I wanted to help.”

Ueno-sensei searched her eyes. What he saw there must have convinced him, for nodding slowly, he stepped back and let her take a chair. Despite how many floors she’d had to run up, her resolution had given her wings; there were only half a dozen conscripts there before her.

One by one, more people drifted in. The same image was stamped on all their faces: fear and worry, but also resolve and a desire to avenge. Chiaki had to swallow down a lump of emotion. This was nothing like her own ill-fated rescue mission. This was a group of professionals coming together after a careful plan, not a ragtag bunch of teenagers. She suddenly felt fiercely proud to be a part of the Future Foundation.

When everyone had arrived, Akagi-san stood. “I’m not very good with words,” he began. “But thank you all for being here. I know I didn’t leave you with much choice by my conscription, but I’m sure if she were still alive, Gekkogahara-san would be proud of everyone here.”

He paused, letting them all bow their heads respectfully. “Hayami-san and I will be leading the rescue. Ueno-kun will be staying here to organize a defense; we can’t discount the possibility of other attacks coming. Helicopters are being prepared as we speak. It’s an hour to our destination, and we leave in another. Hayami-san and I will brief you on mission details, then we’ll gear up and head out.

He gave Chiaki and some of the people near her—the people she’d trained alongside—a glance. “I know, for some of you, this will be your first time in the field. Don’t fear, you’ll be in the back lines, while the more experienced members go up front.

“Now, the cyber department will be setting up surveillance and, if possible, hacking the network for information. The therapist department will be guarding them, and will also be on standby to assist in search-and-rescue or medical evacuation if necessary…”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *whispers* I'm sorry Miaya

Just looking at Future Foundation branch duties, they basically have fingers in every pocket of society. So, if it isn’t clear by now, my interpretation of how they work is part-government, part-socioeconomics, and part-military. As such, all able-bodied personnel serve as a military reserve force, and can be called on for deployment if necessary—and there’s no way a crisis of nearly all branch heads disappearing wouldn’t count as “necessary”.
A/N: Hey, if y’all could offer up a quick prayer or well-wishes for those hit by Hurricane Harvey, that’d mean a lot to me. I’m from the area, and my family’s fine, but others aren’t. My tumblr’s got a tag, “hurricane-harvey”, that has information on how to help people, if you want to take a more active role or even just reblog. Address is just my username, no dashes or anything. Thanks for your time.

Disclaimer: I hate writing combat scenes. I am not very good at writing combat scenes. I apologize in advance for this upcoming combat scene. I researched best I could, but describing it is another matter entirely.

Disclaimer #2: There are some direct quotes from the anime here. They are obviously not mine.

She didn’t sleep on the ride over. Chiaki was distantly aware that she should at least try to catch a quick nap, but her mind was buzzing too much. Instead, she busied herself looking over her equipment—camos, bulletproof vest, SIG Sauer pistol, ammunition, headset and mic…standard reserve military fare. She knew the main military had even more, helmets and rifles and wearing jet-black head to foot.

Not long into the flight, Hayami-sensei poked her head out from the cockpit, one hand clutching a hanging strap tightly. “There’s an update on the situation.” Her face was grim, a poor sign.

“Togami and those with him breached the building. While they explored, they triggered an explosion somehow, and now they and the entrance are buried under rubble. And we still don’t know where any of the people from the meeting are.”

They accepted the news with solemn nods. The helicopter forged on.

Sometime later, the island’s harsh black cliffs came into view, solid shapes against the red sky. In contrast, the landing pad below was in stark definition, brightly lit to guide the helicopters in touchdown. Chiaki could see figures scurrying back and forth on it as they drew closer, and the collapsed tower. From this distance, they looked like ants swarming around fallen building blocks.

Their descent was smooth and uninterrupted. A short distance away, Chiaki saw that the second helicopter, carrying the other half of the seventh division’s forces, had already landed, and Akagisan was striding towards them. He had to yell to be heard over the loud whip of the rotorblades.

“Listen up, everyone! There’s a network jamming signal attacking the wi-fi. We can hack a way past it if we connect directly to the computer network. To the west there’s a vessel traffic service tower, that’s where we’re going. Group A, we’re setting up surveillance to watch for Remnant forces. Group B, you’re combing the corporate building for clues. Everyone follow me!”

The collapsed building was surrounded by two thick, circular strips of pavements, connected by bridges. A single bridge led from the landing pad to the entrance like an inverse castle and moat. The two groups walked around the circumference of the inner ring, passing a few other buildings
and people carrying equipment or stretchers.

When they set foot in the VTS tower, ten of the twenty therapists stayed on the first floor to make defenses. The other half, including Chiaki, followed the cyber department up. She split off from them at the elevator, looking mournfully at the stairs before bucking her shoulders and starting to climb.

She was the last to arrive, emerging from the stairwell to see everyone else setting up. The visual control room was circular, completely glass to watch the air and sea for incoming traffic. There was another stairwell, and when Chiaki explored it, she saw it led to another, smaller room, filled with computers and stacked atop this one like layers of a wedding cake. Two guards were already stationed inside, right by the entrance. She quickly went back down, helping to overturn tables and push consoles to create cover. When that was done, she took up her appointed position and stood guard.

It did not take her long to realize that sentry duty was boring. It varied between watching the radar, watching the horizon, watching the occupants, and watching the room’s entrances. And that was it. Just watching and rotating positions every twenty minutes.

As time crawled by, the cyber department sent down reports. They hadn’t found anything in the building, and suspected that the killing game was being held in a secret, nearby location, with a separate computer network. Without knowing where a mainframe to that network was, they couldn’t connect directly, and thus couldn’t do anything. Currently they were browsing Future Foundation files to see if they contained any clues. Other divisions reported they’d started rescuing a handful of people from the rubble. Chiaki held her breath every time a name was reported, but she heard no mention of Yukizome-sensei, or anyone at the meeting at all.

“We’re under attack!”

The voice in her ear was loud, unexpected, and startling. She gasped, one hand going to her headset. It was her second turn standing guard in the upper room, and the calmness of the atmosphere had lulled her into relaxing. Around her, the cyber department, who had been buried in their computers since the jamming signal went down just a few minutes ago, jerked in shock.

“Keep working, I’ll focus on this,” Akagi-san told them, then tuned into the headset. “Arakawa-kun, right? What’s your status?”

They waited with bated breath. Silence was all that greeted them.

“Arakawa, what’s your status?!” This time it was Hayami-sensei who demanded it, loud and angry and wrought with worry.

“Hey,” one of the technicians called nervously, making Chiaki start—she’d almost forgotten there were other people around. “There’s a ship approaching.”

“Hail them, obviously!” Akagi-san snapped, only half-paying attention. “Arakawa-kun, come in!”

Chiaki tuned the cyber department out as the headset crackled to life again, the man on the other end finally responding. But his voice wasn’t as clear, broken up by gunfire and static. “Main military—nowhere—attacking us! Our own—need backup! We need—”

There was a shot, a scream, and then nothing. Chiaki touched her headset in hesitant shock. Questions flew by in quick succession. Did I just hear someone die? Did he say our own soldiers were attacking us? Why would they do that? What’s going on?
In the stunned silence that followed, the voice responding to the hail rang loud and clear. “...to help.”

She actually stumbled backwards, rear hitting the console behind her softly. That voice. It was soft, masculine, and slow. It was a voice that made her heart pick up and her stomach flip. Kamukura-kun...!

Chiaki almost threw herself forward and screamed the Konami code into the radio. Only her shock and a tenuous grasp of her surroundings, of Hayami-sensei yelling orders in her ear and the fight going on down below, kept her in place. Still—her heart soared. He’s back! He’s here!

“Reinforcements? What division are you in?”

“We aren’t in one. We’re...unofficial help.” We! He said we! Everyone else is here too! “Togami Byakuya called for us.”

The technician glanced at Akagi-san uncertainly. “Sir?”

“It’s fine,” he said. “Tell them to head over to—”

“Are you sure? We can’t get in contact with Togami-san to verify—”

“That’s a Future Foundation vessel.” Akagi-san sounded as if he were fighting to keep his voice even. “I think that’s a good source of credibility. More than that, our own military has apparently turned against us. We need every bit of help we can get.”

The technician quietly obeyed, telling Kamukura-kun to dock at Pier 6. Chiaki was all prepared to ask where Pier 6 was and run there herself when Hayami-sensei’s impatient voice rattled in her ear, unwelcome. “—understand, Watanabe?”

“Huh?” she stammered, having not heard whatever the combat instructor had said. There was too much going on—too much begging her attention—her head was spinning from ping-ponging between things like this—

“I said, you and Honda are staying up here to guard the cyber division. Everyone else is heading down for backup. Do you understand?”

Her spirits sank. “…Affirmative.”

There was no way she could leave now. There was a fight going on, and there were people who needed her protection, and…and she couldn’t go running off on her own again. Not with no idea of where she was going. But oh, she wanted to see her friends so much. She wanted it so badly. More than ever, determination flared deep in her. They absolutely had to succeed here. She would see her friends again after this. They’d help, they and Naegi-kun would explain everything, and surely that would be enough to get them pardoned. She’d been waiting years already, she could wait just a little bit longer.

It was not long before Hayami-sensei called them up on the headset again. “Watanabe, Honda, be on guard. A couple of soldiers slipped past us. They’re heading up for you now. I’ll try to get there as soon as possible, just hold out.”

At this they glanced at each other, then at the cyber department. They were on the same frequency; they’d also heard the warnings. Though their faces had paled, they still focused on the monitors...
before them. “You should start preparing,” Akagi-san said, and only the slight waver in his voice betrayed his careful composure.

“You should start preparing,” Akagi-san said, and only the slight waver in his voice betrayed his careful composure.

“Barricade yourselves in,” she told them. “Don’t come down until we tell you it’s safe.”

Her nerves buzzed as she slowly crept down the stairs. Chiaki peered around. The tower’s height and glass windows gave an excellent overview of the island; down below were flashes of light on the ground and wisps of smoke rising into the sky. It was a strange, silent world, and she stared, wondering if her friends were caught up in it.

Honda-kun cautiously lowered his gun. “We should probably—”

He didn’t have time to finish the sentence. The door was kicked open by a man wearing a Future Foundation military uniform. The light gleamed off the visor of his helmet as he levelled a gun around the room. For a moment, she and Honda-kun were too surprised to move. It was one thing to hear you were being attacked by your own side; it was quite another to see proof in its entirety.

Then the intruder started firing. They both dropped down. Glass shattered. To Chiaki’s left, Honda-kun screamed. Her breath caught. It didn’t matter she didn’t know him very well, all she could think of was that a comrade was hurt, and there were people behind her needing protection, and that she couldn’t afford to screw up again.

Future Foundation body armor covered much of the chest, but left the limbs unprotected. Chiaki saw this, got up on a knee, raised her handgun, and fired twice. She didn’t even think about it. She just acted.

She rarely missed in target practice. She did not miss now.

Blood blossomed out of both the man’s legs. He screamed and crumpled, clutching at them. Chiaki froze. She could hear her heartbeat pounding in her ears. Inanely, wildly, she thought, that man is hurt.

I should help him.

Nevermind that she’d been the one to shoot him, or that he’d attacked first. Natural human empathy took over, and she lowered the gun a fraction, blustering, “Oh my god, are you alri—”

Two more soldiers rushed up. She broke off mid-sentence, diving behind the barricade. Gunfire rang out, ripping through the space she’d been moments before. Honda-kun was already bunkered down, bleeding from his hip. His eyes were stretched wide, the whites completely visible, and his hands trembled around his pistol. “Why are they shooting at us?!?” he screamed.

Frustrated, confused, and scared, Chiaki yelled back, “I don’t know!” What’s going on? Where’s the rest of the division? What about my friends? I can’t lose them, not when we’re right on the cusp of—

Her ears perked up at a notable lull in the fire. Reloading. Taking a deep breath, Chiaki poked her head over the barricade. She had seconds to pick a target, and her eyes darted between the duo, trying to choose—

No time. They were slamming the magazines into place. She picked one at random and fired off a quick round, this time into his upper arm. He dropped his gun, mouth twisting in pain, but didn’t go down. Two more shots to the chest fixed that. One from Chiaki, one from Honda-kun. She prayed the body armor was enough to cushion the blows. She didn’t want to kill anyone, she just wanted this to be over. And limb shots clearly weren’t enough.
She ducked back down, flinching at the *rat-tat-tat* of the rifle, mere milliseconds later. Mentally, Chiaki counted how many bullets she had left, peered around the side—oh god, *another* three had arrived, how many were there? But they couldn’t enter the fight; the stairway was narrow and clogged with two bodies, now, preventing more than a pair at a time from coming up. And for whatever reason, they weren’t using cover. These were only slight advantages, but they were just enough.

The battle went on in this manner for a few minutes, and then, fast as it started, it ended. All was quiet except for low groans. Despite all the guns that had been fired, Future Foundation’s cutting-edge headset technology had done its job; Chiaki’s ears were ringing no more than if she’d been in the range alone.

Chiaki shook slightly as she crouched to examine Honda-kun. His breathing was rapid and shallow, face contorted with pain. His eyes were closed, but he forced them open when her shadow fell across him. “It’s over?”

“Yeah.”

Footsteps. She raised her gun again, but it was a group of familiar faces. The rest of her squad, supporting each other over the bodies in the stairwell and entering the room. Surprise and respect were written on their features.

“I’m sorry, Watanabe, Honda,” Hayami-sensei rasped. Her face looked pale, her breathing ragged. Chiaki could see her pressing a hand under her right armpit, red spreading around it. “They slipped past us, and the situation was so bad, we couldn’t leave until we finished up. I should have left more with you. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, but Honda-kun’s hurt. What about the people downstairs?”

Her face became shadowed. “I’ve got a couple injured with me. Everyone else is dead. Matsumoto, help Honda.”

As the brunette moved to do so, Chiaki balked at Hayami-sensei’s words. “Dead?”

“That’s what I *said*, Watanabe. Us fourteen are all that’s left of the guard, and less than half of us are in good condition.”

“What about—what about those people who said they came to help? Did you see them?”

“Nah, they must have gone somewhere else. Dunno where.” Hayami-sensei turned to the rest of the room, still clutching at her wound. “You two, sweep the halls and make sure none are left. Everyone else, see to the injured. Including the attackers.”

From his spot leaning against the barricade, Honda-kun protested, “They were firing at us!”

“They’re still members of Future Foundation,” the combat instructor snarled. “And until we know what’s going on, we’ll treat them as such.”

As the rest moved into action, Chiaki’s legs buckled. She’d help in a bit. She just—she needed a moment. Now that the adrenaline was fading, she felt—drained. Elated at surviving. The slightest bit remorseful, as she heard one or two pronounced dead.

But that was it. Only a little remorseful. Beyond that…nothing. And that was disquieting.

Why were remorse and guilt so scarce?
Maybe it was because she wasn’t sure she had killed them? It wasn’t like there was any way to know for sure she’d fired the fatal bullets. Maybe it had been Honda-kun.

But maybe it had been her. So, shouldn’t she be feeling worse? Shouldn’t she feel different? Wasn’t killing supposed to leave some sort of mark on you?

It had been kill or be killed. She knew that. She just thought…

She didn’t know.

Her phone rang in her pocket.

“Ignore it!” She jumped at Hayami-sensei’s bark, but it hadn’t been directed at her. The scarred woman was clutching a radio and glaring at a startled-looking therapist, who was frozen in the act of taking his phone out. It hadn’t been just hers that had rung, Chiaki realized. Everyone’s had.

“I—but it might be—”

“Ignore it!” Hayami-sensei stopped, gasping for breath. Someone had dressed her wound, but it was soaking through again. Even though she’d taken a seat, she was sweating heavily, and her face was red. Chiaki wondered, with a flash of concern, if a major artery or an organ had been hit.

“Togami came back online…he’s figured it out. Someone’s…sending out a brainwashing video…”

“A video?” Someone squeaked.

“Yeah…the main military wears…these helmets with built-in video…and special frequencies. They got hit first…now this person…is trying to broadcast it…to everyone else…”

Chiaki suddenly had the urge to throw her phone far away from her. Judging from the shocked and scared expressions on everyone else’s faces, they were fighting the same reaction. Those poor people…they didn’t have a choice…

What a horrid, tragic, despairing affair this was.

Hayami-sensei’s eyes fluttered closed, and she groaned. Chiaki gasped and started to move towards her. Matsumoto-san beat her there, hurriedly pulling out more bandages and the field IV equipment. Biting her lip, the gamer turned away, reaching for one of the first-aid kits they’d brought. Now that she was up, she might as well help.

And for a while, that was soothing. Now that she had a task to focus on, she could compartmentalize all those emotions away. The two scouts returned, reported the building to be clear, and then dove in. It wasn’t truly peaceful, but Chiaki still felt herself calm somewhat.

“Hey, um, this might be a stupid question…” Matsumoto-san said after a while, breaking the silence. “But…shouldn’t someone from the cyber department have come to check on us by now?”

“Oh,” Chiaki said, glancing up, “we told them to barricade themselves in and not come out until we said it was safe.”

They all paused.

*We told them to barricade themselves in.*

*There’s a brainwashing video being broadcast.*

*The room they’re in is full of monitors.*
It sank in for everyone at the exact same time. “Shit!”

Chiaki fumbled with her headset. “Cyber department? Can you hear me? It’s Watanabe! Don’t look at the computers, just come straight down! They’ll brainwash you! Cyber department?”

No answer. She glanced at the stairwell, indecisive. Should I go up to check? If they were brainwashed, they might attack her. Or maybe she’d get brainwashed too. She didn’t know. She didn’t know!

She swore softly. “Hayami-sensei, they’re not answering—”

Chiaki turned to see Hayami-sensei lying still, eyes closed and complexion gray. A trickle of blood was running from the corner of her mouth. “Hayami-sensei?”

“S-She’s not waking up!”

“Oh god, is she dead?!”

“Shut up and let me check!” Matsumoto-san shrieked, voice cracking with stress. She crouched by their squad leader’s side, searching for a pulse. Everyone quieted.

“She’s still alive, just unconscious,” the brunette reported after a few seconds, to sighs of relief. “But...I think the bullet hit something inside...and there’s no exit wound, so it’s probably stuck there. Or maybe it hit a bone and broke apart? I...I don’t know…”

“Is there anything we can do?” Honda-kun rasped, eyes fluttering open.

“No, she needs—she needs more than what we have! A proper doctor, a-and surgery, or she’s really going to die!” Matsumoto-san began to cry.

Panic started to spread. In a couple moments, Chiaki knew hysteria would break out, and then the situation would be unsalvageable. Someone had to seize control, and fast. Buried deep in her, unused for so long, the part of her that had been leader of Class 77 emerged. “Everyone!” she yelled. “Okay, look, I have a plan!”

Everybody stopped instantly and looked at her, wide-eyed relief spreading. She suspected it was less because of her and more because they were just glad to have someone taking charge. For a moment, she quailed under their expectations, the ghost of failure whispering in her ear.

Chiaki licked her lips. “Okay,” she said, mentally organizing a list. There are fourteen of us, eight wounded. If this were a video game, what would I be doing? “First, we need two people to barricade the upstairs from this side and keep watch, in case the cyber department does try to attack.”

She pointed at random, and they scrambled to obey. Chiaki continued, “You two, stand guard outside. Matsumoto-san, keep watch over the injured. Now, we need a doctor for Hayami-sensei. She was using a radio to communicate with the other divisions, right? Can someone pass it to me?”

Sweaty palms pressed it into her hand. Chiaki fiddled with it for a few moments, trying to remember how it worked and what frequency the fourth division was on. Hoping for the best, she pressed the button down and spoke. “Um, this is the seventh division. Is anyone from the fourth division listening?”

A pause. “We hear you. What’s your status?”
“We’ve been attacked. One of us has serious injuries, we need a surgeon.”

“Can you bring them to the field hospital?”

She looked around. “I—no, we don’t have enough people for that. Can you send a surgeon?”

“We’re pinned down. We can’t divert any of our soldiers to play escort. You’ll have to come and do it yourself.”

She swallowed, throat going dry. “Affirmative.”

Closing the connection, she turned and saw quiet fear; the radio was loud enough that the entire room had heard the exchange. Chiaki bit her lip. “Well, you heard them. Don’t worry; I’ll run down and fetch the doctor myself.”

“You’re going alone?” Matsumoto-san’s voice wavered.

“I have to. You’re pretty much the last uninjured person here, and someone has to stay with the wounded.” Don’t bring them with you like Komaeda-kun. “Oh! Don’t forget to tie the attackers up and take their weapons away.”

She paused, looked around. They probably need some encouragement now… “If more soldiers come in, we can defeat them, even injured. You saw them fighting earlier, right? Like amateurs. I think… I think the brainwashing, this version at least, affects their higher cognitive functions. They only did so well before because they took us by surprise, but now we’re prepared. So, let’s stay strong and not give up hope!”

Someone called, “If more attack… should we kill them?”

Chiaki closed her eyes. She suddenly felt as if the weight of the world was pressing on her shoulders. It wasn’t the first time she’d felt the burden of a leader’s decisions, but it was the first time she’d properly appreciated just how heavy it was. “Incapacitate them if you can, but if you can’t…” She sighed. “Do what you must to protect yourself.”

As she headed downstairs, Chiaki started to shake. Somehow, she’d managed to keep calm when everyone was staring at her. But now that she was alone, all her repressed fear was rushing back.

What if I gave the wrong orders? What if I’ve done something wrong again? What if people die because of me? What if I die this time?

She paused in the stairwell, sinking down as the tears finally came. And for a moment, she let them. She let herself cry, let herself be Nanami Chiaki, the girl who may have just killed, the girl who just wanted to be with her loved ones again, the girl who was so, so, so scared.

And then, as she stood, she took all those feelings and placed them in an inner box. Her legs began to shake less as she mentally strapped the box’s lids down. Her steps were more even as she locked that box behind a huge, enormous safe. Her shoulders relaxed as she imagined the safe’s door slamming into place. By the time she’d reached the bottom of the stairs, slightly winded from her run down, Chiaki had felt herself enter ‘gaming mode’—that tunnel vision she got when her attention was centered solely on the game at hand.

People were relying on her. She had a job to do. She could deal later.

As she stepped into the lobby, ignoring the corpses of her comrades, Chiaki raised the radio again.
“Fourth division, where are you located?”

“There’s a gray building on the outermost ring, directly across the control tower. See it?”

She looked out the window. “Yes, I do.”

Clipping the radio to her belt, she took another breath, psyched herself up, then stepped outside. A world of gunfire, rain, yells and smoke rushed her senses. Chiaki peered around. The worst of the fighting was probably around the meeting building, where the bulk of the main military and rescue forces had been congregated, but even halfway around the perimeter, there were still a few battles.

*Okay, try to remember. These two rings have bridges connecting them. I think the closest one was...that way? Mustn’t get this wrong...*

Chiaki took off running, trying to move cover to cover. There wasn’t much, only a few parked vehicles, knocked over crates, and stray sandbags. The strip had far too much open ground for her comfort, and she stayed low.

A spray of bullets exploded into the ground right in front of her, sending tiny slivers of pavement flying. She stumbled to a halt and raised an arm to shield her face, wincing as tiny cuts were torn open on the limb. Chiaki searched the area rapidly, heart beating panicked wings in her chest, but no one was looking at her. It seemed to be stray fire. She took a precious second to force her breathing back under control, then kept running.

There it was. The gray building. Despite her misgivings, she’d reached it unnoticed. A sandbag barricade was raised around it, still bodies lying on the ground. The soldiers on the other side tensed at her approach. Her heart stopped as she found herself staring down a dozen muzzles.

“I’m not brainwashed!” she yelled, raising her hands. “I’m from Seven! I talked to your leader on the radio!”

They lowered their weapons, waving her in. She scrambled over the sandbags, hopping down onto the other side. “Surgeon?” she gasped out.

“Tsushima-kun’s getting ready in the back. Last tent on your left.” One pointed, and she barely gave a nod of acknowledgement before sprinting in the direction he’d indicated. *Wait, tent? This is indoors.*

She soon saw what the man meant by tent. The building was evidently a garage or warehouse of some kind, massive enough to hold many camo green tents. It was a bustle of activity, people rushing to and from, carrying patients on stretchers, moving medical equipment, and yelling orders. Her heart twisted—*how many wounded are there? How many casualties?*—but she didn’t stop.

Reaching the designated tent, she pushed through it, calling the surgeon’s name. She found a young man in his mid-thirties at the back, shaved bald and sloppily dressed, bent over an unconscious woman. He muttered angrily to himself as he injected something into her veins, checking a monitor.

“Tsushima-kun?” she called, and he started, glancing up. His eyes were wild, dark half-moons formed underneath them.

“You’re the one from Seven, right? Just—give me a moment—Doi-kun!” He yelled into his own headset. “Doi-kun, this is Tsushima. I need you to take over here!”

Chiaki gritted her teeth, hopping in impatience as precious seconds ticked by before a young man...
finally scrambled in. After whispering hurried instructions, Tsushima-kun broke apart. “Sorry! I was going to pack, then she started going into shock, and I had to attend to her—”

He talked very fast. Seeming to realize she could barely understand him and that he was wasting time besides, Tsushima-kun took a deep breath, shook his head, and slowed. “Nevermind. You said someone needed me. What’s the injury and what are the symptoms?”

Chiaki felt so stupid. Why didn’t I think to say that over the radio? “Shot under the armpit, probably from a standard military-issued rifles. Labored breathing, sweating, fainting, and she started bleeding from the mouth just before I left.”

Tsushima-kun was moving around, throwing equipment into a tattered black bag as she spoke. He paused at her final words, gaze darkening. “Was she shot on the right side or left side?”

“Right.”

He relaxed a fraction. “Alright, that’s good. Harder to hit the heart on that side. Blood type?”

“I don’t know, but we’ve already set up a field transfusion.”

“That’s good, that’s excellent...still, just in case…” He grabbed a small cooler, hefting up his bag in his other hand. *He must have done this dozens of times before,* she realized as he gestured for her to lead.

Unfortunately, her luck did not hold on the return trip. As they approached the bridge, a pair of soldiers rounded the perimeter. They spotted each other instantly. Their rifles came up.

The only thing resembling nearby cover was a parked helicopter. Chiaki dove behind it. Too slow. Pain exploded along her left arm, and she couldn’t hold back a scream.

*I won’t die here! I absolutely won’t die here! I’ll see everyone again!*

The problem with gunfights was, there was so little that would drop a person instantly, and she couldn’t stick around. Someone would die if she didn’t finish this escort mission quickly. Headshots were pretty much a guarantee, though; at worst, the pair would be knocked out good. They might even survive, depending on how much the helmets dulled the impact. And they were only three or four meters away. She could make that shot.

Pressing her injured arm under the right for steadiness, Chiaki spun out of cover, raised herself onto a knee, and fired off two return shots. Her grip wasn’t good enough; the recoil knocked her arm into her nose. Stars winked in front of her eyes. But the soldiers’ heads jerked backwards. They fell, rifles firing uselessly into the air.

It was getting easier. That was disturbing. She didn’t want it to get easier.

Now that the danger had passed, Tsushima-kun was instantly by her side, pulling out bandages. “It can wait,” she insisted, and he glared.

“Blood loss is not something to be trifled with, especially when there isn’t time to check how bad that is. It won’t take more than a few seconds.”

She pursed her lips, but recognizing the truth of that, allowed him to tie a hasty tourniquet around the limb. Blood dripped from her nose, staining her lips, but there was less they could do about that except wipe it away. “Can we get going now?”
“After you.”

This time, Chiaki kept her pistol out of its holster when they resumed running. Each step jostled her arm, sending a fresh wave of agony up it, but she gritted her teeth and shoved it aside.

*This pain is nothing. Compared to the maze, this pain is nothing.*

They’d almost made it to the VTS tower when Chiaki saw more soldiers approaching. She swore, glancing between the doors and the military. Run or fight? She didn’t want to expose her back, but there wasn’t cover here—

But then, to her astonishment, the soldiers stopped short.

“What’s happening?” she hissed at Tsushima-kun, poised to run, unsure if it was a trap of some kind. He looked just as lost as she.

“I think,” he said slowly, watching the soldiers with cautious eyes, “the brainwashing’s been undone.”

That…made sense. She couldn’t hear gunfire anymore; the island had fallen deathly silent. Even as she watched, the unmoving figures were lowering their weapons, shaking their heads in confusion. A beam of sunlight hit her in the eye, and she squeezed them shut.

*Sunlight?*

Her eyes popped open. Chiaki looked up. And she stared. It hadn’t registered with her before now, adrenaline pumping through her system and mind focused on the task at hand. But the rain had stopped and, for the first time in ages…the sky wasn’t red. It was growing lighter, in shades of pale yellow and pastel pink and baby blue.

...*Dawn…?*

...*When was the last time I saw a dawn?*

She'd been lucky enough to catch a few sunsets when the sky whimsically cleared up, but she couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a sunrise.

If it was dawn, then…did that mean they’d been here all night? Had everything from Gekkogahara-san’s death ‘til now really happened in just one day?

The reminder suddenly sent waves of exhaustion crashing into her. Her arm throbbed painfully. She swayed. Dimly, she could hear Tsushima-kun yelling in alarm, but she couldn’t seem to focus on it. Her vision was going dark…

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Softness under her. Silence around her. Grimacing, Chiaki opened her eyes. Her head was spinning; her mouth felt full of cotton. She groaned, waiting for the winking spots in her field of vision to go away. She vaguely remembered the sun, and people running around, and being hurried away...

She rolled her head from side to side, searching the room. She was in a hospital bed, an IV trailing from her right arm. A portly nurse was nearby, checking something off on a clipboard. She looked up to find her patient awake, smiled, and put it down. "Up, dear? You're in the field hospital, safe as can be. You haven't been out long, just a few hours. Plenty of time to get treated."

"...What happened?"
"You passed out, dear. Exhaustion, primarily, and a bit of dehydration. You kept drifting in and out of coherency."

Chiaki glanced at her arm, now swathed in proper bandages, as the nurse continued, “Two of the bullets just grazed you, and the one that actually went in went clean through. No structural or vascular damage, I’m happy to say, so you get to keep full function of that arm!”

She blinked as a pair of unnecessary glasses were placed on her nose. “Here you go!”

Oh…right. Her disguise. She’d fainted while still wearing it. “Um, thank you.

Chiaki had to spend ten or so minutes answering questions, the nurse checking to make sure she was no worse for wear from her fainting spell, before she finally got to ask one of her own. “What’s going on? Is everyone alright?”

The nurse’s face became sad. “Well, the killing game ended and the brainwashing’s been stopped. But we had quite a number of casualities, unfortunately including nearly all our branch heads, and many injured.”

Chiaki’s chest constricted. “Our branch heads? W-Who made it from the game?”

“Naegi-kun, Kirigiri-san, Asahina-san, and Munakata-san…and he jumped on the first helicopter back to Tokyo as soon as we were done patching him up! Hmph. Never thought he’d be one to shirk responsibility…”

She ignored the nurse’s mutterings for the one name she hadn’t heard. “That’s…that’s it? No one else survived?”

“I’m afraid not. Even Branch Thirteen’s leader died in the battle here.”

Chiaki felt dizzy. Yukizome-sensei is dead? No matter how often her mind repeated those words, they refused to sink in. She couldn’t be dead. She couldn’t. Chiaki was supposed to save, somehow, and all her friends, and they were all supposed to meet again, and—

That push in the elevator wasn’t supposed to be the last time she ever saw her.

Grief threatened to crush her, but the reminder of the elevator, the events leading up to it, made her breath catch. My friends. They’d been here. If they’d died too—no, no, she couldn’t even think about it. “Where are my friends?” she gasped.

“You’re from the seventh division, right? Yes, you came running in to get a doctor. Don’t worry, he made it in time to treat your injured. Everyone’s safe.”

“No, not them!” Part of her was relieved that her efforts hadn’t been in vain, that she’d actually saved people. But that part was drowned out by terror for her friends’ fates. “They aren’t in a division, but they showed up to help—they were led by Kamukura Izuru—are they alright?!”

For just a moment, the nurse’s smile faltered, alarm and fear crossing her face. “A group led by Kamukura Izuru,” she said after a pause. There was something indiscernible behind her voice. “Are you sure you’re not confused, dear?”

“No, I’m not! They have to be alright—”

“Don’t you know they’re the ones behind the video?”
Chiaki swore she felt her heart stop. “Video? The brainwashing video?”

“That and the other one… Oh, that’s right, you fainted before it was broadcast.”

She gaped, desperately lost and afraid. The nurse eyed her a moment longer, still wearing that strange—wary, Chiaki realized suddenly—expression. But looking at her upset patient must have stirred some pity in her, for the severity in her face diminished. Reaching for an iPad, she flicked through it for a few moments before turning the screen towards Chiaki. “Well, here’s a recording we took.”

The video was lit by a soft red glow, familiar figures lined up in two rows. Her breath caught, seeing her friends for the first time in years. But her eyes were drawn to Kamukura-kun, standing front and center. He looked different. Very different. His hair was all gone, cut in a short and spiky style she nostalgically recognized, and he wasn’t wearing his suit anymore. Something about his eyes looked odd, too. But it was the expression on his face that made her feel like she’d been plunged into ice water. There was a knife of a smile there, a cold, sharp thing. Enoshima’s smile.

“Did you enjoy the game that we set up? Now, you all should understand. How boring the Future Foundation is.

“Don’t you think it would be boring for the world to be saved with a happy ending? That is why we wish to plunge the world into despair once more.

“The world needs despair.”

Chiaki did not say anything when the video ended. She did not move. She did not blink. She just sat there, eyes wide and burning. It felt like gravity had increased tenfold. Like the sky was falling down around her and the earth was swallowing her whole. In those conditions…of course it was impossible to move.

...What…?

This…this doesn’t make sense.

They were coming to help...

How could this happen…?

...Ah.

This is…

Despair?

Chapter End Notes

A/N: War is hell, and if there’s one thing I really didn’t like in DR3, it was that Ryota brainwashing a bunch of people into killing each other, as a distraction, was completely waved over. Show the effects that has, the damage that causes!

Besides doing the above, this chapter served a lovely two-fold purpose: to give Chiaki her redemption moment, where she successfully leads and saves a group of people…
and a kick in the gut moment, where she’s reminded that the most important things are still out of her reach. *scrambles away from pitchforks and torches* Nonono! It’s always darkest before dawn! The greater the despair the greater the hope! *The greater the despair the greater the hope!*
The world around her must still be moving—she was vaguely aware the IV had been removed from her arm, that the nurse had left a while ago, and that a pair of soldiers had come in—but to Chiaki, it seemed frozen. She couldn’t move. Part of it was because she was told she still needed to be checked over before she could be released, but part was because she just…couldn’t. Numbness pervaded her entire being.

It felt like hours before her brain could finally think again.

*Why am I still here?*

*Why…do I always keep living, when everyone around me is dying or brainwashed?*

*Why…*

She shuddered, squeezing her eyes shut. Somehow, she’d never thought Kamukura-kun would fall to despair. He’d *told* her it was a possibility, that the Neo World Program *carried* risks, but there she’d been, the oblivious idiot, still believing everything would be alright—

*What am I going to do now?*

In this bleak despair, there seemed to be only one option. Give up. Spend the rest of her life living this lie of Watanabe Keiko, until eventually it became truth. Kill Nanami Chiaki bit by bit, every day, until she was nothing more than a bad memory. Live with this hollowness inside, guilt and failure and regret, until she died a washed-out, despair-filled shell.

It was a terrible future, and she trembled. But the only other option she could think of was to keep going. Try to find ways, somehow, to save Kamukura-kun and her friends. Keep fighting, like she’d told him she would. But the thought made her whimper. She didn’t even know where to start. And—she wasn’t strong enough. How could she keep fighting? She was so tired of it. She wanted the instant gratification, the reward. She wanted to have her happy ending and stop hoping for it. Hope hurt. It hurt. It hurt. It hurt.

*You’re so weak,* her old, cruel friend, Depression, hissed. *Didn’t you say you’d find a way to make things work, somehow, if this very thing happened? That if you just do it everything would be okay? And here you are giving up on the first day. You’re weak, weak, weak, weak—*
“Kirigiri-san would like to speak with you.”

The cool words cut through the fog of self-deprecation that hung over her mind. Chiaki glanced up, realizing for the first time that someone else had entered the tent. A man in a suit, body posture and proximity to one of the soldiers suggesting he’d just straightened up after whispering. His straight spine and choice of attire painfully brought back memories of Kamukura-kun, and she had to blink rapidly to restrain tears.

If any of the three noticed her distress, they showed no sympathy. The man who’d spoken before simply said, “Get up and follow us.”

She thought she should ask why a branch head was interested in her, but couldn’t seem to muster up the ability to care. Wordlessly nodding, she climbed out of the bed. A quick search for her clothes revealed nothing, and so in the thin hospital gown, she followed them out. She didn’t take more than a few steps before the newcomer was at her side, hand closing around her right elbow too firmly to be kind. The first stirrings of unease rippled through her.

The field hospital was somewhat calmer now. The crowd had subsided, the injured safely resting in their beds and the nurses and doctors all watching over them. Only a few other people were around. The unsettled sensation in Chiaki’s gut did not abate as the other two fell into place on either side, keeping pace like they were bodyguards…or prison guards. Goosebumps prickled along her arms.

The pace across camp was brisk, not allowing her much time to think. The three men led her to a slightly larger than normal tent, off in a quiet corner. The one holding her elbow released her, rapped lightly on the canvas, and called, “Kirigiri-san? I’ve brought Watanabe.”

“Enter.”

When they not-so-gently brought her inside, Chiaki saw the fourteenth division leader sitting up in a bed, half her face discolored purple and bandages pressed over her left eye. Naegi-kun was with her, leaning close and talking in a quiet, earnest voice. His hand was pressed over Kirigiri-san’s; at Chiaki’s entrance, he started and withdrew it, cheeks flaming. Once it would have made her smile. Now, it just made her ache.

“Watanabe-san,” Kirigiri-san greeted. “I was hoping to speak with you. There’s some information that’s come to my attention, and I must discuss it with you immediately.”

She glanced at Chiaki’s escorts, who had released her but still lingered. “Thank you for bringing her. Leave us.”

They saluted smartly and left. Chiaki’s eyes drifted around. It looked like Kirigiri-san had gotten her own private tent, or that a command tent had been converted into a medical room; hers was the only bed. There was a small desk with stacks of papers, folders and a laptop. Though small and cramped, it was private, with a flap that could be secured shut. Naegi-kun did that now, then returned to the sole chair by the bed. Chiaki stood wordlessly, staring at the floor and unable to muster up the ability to care about her rudeness.

When it became clear she wasn’t going to speak, Kirigiri-san folded her hands. “As I’m sure you’re aware by now, all the other branch heads are dead or gone. The Acting Heads have stepped up to replace them, but many of them are psychologically and emotionally unprepared for the sudden promotion, and can barely manage their own division. Leadership is, in short, turbulent. As the only surviving, available member of the original branch heads, I have been placed in charge of the Future Foundation…at least for now.”
She then fixed Chiaki with an unreadable violet stare. “It would not be an exaggeration to say that Future Foundation is the most precarious it’s ever been. So, I must treat nothing lightly, especially not accusations of being a Remnant.”

Chiaki had thought her situation could not possibly grow worse. She had thought wrong. Her stomach seemed to drop out through her feet. Her voice returned. “…What?”

“You are a leader of the Kirigiri division. You are the one who halted a bad situation from escalating. You prevented further injury, and you saved Hayami-san’s life. So, I must be fair about hearing your side first, too.”

It’s all ending, Chiaki thought, in a vague sort of horror. She’d been stupid, she’d been careless, she’d been found out. One slip of the tongue, that was all it had taken to put the spotlight on her. And now…what was going to happen to her?

She was wrong. She didn’t have the choices of giving up or keep going. Her only future was a prison cell or an execution block.

Chiaki trembled, wondering if she should run. But where would she go? This entire island was filled with Future Foundation forces. She’d have to somehow escape all of them, and then she’d spend the rest of her life running, and it just seemed so…exhausting. Even the despair seemed to drain out. She bowed her head, waiting for the axe to fall, her final thought how disappointing a person she’d been.

“However, your division claims you’re a hero. From their account, your actions and quick thinking stopped a bad situation from escalating, prevented further injury, and saved Hayami-san’s life. So, it would be remiss of me to not hear you out first.”

…huh?

…She was…being given a chance?

Hardly daring to believe it, she looked up. Kirigiri-san’s expression was neither severe nor soft. Just fair, waiting to judge. Willing to judge.

For a moment, she still felt empty, brain trying to wrap around this unexpected development. Then emotional whiplash, from dread and resignation to mercy and shock, hit her so hard her entire body shook. Her eyes started to water.

I…I didn’t realize…right until I thought it was imminent…

Right until I thought despair was all that was left…and then had hope offered again…

She still…she still didn’t want to die. She didn’t want to die without seeing her loved ones again. She didn’t want to die while they were in despair.

She didn’t want to give up.

But how…how could she…she didn’t know a way to help…

“Please don’t cry!” Naegi-kun exclaimed. “I’m sure you have good reasons, and I promise we’ll hear you out. The days where Future Foundation suspected people guilty until proven innocent are over.”

Naegi-kun… He was so kind. So sweet. Giving everyone a chance, even suspected Remnants or
Remnant sympathizers…

Memory fluttered. That…that was right, wasn’t it? He’d given her friends a chance. Brought them to the Neo World Program. And—hadn’t Kamukura-kun told her, what’d happen if that went wrong? That if he and her friends had emerged from the Neo World Program in despair, there was no way they would have left Naegi-kun alive or allowed him to escape? So, what did it mean that he was here, now, breathing?

If her friends were in despair, Naegi-kun shouldn’t be alive. But if her friends weren’t, that video shouldn’t have been sent. Neither option made complete sense, so maybe there was a third? Or pieces of the puzzle she hadn’t seen?

The moment she had that thought, a tiny sliver of hope was born. It felt like a thorn stabbing deep in her chest. Maybe the pieces would fall in a way she didn’t like. Maybe Kamukura-kun had just been wrong, for once. Maybe she was just being delusional. But she clung to that splinter all the same.

Giving up hope would be giving up on her friends. And that was something she just couldn’t do.

I can’t…I can’t give in to despair! Not yet! Not when there are still truths I don’t know! Not when there’s even the tiniest chance…the tiniest chance they can still be saved! Because…

“You have to help them!” she burst out. “They’re—it’s not their fault, they’re just brainwashed, please, y-you have to…” Because…because they saved me first!

“You’re concerned about them?” Kirigiri-san’s eyes narrowed. “Are you admitting to being a Remnant?”

“N-No! I’m not a Remnant! I…I just…” Her traitorous tongue tripped. Her shoulders heaved, lungs sucking in great big gasps of air.

The detective was silent a moment. “…Alright. I’ll listen to everything before making any final judgments. Explain your relationship to them.”

Chiaki tried to speak, but she was crying too hard, nose running and vision blurred with tears. So instead, she decided to just show them. A shaking hand pulled the glasses off and tossed them aside. Then she fumbled with the wig, yanking it off her skull, pain tugging at her scalp from the force.

As she pulled her pink hair out of its clip, letting it fall down her shoulders, her vision cleared enough to recognize the look on Kirigiri-san and Naegi-kun’s faces. Pure shock. They stared at her as if they’d seen a ghost.


“Nanami Chiaki.” Kirigiri-san had schooled her expression back to one of casual indifference. “You’re supposed to be dead.”

“I…yeah. Yeah, I was. B-But…it was safer for me to pretend…”

Kirigiri-san steepled her fingers. “Start from the beginning.”

And so, Chiaki gave them an abbreviated version of what had happened. How Enoshima had attempted to kill her. How her supposed death had been the catalyst for her friends’ brainwashing. How Kamukura-kun had resuscitated her, hidden her, and nursed her back to health. How she’d
joined the Future Foundation to make a difference, but kept her identity hidden for her protection.

When she was finished speaking, she looked between them beseechingly. Naegi-kun’s face was one of sympathy, while Kirigiri-san seemed more ponderous, rubbing her chin. “…That’s everything. Please…I know I have no right to ask this, but please…please don’t hurt my friends. Please, at least let me go after them. I just want to help them. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

She still didn’t know what would become of her. But, she figured she didn’t have anything to lose. And if these were her last moments alive, she might as well use them pleading for the people she loved.

“We have no intention of pursuing Class 77,” Kirigiri-san said. “That’s all I’ll say at the moment. As for letting you chase them…”

She trailed off, visibly musing. “I want to talk with my classmates,” the detective decided. “In the meantime, please just wait. You may walk around as you please, but don’t try to leave.”

Typically, the Future Foundation’s branch heads voted on important matters, with the Chairman acting as the tie-breaker. However, in a state of emergency, the Chairman could act without the other divisions’ approval. Obviously, there were limits to this; at such times, the Chairman could only move military forces or resources. He or she could not abuse this power to remove other division heads, cancel projects, or force projects through. Additionally, two-thirds of the other heads had to vote in favor of maintaining the state of emergency for him or her to keep such authority for longer than twenty-four hours.

Still, while this ability was limited, it had come in handy now; Kirigiri-san had been able to call Future Foundation’s forces off Class 77’s trail. Makoto doubted she intended to remain in power any longer than it took to resolve this crisis. But for now, her authority was unchallenged.

When she had called the rest of their classmates in and finished relaying Nanami-san’s story, Kirigiri-san looked around. Asahina-san was sitting on the desk, her leg still bandaged, while Hagakure-kun slouched at the foot of the bed. Makoto noted in amusement that Togami-kun stood in the corner as haughtily as though this military tent were his personal castle. “Well, what should we tell her?”

“I think the answer’s clear.” Togami-kun pushed his glasses up his nose. “Nothing. She’s lied to the Future Foundation for two years straight. We can’t trust her with a secret of this scale.”

“I believe in her,” Makoto offered, and Togami-kun scoffed.

“You believe in everyone, Naegi.”

He laughed sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. That was true, but, well, it was just who he was. He wouldn’t be Naegi Makoto if he was any other way.

But this wasn’t just a matter of him simply being idealistic. He was pretty sure—she hadn’t said anything confirming it one way or the other—but he was pretty sure Nanami-san was in love with Hinata-kun…er, Kamukura-kun? And…he knew that pain, of loving and losing, the joy of finding that special person again…

His fingers involuntarily tightened around Kirigiri-san’s, which he’d discretely reclaimed under the bed covers.

It had been six hours, thirty-nine minutes, and eight seconds—not that he was counting—since
he’d turned to see her staggering towards him. The awe and joy of seeing her there, alive, still hadn’t faded. They’d had a brief, but heartfelt reunion before a nurse chased after her, scolded her, and confined her to bedrest. Kirigiri-san apparently chose to interpret that as “working from bed”, as ever since she’d learned she was de facto leader of Future Foundation, that was all she’d been doing.

At first Makoto had protested, telling her Togami-kun could handle things, that she should focus on recovering. She’d shot that argument down by reminding him Future Foundation was in a very unsteady state and that she’d worry too much to rest if she didn’t see for herself everything was going alright. So, Makoto had sat by her side, reading her reports and relaying her orders over radio and watching the medical equipment, ready to call a nurse if needed.

It was constantly busy. There wasn’t any time to talk about…personal matters. Not that he minded, he was just happy to be back in her company again, and determined to see her recover well. But maybe…maybe soon, they could talk about their relationship.

Even thinking ‘their relationship’ made him blush like a schoolboy.

So, having loved, and lost, and regained…he empathized with Nanami-san. He empathized a lot. “That’s true, but I still feel like we should help her. She just wants to be with her friends again. And I know…I know I’d do anything to bring ours back.”

The mood became more somber at the reminder of their deceased classmates. Asahina-san bit her lip. Hagakure-kun rubbed his arms, looking away. Even Togami-kun was quiet, eyes drifting to the ground in reserved contemplation.

“Naegi-kun’s right,” Asahina-san finally said. “That pain of separation…it’s awful. I don’t think Nanami-chan would do anything to betray Future Foundation, if we told her the truth. If she knew her friends were fine—”

“She might get angry at us for letting them take the fall,” Togami-kun countered. “She knew about an active Remnant mole in the Future Foundation, and did nothing, to protect her. What else would she do for her friends? What about Kamukura’s plan with the virus? Did she know about that too?”

“She didn’t say, but I don’t believe Nanami-san is the type of person who would go along with that!” Makoto protested. “A-And you’ve contradicted yourself! You just said she’d do anything to protect her friends, then insinuated she would put them in danger—”

“Yeah, I gotta agree with Naegi-chii.” They all blinked and looked at Hagakure-kun, surprised he’d spoken up. Makoto felt mean for thinking it, but it was kind of rare for him to offer much in these types of discussions. “I actually emailed her a couple times before. She was one of Nakajima-chii’s therapists, really helped her out. Nakajima-chii thought she was chill, and she’s a way better judge of character than me! So…I kind of want to pay Nanami-chii back.”

He hesitated, then added, “Besides…if it were you guys, I’d want to know you were really okay.”

_Hagakure-kun…_

Togami-kun ground his teeth, turning to Kirigiri-san. “Kiris, I know you’re sometimes a reasonable person. Tell me you see the stupidity in trusting Nanami Chiaki after all this.”

She was quiet, head bowed. Slowly, carefully, as though weighing each word, she said, “I do think, considering all we know about Nanami-san’s actions, how vital it is to preserve the Foundation’s integrity in the eyes of the public, and how a single pair of loose lips can destroy that, sharing the
truth about what happened here would be foolish."

"Thank you—"

"However…" Togami-kun groaned. "We should also consider what happens if we don’t tell her. She might try to take action on her own. She might dig deeper and miraculously uncover the truth, and then get angry that we withheld it. If we tell her ourselves, we can limit the number of unpredictable variables."

A small smile crossed her face. "Besides…I think Naegi-kun, Asahina-san, and Hagakure-kun are right. Telling her is the right thing. And isn’t believing in people what we do?"

"Even you, Togami-kun," Makoto interjected. "Even you decided to believe in Class 77 when we left Jabberwock. And that all turned out for the best, didn’t it?"

"Yeah!" Asahina-san put her hands on her hips. "I bet even Fukawa-chan would side with us, if we called her up and didn’t mention your decision! Why’s it always you who’s gotta be ‘grr, I’m a jerk’?"

Very slowly, looking as if she’d physically wounded him, the Ultimate Affluent Progeny pinched the bridge of his nose. A vein in his temple throbbed. "Do not reduce me to such caricatures,” he ground out. "I am merely exercising caution. That said, if this is the decision the rest of you have made…I’ll go along with it."

"Togami-kun!" Makoto exclaimed, grinning broadly.

He crossed his arms. "If only because Kirigiri’s point about controlling variables is not a bad one. This way, it will be easier to prepare precautionary measures."

"Oh, just admit it, Togami-chii," Hagakure-kun teased, "You’re just a big ol’ softy now!"

"I’m not even going to acknowledge that asinine delusion."

"Then," Kirigiri-san said, before the conversation could go off-target, "it’s decided. Togami-kun, I trust you can continue managing hands-on matters for me?"

He sniffed, pushing his glasses up his nose. "Just who do you think you’re talking to?"

"Asahina-san, please continue helping Branch 13 distribute resources around camp. Specifically, food and medical supplies."

"I’m on it, Kyoko-chan!"

"Hagakure-kun…just do what you can."

"H-Hey, why do you have to say it like that?"

"Naegi-kun, will you wrap up this business with Nanami-san?"

"Make sure you interrogate her about what she knew of Kamukura’s plans,” Togami-kun interjected.

Makoto frowned. “Togami-kun—"

“I’m just saying, it wouldn’t hurt to check.”
“I have to agree,” Kirigiri-san said. “In fact, it’d be wise to see if she knows anything else about the Remnants. Something Kamukura did not, or chose not to share with us, perhaps.”

He reluctantly nodded. “But we’re telling her the truth no matter what.”

“We are.”

Makoto smiled. “Alright, Kirigiri-san. You can count on me.”

Kirigiri-san gave him that tiny smile, the one reserved only for him, and his heart did backflips. “I know I can.”

Outside the field hospital, the sky was still blue, the sun peaked high. She’d forgotten to put her disguise back on before leaving, but nobody had paid her any attention, too caught up in exhaustion and work. They all seemed to assume she was a member of some other division. And there was nothing odd about someone visiting the bodies, lined up in rows. Many people were searching the faces, hoping not to see friends or family among them, or quietly paying their own respects.

Like all the bodies out here, Yukizome-sensei’s had been covered respectively with a cloth, but Chiaki could recognize the copper hair peeking out the top. Then the guards had briefly lifted it to show Yukizome-sensei’s face. It had been still and pale, eyes closed and skin cleaned of blood. The Yukizome-sensei she’d known had been vibrant, full of livelihood and color. It was hard to believe the body before her belonged to the same woman.

Chiaki was glad when the cloth was dropped. She didn’t want to remember Yukizome-sensei as a corpse, or as the crazed, despair-filled woman who’d betrayed her. She wanted to remember her as the kind teacher who’d encouraged her to make friends, who’d helped her reach out and guided her, who’d been more than happy to join her students on whatever silly activities they did together. So, as she stared unblinkingly at the cloth, she focused only on those memories, biting her lip until it started to bleed.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered to the cloth. “You believed in me, more than anyone else, and I didn’t live up to that. I made…such a bad decision. I couldn’t help you, then or now.”

Chiaki ducked her head. “And…I almost gave up, just now. I almost let you down again. But I won’t. Even if it takes the rest of my life, I’ll make things right for our class. So…please watch over me, sensei.”

And even though she’d said everything she wanted to, she didn't leave. There wasn’t anywhere else she particularly wanted to go, and this felt like the last respect she could give her dear teacher. She simply stood there for an indefinite amount of time, allowing all those good memories to loop through her head, until one of her guards finally told her Naegi-kun was ready to speak with her.

Chiaki crouched, the muscles in her legs groaning, and tentatively rested her hand on Yukizome-sensei’s cloth-covered one. "Goodbye," she whispered. Then she straightened up and walked away, refusing to look back for fear that she'd break down again.

When she reached the command tent, she found Naegi-kun slipping out. He raised a finger to his lips when he saw her. “Kirigiri-san’s working again,” he whispered, “so let’s not disturb her. The guards will keep watch and make sure no one eavesdrops.”

“What you’re telling me is that important?”

He nodded, solemnly. “I don’t want to go too far, but everyone else has a lot of work to do, and
I’ve been at the forefront of these past events. So, we figured it’d make sense for me to tell you everything.”

Her heart began pounding as he ushered her a little away from the collection of tents. Two lawn chairs had been brought to the back of the garage, and her legs shook as she sank into hers. Naegi-kun folded his fingers. “That video is fake,” he finally began. “Your friends…they were cured of their despair by the Neo World Program.”

If before had felt like the world ending, this felt like waking up and finding it was a nightmare. Her fingers tightened around the armrests. “It worked?” she whispered. “It worked…then, why would they…?”

Naegi-kun bowed his head. “The Future Foundation itself began that killing game. We had several corrupt members…not just Yukizome-san, but the Chairman as well.”

Her jaw dropped in shock. “E-Even the Chairman…?!”

How…? Weren’t they the ones who were supposed to fix the world? Weren’t they, like Hope’s Peak, the hope of the world? How could this happen again? Shock gave way to anger, fizzling like a hot pot of water.

“Yes. He’s the one who started the game. He was planning to use it to drive your former classmate, Mitarai-kun, into brainwashing the world into hope. And after the killing game…Mitarai-kun tried to do exactly that.”

“Just like Enoshima,” she spat, eyes slanting.

“I don’t agree with it, but they were both desperate,” Naegi-kun defended. “Anyway, Togami-kun called your classmates in. Not only did they talk Mitarai-kun down, they rescued Togami-kun and saved many others. They’re heroes. But if it was ever known, that the Future Foundation’s own leaders did this to itself…”

“So you stabbed my friends in the back.”

“No!” Empathetically, he shook his head, leaning forward. “No. They took the blame of their own volition. I would never have asked them to make a sacrifice of this scale. But now that they have, I’ll honor it.”

Chiaki scowled at the ground. The Future Foundation was one of, if not the, top leaders of reconstruction in the world. While they had many supporters, they had many detractors as well. And if it was discovered that even they weren’t infallible, those detractors would swoop upon them like vultures. It wouldn’t take long for their credibility to be lost and all that painstaking work undone.

She got it. She did. It just sucked that her friends had to pay the price for someone else’s mistakes, again.

Her friends. “They’re alright,” she repeated. She could scarcely believe it. Her face smoothed over, anger washed away by awe and relief at that one fact. “Oh god…they’re alright… Wh-Where are they? Do you know?!?”

Naegi-kun smiled.

“We do.”
They were on Jabberwock Island, Naegi-kun said. Though they wanted to help the world, it wasn’t feasible for them to travel around. So, they were keeping the archipelago as a base of operations. There, they would use their talents to research and create inventions, which they would entrust to Branch 14 to distribute around the world. Anonymously, of course.

“We’ll tell everyone the facility there was destroyed in a Remnant attack, so we’re abandoning the location entirely due to suspicion of compromise. Eventually, we’ll work with Class 77 to fabri cate a video of their deaths. Then they’ll truly be free to live in peace.”

While Chiaki was relieved her friends had a haven, a small piece of guilt still gnawed at her. “Gekkogahara-san, though…she talked so much about how she poured her heart and soul into the Neo World Program…”

“We still have her research and data,” Naegi-kun assured. “Even if it we have to lose the current Neo World Program…we’ll ensure Gekkogahara-san’s work doesn’t go to waste. It does need tweaking anyway. We’ll use the time spent building a new facility to work out all the final kinks.”

She exhaled. “Good…”

Naegi-kun shifted, and she glanced over. He was working his lower lip between his teeth, a worried expression on his face. Finally, he sighed and turned towards her. “I should probably have asked you this before telling, but…I wanted to show you that I believe in you. I hope you can return that by being honest with me.”

Chiaki blinked. “Alright. What is it?”

He took a deep breath. “First…is there anything Hinata-kun—er, Kamukura-kun—told you that he might not have shared with us? Information on other Remnants? Any other plans he had lying in wait, that he just…forgot about when he erased his memories of you?”

She racked her brain. “Um…he was anonymously giving you guys funds for the Neo World Program. And like my friends, Yukizome-sensei was brainwashed. Well, lobotomized. But—she wasn’t a Remnant voluntarily. That’s it, really.”

Then Chiaki frowned, something about Naegi-kun’s sentence sticking with her. Meanwhile, his eyes widened. “Really? We’ll have to try and contact Munakata-san, then. I don’t know if it’ll make him feel better…but he should know.”

Naegi-kun hastily jotted down a note. “Alright. Finally, Nanami-san, how much did Kamukura-kun tell you about his plans for the Neo World Program?”

Distantly, she answered, still chasing that niggling detail, “Just that he was going to bring my classmates, and that there was some danger of the program glitching out.”

“I see…so he didn’t tell you…”

Perhaps he thought she wouldn’t overhear his soft murmur, but she did. And at the exact same time, her brain locked onto what, specifically, had been so strange about Naegi-kun’s previous statement. “Tell me what?”

He started, a guilty expression crossing his face. “That’s, um…”

“And what did you mean by other plans?”

Naegi-kun winced. Chiaki’s skin prickled in trepidation. Icicles seemed to form in her stomach. “…
What did Kamukura-kun do?

What struck Chiaki the most, as Naegi-kun slowly explained what had happened in the Neo World Program, Enoshima’s AI and the killing game and how Kamukura-kun had initiated it all, was the complete and utter lack of surprise. She was confused, and angry, and hurt. But she wasn’t surprised. Something deep inside her looked at the information and didn’t protest, didn’t scream how it couldn’t be true. It just accepted it as fact.

Because of course Kamukura-kun would do something like that. Of course he was capable of making such a huge gamble. Hope or despair, salvation or damnation, his life and her friends’ or Enoshima’s.

She had one small comfort, and that was knowing he hadn’t done it for Enoshima’s sake. The way he’d spoken of her, the spite and bitterness in his voice and eyes, had proven his hatred of the model enough. And he’d said plenty of times that he was after some answer from the Neo World Program.

But it still hurt. It hurt that he’d done something like this when it wasn’t necessary, when the program would have worked just fine on its own. It hurt that he was willing to risk Enoshima’s return for his answer. It hurt that he’d lied to her face about it. And she didn’t understand what answer he could have possibly gotten from another killing game, or why it was so worth the associated risks.

When Naegi-kun was done, she quietly tucked her knees up to her chin, wrapping her arms around them. She stared out over the tents, struggling to reconcile what she knew of Kamukura-kun and her friends with what she’d just been told. It felt like she should cry, but her eyes were suspiciously dry.

After another moment, Naegi-kun asked, kindly, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Chiaki hugged her knees closer. “I would, but…I don’t know where to begin. I just…I feel so betrayed.” He lied to me. He actually lied to me. He risked bringing Enoshima back, and—

It hurt.

“I can imagine.” He fiddled with his hands, rubbing them around his left wrist. “Kirigiri-san…once she risked my life, and recently she risked her own, for her own purposes. She didn’t tell me why either times, not until everything was over. So, I do know what it’s like to be hurt by the secrecy of someone you love. But…I’ve never regretted knowing her.

“Nanami-san…I don’t know if it’s my place to say this. But I spoke to Hinata-kun after the shutdown, and he was a man filled with regret. I don’t know if that’s worth much to you, and I’m not saying you shouldn’t feel angry or sad or hurt. Or that you should forgive him, that’s for you to decide. But I think you need to ask yourself whether the pain he’s caused is worth the joy he’s brought.”

…Pain and joy, huh…?

Waking up. Healing under his care. Learning about the Tragedy.

Playing games. Braiding his hair. Crying into his chest. Watching the Killing Game. Being held in his arms through the worst of her flashbacks, and feeling so safe.

All the good times they’d had…the good times they hadn’t yet…

That she still wanted to happen.

“Yeah,” she finally admitted, voice cracking. “Yeah, it is.”

He smiled. “Then there you go. Maybe you don’t understand why this happened, and maybe there isn’t a reason you can accept. But maybe there is, and the willingness to still love someone and believe in them, to take that chance…I think it takes great strength, Nanami-san.”

“…I’m not strong.”

Naegi-kun tilted his head to one side. She continued in a watery voice, “I’m not. I couldn’t help Hinata-kun and I couldn’t save Yukizome-sensei and I got my friends brainwashed… I couldn’t get Kamukura-kun to just have faith in hope… I’m not like you and your classmates. I’ve never succeeded when it mattered most…”

“No, that’s wrong!”

His declaration was just as forceful in real life as it was on television. She jerked back, blinking dumbly. Naegi-kun twisted in the chair and grabbed her shoulders, a beseeching expression on his face.

“You have done things that mattered, Nanami-san! There was one point where Hinata-kun and the other students were so deep in despair, it looked like Enoshima would win…but do you know what pulled him out of it? His memories of you. You did, Nanami-san. He told me so. You gave him the strength to fight back, to keep hoping. And then he inspired everyone else to not give up.

“And what about Nakajima-san? Or the people in your squad? Those lives were touched for the better, saved, by you as well. I think, for each time you’ve failed, there’s also been a time you succeeded…you just can’t see it because you’re always looking back at those failures.”

…Really?

She actually had helped Hinata-kun and her friends? Even just in spirit…?

…When Naegi-kun said it so sincerely…it was impossible not to believe him, even just a little.

Her lower lip quivered. Chiaki wiped away the moisture gathering in her eyes with a determined sniffle. “Th-Thank you…”

“Do you feel a bit better now?”

“Yeah…you really do live up to your title.”

“You think so? I’m just doing my best, honestly.”

He passed her a handkerchief to blow her nose in. There was a long silence. Finally, Chiaki spoke up again. “…Why do you call him ‘Hinata-kun’?”

Naegi-kun laughed. “That’s definitely not my place to say. Besides, I’m not sure I fully understand it. I’ll just tell you he’s a changed man, and let him explain the rest…if you still want to see him and your other friends, that is.”

It wasn’t even a question. “I do.”
He smiled. “I thought you’d say that.”

Then his expression became more somber. “But, Nanami-san, you should know…there’s no coming back from this decision. We have to restrict traffic to Jabberwock to lower the odds of someone cottoning on, so you won’t be able to come and go as you please. Your contact is going to be limited entirely to those on the island. I mean, I’ll try to call, but most of the time it’ll be for business. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say you’ll be living in exile. Do you still want—”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “When can I go?”

Naegi-kun scratched his cheek, looking sheepish. “Well, you may have to wait a while. We’re trying to evacuate this island, so all our helicopters and ships are occupied. We can’t divert one for one person, it’d be instantly noticed.”

She smiled, thinking back to a dock and a pair of keys that had not been used once. “That’s okay. I have a boat in Tokyo.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Next chapter: the moment you’ve all been waiting for.
A/N: oh boy I have been awaiting this moment. It’s finally here guys. I suggest putting on "Absolute Hope Birthday" around the line starting "Do you want to start over?"

Chiaki closed her eyes, inhaling the salty tang of the ocean air. Beneath her, the Second Wind bobbed up and down, carrying her closer and closer to her destination. Above her, the sky was still valiantly clinging to blue, only a slight purple-red tinge hinting to the pollution. She chose to interpret that as a good omen. Maybe the Tragedy was finally over, once and for all.

It had taken a day or two to get everything ready for her departure. First, Chiaki had to finish crafting a cover story with Class 78. They’d decided to announce that the trauma from discovering Gekkogahara-san’s body and fighting for her life had left her confused and psychologically scarred, and she was moving out of Tokyo to live with friends; a clever mix of vague truths and lies.

Then Chiaki had joined one of the helicopters bringing the wounded back to mainland, riding with Branch 14 instead of her own division. Once she’d returned to Tokyo, she’d spoken to her landlord about breaking her lease on the spot. Fortunately, her rental agreement was month-to-month, and the landlord was pretty understanding about her ‘fragile’ situation; he’d allowed her to move out on such short notice so long as she paid for the next few months’ rent while he searched for a new tenant. She’d readily agreed, figuring she wouldn’t need money where she was going anyway.

The final thing to do was go about making her goodbyes and moving her things out of the seventh division building. That was a short affair; she’d been a licensed therapist for all of one day and hadn’t had time to take any clients. And while her division had swarmed her with thanks and praise, very few of them had known her on an individual level, sparing her the need for many personal goodbyes. She’d only really visited a recovering Hayami-sensei and Ueno-sensei, wearing that hateful disguise for the final time. The latter had been a short, stilted conversation.

_Ueno-sensei leaned against his desk, looking her resignation papers. “So you’re leaving?”_

_“Yeah. Sorry…I just…” She waved a hand uselessly. “I’m just kind of having a personal crisis.”_

_“Well, it was rough down there from what I hear. You’re not the only one from that place who needs counseling now, or even the only therapist. No one expected things to turn out that way. Still, are you sure you don’t want help from us?”_

_“I’m sure,” she empathized. “I just…want to be with my friends.”_

_He nodded, clapped her on the shoulder, and wished her the best. And that was the last she saw of him._

This morning a few of Togami-kun’s personal men, who he assured could be trusted, had helped her move her things onto the boat and seen her off. Naegi-kun had also contacted Kamukura-kun to let him know to expect a ship with ‘a pleasant surprise’ on this date. He’d offered her the chance to
speak with him, but, well…she’d refused.

She’d just…needed the past few days to come to terms with what Kamukura-kun had done. She hadn’t been ready to talk to him at the time. And she’d been nervous and scared of talking to her classmates. Chiaki couldn’t help wondering whether they would really want to see her. It had been years, after all, and she’d led them to their doom. Maybe they were angry at her. Maybe they couldn’t forgive her. Maybe she was just a clingy fool, holding onto the past.

And—it was superstitious, stupid, but she couldn’t help being afraid that if she did call and say she’d be there soon, she’d tempt fate into interfering.

As the autopilot’s smooth, mechanized voice informed her she had arrived at Jabberwock Island, she nervously smoothed out her cream and brown dress—it was the nicest thing she owned, but it still didn’t feel special enough for this occasion. There was a familiar, lone figure on the pier, wearing a white dress shirt and a green tie. Her heart sped up. Even from this distance, she could see his eyes widening, and knew his superior vision had likely picked her out already. And yet he stayed on the shore, still as a statue, as if she was an illusion and moving would dispel her.

The ship docked with a gentle bump. Too impatient to lower the gangway, Chiaki jumped onto the pier instead. Kamukura-kun was standing there, a quietly stunned look on his face. They locked gazes instantly, the world around her fading out.

She stepped closer, until she could hear him breathing. This close, she could freely drink in the details of his face—the fullness of his lower lip, the slant of his jaw, his long lashes. And his irises—they’d changed. One red, one green. Those irises were searching her face now, drinking in every detail. “…Naegi said there was something unexpected on the boat,” he said slowly, “yet you…this should be impossible…”

His voice trailed off, stare intensifying. He looked as if he were on the verge of an epiphany, yet too scared to reach out and grasp it in case it was false. She licked her lips. “Up up down down left right left right b a,” she said, enunciating clearly.

His eyes widened minutely. Then he went completely still, gaze fixed on some unseen point over her head. Chiaki waited, quivering, dread building up as the silence spread on and on. What if it hadn’t worked? Or worse, what if it hurt him somehow? What if—

Kamukura-kun lunged and embraced her, wrapping her up in a hug so tight she almost couldn’t breathe. Her injured arm throbbed from the pressure. It felt inconsequential right now. His words were quiet, heavy with too much emotion to name. “Nanami…I didn’t…I didn’t let you die…”

Her heart squeezed at the pain in that one sentence. She worked her arms up and around his back, clutching him tight. “No. No, you didn’t.”

He shuddered, squeezing her closer. They stayed there on the pier, gently rocking in embrace, for…she didn’t know how long. Time had ceased to matter the moment she was back with him.

But gradually, Chiaki became aware of other emotions vying for control. She thought she’d worked through her righteous anger, hurt and sadness in the last few days. She’d thought wrong; now that the cause of their creation was here, they were rising from the depths of her heart, yearning for release. The pressure built up and up in her chest, like an old rubber band that was stretched too far, tense and ready to snap at any moment.

“Nanami…there’s so much I need to tell you.”
And that was it. That was the catalyst.

She pushed away from him, glaring and trembling. Words flew from her lips in an uncontrollable outburst. “I think I can guess what, you idiot! What were you thinking? You—you could have been killed! You could have been made a vegetable!”

He blinked. He almost looked surprised. But he didn’t answer, just watched her with remorseful eyes. “And not just you! Any of you! You put my friends at risk, too! I could have lost everyone, and Enoshima could have come back, and you knew it, and…a-and…and you did it anyway!”

A quiet little part of her whispered, *This wasn’t how this reunion was supposed to go.* She rubbed her eyes furiously. “And…I just want to know why. Why did you…why did you do this? What answer could possibly be so important you would risk everything?”

He bowed his head. “…I thought it would help me find an interesting life. That by watching hope and despair battle, free from outside influence, I could see which was more unpredictable, and that would help me find a purpose. Then the path to escape from my boredom would be paved.”

Of course. Of course, that made perfect sense. Hadn’t he told her Enoshima lured him in the first place by promising despair was unpredictable? Hadn’t she seen for herself how empty he’d been? Hadn’t she wanted him to be able to escape that dull joylessness permeating his entire being?

*Not with such a dangerous method, though…*

“But I was wrong,” he continued, surprising her. “Hope, despair, talent…those things aren’t what matter. Everything you’d been trying to tell me was right. Making memories, forming bonds with people, that’s what makes life enjoyable. I was just…too overconfident in my analytical abilities to believe you. I’d come to a conclusion, so it must be infallible.

“I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to risk your life, and because I knew it would upset you. At that time, I honestly did not care about anything or anyone else. If something did not endanger you and could get me what I wanted, I saw no reason not to do it, no matter how unscrupulous, I know none of these are excuses, and I’m not going to use them as such. I’m just going to say…”

He took a deep breath and looked her in the eyes. His were a little moist.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m sorry I abandoned you as Hajime. I’m sorry I lied to you as Izuru. I’m sorry I put all the people you loved in danger. I’m sorry it took me so long to get my head on straight. I was convinced I was right, and I hurt you because of it. From the bottom of my heart, I am truly sorry, Nanami.”

It was the apology that got her. The sincerity, sadness and regret in his voice pierced through all her negative emotions like a beam of light. Before she knew it, the last dregs of anger went spiraling down a drain. And in their place, there was just her feelings for him. *That’s right…it’s easy to forget in the heat of the moment, but I already…*

“Come here,” she sniveled, holding her arms out.

A flicker of surprise crossed his face, but he went into them. He was so tall, and she was so short, he had to stoop to make it. She stood on her tiptoes and buried her face in his shoulder, inhaling his scent. “I forgive you.”

She heard his breath catch. But he listened as she continued, “I mean…I won’t lie. I was so mad when Naegi-kun told me what you did with the Neo World Program. And sad, and hurt. But I had time to think it over, and I got some advice, and I realized…at the end of the day, I still loved you.
I was still willing to believe in you and give you a chance. So, I forgive you.”

She paused, then added in a shaking voice, “But don’t you ever do something like that again. Okay? If you ever feel that empty and lost again, just come to me. I’ll make you a map.”

His voice was choked when he answered. “I understand.” Small, wet drops were landing on her shoulder. She politely didn’t mention them. “I swear to you, Nanami…I’ll work hard to make up for this. I’ll spend the rest of our lives making you happy.”

His demeanor…it was both different and familiar. He was so much more affectionate. So much more open. Was this really the power of the Neo World Program? She patted his back comfortingly, putting that question to the back of her mind for now.

When he’d stopped trembling in her arms, she finally asked. “Hey…can I ask you something else?”

His response was instant. “Of course. Anything.”

She pulled away a little, studying his eyes. The dual colors were certainly interesting. It made it hard to focus directly on them; she kept darting between one or the other. “Naegi-kun called you Hinata-kun, and I feel like I can see him in you. But I can see Kamukura-kun too. And you apologized for both their actions. So…which are you?”

“What did Naegi tell you about the events and outcome of the killing trip?”

“Nothing specific…just a basic overview of what you did. He said this, especially, was something you should tell me yourself.”

He hummed. “When you enter the Neo World Program, a specific date is entered, and it ‘resets’ your memories to before that time. For your classmates and I, the date was our first day at Hope’s Peak, before any of the Tragedy happened. And who did this body belong to at that time?”

“…Hinata-kun.”

“Yes. The Neo World Program dug up Hajime’s memories, which had been repressed to the deepest parts of Izuru’s psyche…but because the program was shut down before it could be finished, Izuru was never overwritten. So, I woke up with two sets of memories. Those of Kamukura Izuru’s, and those of Hinata Hajime’s. I suppose it would be most accurate to say those two personas fused.”

Chiaki felt frozen, not in fear, but in trembling anticipation. Tentatively, she said, “So…you remember…you remember…”

He smiled tenderly. “Our time together at Hope’s Peak, yes. Meeting you, our afternoons by the fountain, all of it.”

It felt like her chest was going to burst from all the emotion gathering in it. Huge, happy sobs left her throat as her eyes grew wet. “Hinata-kun…!” she blubbered. “Y-You’re back…! You’re really back!”

“I am.”

“A-And Kamukura-kun, too…I didn’t lose you either…”

“You didn’t.”
She sniffled again, loudly, and threw herself back into his arms. They tightened around her, and she burrowed her face into his chest. And then, in the safest place on Earth, with the reassuring thump of his heartbeat echoing against her ear, Chiaki let the tears flow.

It was nice to cry out of happiness, for once.

He was still holding her when the tears ran out—she didn’t think he’d be letting go any time soon. Chiaki knew she certainly wouldn’t. It was dumb, but…she was afraid if she let go, he’d disappear.

Not wanting to leave her spot, she craned her neck up. “So…if you’re both Hinata-kun and Kamukura-kun…which name do you prefer to go by?”

One of his hands was rubbing small, soothing circles on her back. She shivered at the touch. “I said I’d live on as Hinata Hajime, and that’s what everyone here calls me. But I’ll understand if you want to call me Kamukura, too. You may use whichever you wish.”

She thought it over. “Well, since everyone else is using Hinata-kun, I will too. But when we’re alone, I’ll switch between Hinata-kun and Kamukura-kun. I fell in love with you both, after all, and you’re both, so it doesn’t feel right using just one name.”

He smiled. “That’s very ‘you’, Nanami.”

“You can call me Chiaki.” It was offered without thinking, just a natural extension of all the things she’d been feeling. He stilled, eyes widening a fraction, and she wondered if she was being too forward. They’d only been reunited for a day—less than a day—less than an hour—and she was already pushing for this stage. Maybe he still needed time to adjust to her reappearance in his life. Maybe she was pressuring him, or being presumptuous, or—

But any worries she had were quelled when she saw that lovely smile return. “Alright. But only if you return the favor, Chiaki.”

…Oh.

So that was what it felt like, being addressed so intimately. Without her permission, her face dusted with a blush. Tingles of warm delight coursed through her entire body. It’s super effective! Critical hit! Staggered!

She wanted to hear him say her name more and more.

“Definitely, Hajime…Izuru…” The lack of honorifics was almost intimidating, but it was oh-so-satisfying to see the subtle color that came to his cheeks and the way his smile grew a little. Chiaki felt a burst of pride that she could have that effect on him.

She wasn’t sure which of them moved first, but in the next instance they were kissing; his hands cradled her face and hers moved to his chest as their mouths plied together. Once, twice, again and again. It was almost unfair how toe-curling his kisses were; as far as she knew she’d been his first and only. Maybe he had some Ultimate Kisser skill in there. Or maybe his kissing only seemed so amazing because it was her weak point?

She hoped she was making him feel this level of swooning pleasure, too. She’d have to EXP grind a lot, just in case.

When they pulled away, Kamukura-kun—no, wait, Hajime, that would definitely take some getting used to—murmured, “I have something to return to you.”
Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a familiar multi-colored hairpin and tried to place it in her hand. Chiaki shook her head, folding his fingers around the little spaceship. “You keep it.”

“Are you sure? I thought you wanted it back when we reunited.”

“I’m extending the goals of that questline. I said I’d take it back at the ending, but this isn’t an ending for us, is it? It’s just the beginning. So you have to hold onto that until the very end.”

He stared at her for a moment, then, with a soft chuckle—whoa! He actually laughed!—shook his head. “That is…so cheesy.”

She puffed her cheeks. “Hey!”

But she was mollified by him taking the hairpin back and clipping it onto his tie. Stepping away, he held his hand to her, that beautiful smile still on his face. “Now…isn’t it about time you reunited with your classmates?”

They walked hand-in-hand along the island, Hajime pointing out landmarks for her: the ranch with cows and chickens, the supermarket, the airport. Though they didn’t go, he told her there were other islands, with a plethora of other buildings. Military equipment, medicine, electronics, transport, all of it was available. There was even enough land for her friends to build or convert into areas they needed. They could truly be self-sufficient.

And none of this took the cache Kamukura-kun had left her into account. True, it was meant for one person, not seventeen, but the supplies there would still be enough to last them a long time.

When they arrived at the hotel resort, they detoured only to move Yumigami into Hajime’s cabin, where he had invited them to live from now on. “There are only sixteen cabins, all occupied, so moving in makes sense—” Hajime had begun to explain, before she cut him off with a smile and hug and said that sounded wonderful.

His cabin was still sparse, but not coldly—there were a few personal touches here and there, a sight that gladdened Chiaki. She set Yumigami’s carrier down in the bathroom, figuring that would be wide enough for her to stretch her legs without chewing on any of Hajime’s belongings. Hajime’s mouth quirked, and he extended a finger to stroke the rabbit’s head when she poked it out.

“Remember me?” he asked quietly, and then seemed to study Yumigami very intently as she twitched her nose at him.

“Can you really understand her?” Chiaki couldn’t help asking as they left.

“Yes. Animals don’t speak in words as we humans do, but through a study of their body language and noises, one can glean an interpretation of their feelings.”

“That’s amazing,” she smiled.

But as they approached the hotel itself, where Hajime had said her friends were eating a communal dinner, Chiaki’s steps involuntarily dragged. All those tumultuous feelings from the boat resurged, churning and spinning until she felt like throwing up. Hajime paused and squeezed her hand.

“They’ll be overjoyed to see you again,” he murmured, sensing exactly what was on her mind.

She licked her lips. “Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

Hajime, showing yet more intuition, ascended the stairs first, giving her time to mentally prep. She heard Pekoyama-san’s voice, calm and inquiring. The storm in her stomach picked up speed.
“Hinata, you’re back. You were gone for quite some time; we were about to send someone to search for you. What did Naegi send us?”

“Someone amazing.”

Taking that as her cue, Chiaki emerged. Her breath caught; they really were all there, sitting at tables, mostly-empty plates before them. Their bodies were turned halfway towards the door, faces all sporting flabbergasted expressions. Her eyes drank them in greedily.

They were here.

They were here.

Older, battered from what they’d endured—her heart broke at Komaeda-kun’s metal arm and Kuzuryu-kun’s eyepatch—but here.

It was Kuzuryu-kun who spoke first, eloquently as ever. “What the fuck?”

He swung around to glare at Hajime, fists clenched and face flushed. “What the fuck, asshole? What—who the fuck do you think you are? I don’t know what this is, but these kinds of —of sick jokes are not okay! I swear to God I’m going to skin you alive—”

“It’s not a joke,” she said, and he froze. “I…I’m back, everyone.”

Silence. Sweat built on the palms of her hands. She wiped them against her dress.

“That is impossible,” Tanaka-kun finally rasped. “The dead cannot be raised, no matter how black the magic one uses! Even my own powers can merely pull my underworldly servants from the brink!”

“That’s exactly what I did,” Hajime said calmly, and then retold the story she’d shared with Naegi-kun and Kirigiri-san.

When he was done, her classmates looked sucker-punched. “Naw…” Hanamura-kun croaked, his accent slipping out in his shock. “Y-Ya…could save her? Even from that?”

“Hey, pig barf!” Saionji-san barked, voice cracking. “Is this guy telling the truth? Could…could someone s-survive…that?”

“Um…I suppose, hypothetically, if the spears didn’t hit any vitals…” Tsumiki-san mumbled, fidgeting with her fingers, “and if y-you had the equipment to treat hypovolemic shock, and could move fast enough, and had a bit of luck…yes, it could happen.”

“S-So, you’re really alive, Nanami?” Owari-san gripped the back of her chair with white knuckles. “You’d better be! I’m gonna beat you up if you’re just some ghost!”

She hesitantly smiled. “I’m really alive.”

They still seemed too stunned to move. Well, that was okay, there was something she still needed to do.

Chiaki swallowed, then knelt and performed the best dogeza she could. From over her head came a collective group of shocked exclamations. “Nanami-san?!?” “Nanami?!” “Hey, what—”

“I’m sorry!” Chiaki pressed her forehead so hard into the floor she thought it might leave an imprint. “I’m sorry… I wronged all of you. I was your class rep, your leader; I should have tried to
protect you from Enoshima, not led you right to her. But I let my personal feelings cloud my judgment. I made a terrible decision that day and you all suffered for it. I am so deeply sorry.”

She stopped, biting her lip lest she choke on a string of further apologies. Silence was all that greeted her, and she cringed. Then, fourteen voices rang out in unison. “We forgive you.”

Chiaki lifted her head, lower lip quivering. She was met with faces and faces of smiles. Tears filled her eyes again at the acceptance there. How was it possible to cry this much? Wasn’t there some limit to the amount of tears a human being could shed in a few hours?

“Though I don’t understand why you’re apologizing at all!” Komaeda-kun laughed. “After all, that despair birthed this hope, so everything worked out in the end!”

“But that doesn’t make it okay! None of us knew this would happen. I put you in danger without being able to foresee the consequences… I thought… I thought you’d all be angry…”

Koizumi-san shook her head. “We regretted what happened, but we never blamed you for our misfortune.”

“True, you made a poor call, but it’s not as if you wanted us to be brainwashed.” It took Chiaki a moment to place the round, generic face before her as belonging to the Ultimate Imposter. She’d seen it only once before, after all. “Everyone makes mistakes, and we thought you had paid for yours with your life. That’s far more precious to us than some grudge.”

“I do wish we’d all acted wiser that day, but the past cannot be changed,” Sonia-san said, stepping closer. “As far as I’m concerned, it is good enough to have you…to have you…”

The Ultimate Princess sniffed. Then she sank to the floor, pulled Chiaki up, and threw her arms around her. “It’s truly wonderful to have you back with us, Nanami-san!”

Physical proof that she was there and could be hugged seemed to be a trigger of some kind, as before Chiaki knew it she was swarmed by bodies, hands tugging at her and warmth pressing into her from every side. She yelped, faintly hearing Hajime chuckle as he stepped away to allow the others their turn. “Careful with her arm,” he called.

Chiaki had no idea whether they heard him or not. Excited voices were climbing over each other, too fast for her to respond to them all. “You’re not a ghost!” Owari-san yelled, patting her down in amazement. “Y-You’re real! I can touch you! You’re not dead!”

“GROUP HUG!” Mioda-san screeched, glomping Chiaki. “Group hug, group hug! Ahhhh, I’m totally gonna write a song about this! I’ll call it, ‘My Friend Died But She Got Better!’”

“For a mortal, you are truly the most blessed among us!” Tanaka-kun laughed. “You had best be careful with this gift of resurrection that has been bestowed upon you, for I fear the gods of the underworld shall not permit you to escape twice!”

“I’m sorry!” Tsumiki-san wept. The poor nurse had tripped in the stampede, but managed to scramble halfway upright before throwing herself at Chiaki. Now she clung around her midriff. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry! I-I didn’t w-want to d-do it, b-but I couldn’t fight ba-ack!”

“It’s fine,” she reassured, reaching down to pat her shoulder. “Really, Tsumiki-san, I know it wasn’t your—”

Chiaki squeaked as she was wrapped in a giant bear hug from behind, pulling her solidly out of Tsumiki-san’s grip. Owwww, my arm. “Nanami!” Nidai-kun bellowed, and wow he was actually
lifting her off her feet. “Good to have you back!”

“Hey dumbass, you’re probably crushing her!” Kuzuryu-kun snapped. “She’d better not get suffocated after everything!” His voice broke a little at the end, and he suspiciously angled his good eye away.

“It’s okay,” she gasped out. “I’m glad to see you too.” Still, she couldn’t hold back a sigh of relief when Nidai-kun placed her back down. Chiaki beamed as more of her precious friends moved to the front.

“It’s good to have you back,” Pekoyama-san said simply, giving her a slight smile.

“Truly,” Hanamura-kun said, trying to sound silky but failing because of the waver in his voice, “it is a treat to be in your presence again.”

“You stupid, dopey gameeeeeeer!” Saionji-san wailed, clinging to her good arm fiercely. “Waaaah! D-Don’t you ever die on us again, al-alright?! I won’t f-forgive you if you do!”

Before Chiaki could make that promise, one of her hands was suddenly grasped by a larger pair, the left cold and too smooth to the touch. “What a wonderful turn of events this is!” Komaeda-kun exclaimed, smiling so broadly his face was almost split in two. “Our class rep’s brilliant hope inspired the Ultimate Hope himself! Her life was saved, and our despair over her death has been made a mere stepping stone for this momentous day! For trash such as me to bear witness…I really am lucky!”

“You aren’t trash, Komaeda-kun! You’re—are you crying?” Indeed, his eyes looked very watery.

“This hope is brighter than anything I’ve ever seen! How can I not cry when faced with something that shines so splendidly?!”

“W-Weirdo,” Soda-kun sniffled from Chiaki’s other side.

“Ah, but Soda-kun, you’re crying too?”

“I am not! I-I just got pepper in my eye, that’s all!”

There was a bright flash of light. Koizumi-san lowered her camera, eyes wet and smile quivering. “S-Sorry…I just…couldn’t resist commemorating this moment…” She rubbed her eyes. “I’m s-so happy you’re back, Chiaki-chan!”

“The class wasn’t the same without you,” the Imposter nodded, laying a slightly shaking hand on her shoulder.

“I wasn’t the same without you,” she said, locking gazes with everyone. “All of you. I love you all.”

Her friends all smiled back. “We love you too.”

The Imposter turned. “Hey, don’t be shy. I’m sure she’ll be happy to see you as well.”

Chiaki craned her neck to see who he was calling to. A figure hovered away from the group, not participating. Small and skinny, with a pale complexion and ashen blonde hair. “H-Hello, Nanami-san,” he whispered, looking as if he wanted the floor to swallow him whole. Her classmates quieted down, watching the pair of them anxiously.
“Mitarai-kun,” she greeted, disentangling herself from the knot of bodies and approaching him.

The Ultimate Animator swallowed. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, not meeting her gaze. “I’m so sorry, Nanami-san. It’s because of me Enoshima was able to brainwash everyone… I helped her make that video because I was too cowardly to stand up to her…and when you were all in danger, I didn’t try to help you…I just ran…”

Chiaki stared at him contemplatively. She was unsure how to feel. She really didn’t hold that against him. What she did were the events on that island, the brainwashed soldiers, the shooting and the screams and the injured.

But…she could understand him, too. They’d been in similar positions. Inadvertently dooming their friends and the world, stuck watching events from the outside, too scared to take more active roles as they were driven closer and closer to despair. Perhaps, if her talent had been as powerful as his, she might have gone as extreme as Mitarai-kun to save her friends.

That, ultimately, was what softened her. “Mitarai-kun…I don’t blame you for any of that. You were her prisoner, and her victim too.”

“B-But if I’d stayed—I could have warned all of you that she’d brainwashed Tsumiki-san—”

“Mitarai-kun,” she said clearly, “I don’t blame you at all for being scared of Enoshima. …I was too. I just didn’t listen to that fear, and, well, we all know how that turned out.”

She looked down at her hands. “I’m more upset about what you tried to do with that Hope Video, honestly. I was there on that island. I had to fight a lot of my own allies. Maybe even kill some. Trying to take away everyone’s freedom… was such a wrong thing to do, Mitarai-kun.”

He flinched as if struck. His fingers clenched around an invisible phone. “I…”

“Do you want to start over?” she interrupted. “I… I told Hajime this already, but I’ve had a couple of days to think. And if I can forgive him, I can forgive you too.”

Slowly, a small smile formed on his face, trembling as if it didn’t believe it deserved to be there. “I… thank you. I’m glad you’re alive.”

She returned it, holding her hand out. “Me too. I look forward to spending time together.”

They shook, and—

“WHOA, WHOA, WAIT!” Mioda-san squawked. She’d been bouncing on her heels impatiently in the background, and as soon as Chiaki released Mitarai-kun’s hand, zipped forward as if taken off a leash. “Were Ibuki’s ears working correctly just now? Are you and Hajime-chan on first-name basis?”

She laughed. Leave it to Mioda-san to note that particular detail. “Yep.”

The musician squealed. “OH. EM. GEE! How did it happen?! Was it love at first sight? Did you have a nauuuuunghty affair while he nursed you back to health?”

“It was nothing like that,” Hajime said, finally stepping back up and taking Chiaki’s hand. Her classmates’ eyes all snapped to their linked fingers.

Sonia-san was the first to react, pressing her hands together in delight. “Oh, congratulations! You must ‘give me the deets’, as they say, Nanami-san!”
“Wait, you actually got that right?” Kuzuryu-kun’s eyebrow rose. “Anyway, you could do worse than Hinata, Nanami. He’s a pretty reliable guy when it comes down to it. Congrats.”

“Dude, what gives?” Soda-kun whined, grabbing Hajime’s shoulders. “You’re my soul friend! That means we ride and die together! If one flies solo, so does the other!”

“I never agreed to that.”

Chiaki ducked her head, face flaming, at a particularly exultant comment from Komaeda-kun. “How marvelous! What could be more wonderful than the joining of such strong hopes? The hope born of such a union would—”

“Hey, don’t go talking about stuff like that!” Koizumi-san scolded. Schooling her face back into a smile, she turned to Chiaki. “Congratulations! I didn’t think he was much at first, but he surprised me. You can definitely count on him.”

“Nanami’s return and new relationship call for a celebration!” Nidai-kun bellowed. “HANAMURA! You up for cooking a second dinner?”

“Oh, but of course! I’ll whip up an extra-large serving just for you, Nanami-san!”

“HELL YEAH! MORE FOOD!”

“OOOOOO!” Mioda-san clapped her hands excitedly. “SLEEPOVER! Let’s make it a sleepover!”

“Aren’t we all too old for sleepovers?” Hajime snarked.

“Never! You’re never too old to hang and have fun with your friends!”

“B-Besides,” Tsumiki-san added, “Nanami-san doesn’t have a place to sleep for the night, r-right?”

“I was just gonna move in with Hajime,” Chiaki said without thinking. Predictably, that set off another round of raucous chaos.

“My, my,” Hanamura-kun purred, rubbing his chin, “She’s back for only a few hours and you already have her moving in? You have technique, Hinata-kun. Care to...demonstrate?”

Mitarai-kun’s eyes widened. “Wow… That’s pretty daring of you, Nanami-san. But, um, I don’t think he’s a bad guy, so…you’ll probably be alright.”

“Oi, Hinata-onii! You better not have coerced Nanami-onee into anything weird, you perv!” Saionji-san snarled, cracking her knuckles.

“Really? You really think I’m the type of person who’d do that?”

“No, but this is our beloved class rep we’re talking about,” the Imposter said. “And we just found out she’s alive. You’ll have to excuse some overprotectiveness for the time being.”

“Indeed.” Pekoyama-san patted her bamboo sword. “We must be extra vigilant to ensure no harm falls upon her again. That said, I’m sure we can entrust her care to you.”

“Take heart in the knowledge, mortal, that the Supreme Overlord of Ice already holds you in decent esteem! Else the spell of protection I cast on this mortal would have thrown you into hell the moment you tried to pursue her!”

“Yeah, yeah…”
Chiaki almost melted from pride and joy at Hajime’s easy banter with her friends, the slight roll of his eyes and twitch of his lips as they laughed and slapped him on the back. He’s found a place here too.

“Let’s celebrate!” she declared.

The sleepover was a smash. Furniture was shoved aside. People ran out to their cabins, carrying in blankets and pillows and changing into their pajamas—Chiaki had to bite back a giggle at the sight of Komaeda-kun’s adorable floppy dog slippers. Hanamura-kun was on fire, laying out takoyaki, spring rolls, gyudon, chicken skewers, more dishes than she could count, faster than she could blink. Board games, video games, card games, and party games were all brought out and engaged in. Her friends bounced back and forth between the various activities and her, scarcely seeming to believe she was really alive. It was a whirlwind of chatter and liveliness, and she couldn’t seem to get a moment alone with any of them. She loved it.

It was long past midnight, and her cheeks were actually aching from all the smiling they’d done, when the party grew old. The restaurant was littered with forms, most solitary and sleeping, but a few clustered together and talking in low voices. Chiaki and Hajime were curled up together under a blanket, facing each other. Though it was dark, a few lamps had been brought in (mostly so no one would trip over each other during bathroom runs), and the soft light was just enough for her to make out his face.

The decision to sleep together, even not that way, was one neither had consciously made. They’d just gravitated together. This was something they just needed, and they trusted each other and themselves.

Still, seeing him in sweat pants and a sleep shirt was weird. Seeing him in anything but a suit was weird. But good weird. It felt remarkably more intimate. So did this. Cuddling with him, neither speaking, just looking at each other and occasionally twining fingers, simply gave her a sense of quiet comfort, peace and privilege.

“You grew your hair out,” he murmured after a while, reaching out to toy with some of the pink strands. “Any reason?”

“No…just because.”

“I like it,” he smiled softly.

She returned it, running her fingers through his much shorter hair. It was still soft as silk, despite how spiky it looked. “You cut yours.” Tilting her head, she asked in a teasing lilt, “Any reason?”

He closed his eyes. “…I wanted to start over.”

Chiaki’s face softened, and she moved the hand in his hair to his cheek. He nuzzled her palm. “I remember you liked playing with it,” he murmured, as if to himself.

She loved those words. I remember. She was never going to take them for granted again. “Yeah. You have really nice hair.”

“Do you want me to grow it back out?”

“No!” she gasped, and he raised an eyebrow. Chiaki swallowed. “…Or…not because of me. If you grow it out, it should be for you. Not to make me happy.”
Besides, with his hair shorter, she could suddenly appreciate how broad his shoulders were. They’d been hidden in the long waterfall before. She ran a hand over one admiringly.

“We’ve got a lot to do tomorrow,” she mumbled. “I want to talk to everyone about setting up therapy appointments, introduce them to Yumigami…”

“Unpack your numerous boxes of video games.”

“They’re all very important video games! And we’re having a rematch on every single one.”

“I look forward to it.”

They fell into a comfortable silence again. Outside, crickets chirped softly. Owari-san mumbled something in her sleep before rolling over and snoring loudly. The sound of her sleeping classmates’ even breathing filled her ears, soothing and homey. If Chiaki had one initial qualm about this sleepover, it was that they might wake each other up from nightmares. But for some reason, she had the feeling everyone would sleep soundly tonight.

“Hey, Izuru…” It still felt kind of tingly to use one of his given names. “Are you…are you still bored?”

When he smiled this time, it was subdued. “Yes. That’s never going to go away. It just comes with Ultimate Analyst. But…it’s not crushing like it was before.”

“So…you were having fun earlier?”

“Yes. I suppose it’s akin to when we would play video games during your recovery. The outcomes were always predictable, but because you were with me, it was less boring. Now…it’s not just you, but everyone. If I focus on the bonds we have, the emotions that invokes in me, the boredom becomes secondary.”

He scowled. “Enoshima had all that too…but she threw it away. And I almost made the same mistake.”

“But you didn’t,” Chiaki said, cupping his face again. “You did something she never did—you held onto hope. You hoped that despair wasn’t your only path, and I’m so proud of you for that. I’m so glad you’ve found a place to belong, and I’m so glad it’s with us. If you were an outsider here, if you were unhappy…I wouldn’t be able to bear it.”

His face softened, and he pressed his forehead against hers. “I love you. I never told you that explicitly, did I? I love you so much, Chiaki. More than anything or anyone else in the world.”

Brilliantly, she beamed back. “I love you too. Every part of you, with all my being.”

He reached up and squeezed the hand on his cheek. Chiaki wanted to talk more, but her eyelids kept drooping. But…I guess it’s okay. We have all the time in the world now. She scooted around until she was nestled into his chest.

“You know you have a pillow?”

“This is cozier.”

A slight huff of laughter was his only response, and he tugged her closer, dropping a lazy kiss on her forehead. She hummed in contentment and closed her eyes.
She’d finally made it home.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: My goal this chapter was to make it the most heartwarming moment possible. To induce so much sugar, cheese and fluff y’all throw up. Have I succeeded?

The Ultimate Imposter is in his ‘real’ form because I like to think he’s grown comfortable enough to no longer hide behind masks, and only wore Byakuya’s in the ending of Side:Hope to troll the real Byakuya.

Height in Dangan Ronpa is a wonky thing. Between inconsistent animation and the English version sometimes knocking off an inch or two for no apparent reason, it’s kind of hard to tell how tall or short some characters are. Our boy here? Is apparently both 5’8” and 5’10.5”, depending on where you look. I’ve been going with the latter because it’s closer to 179 cm, his Japanese height.

Meaning he’s got a solid 7 and a half inches on tiny 160 cm (5’3”) Chiaki.

You better believe I’ve been playing that up.

The epilogue is going to be up October 5~ I know that’s technically a day over the two-week update period but c’mon, it’s the one-year anniversary of this fic. I can’t just ignore that.
True Ending

Chapter Notes

A/N: Man, hard to believe a year ago today, Extra Life was first posted. Also, is everyone enjoying V3? I hope the conclusion of this fic helps heal all the hurts it’s inflicted.

A French translation has now been started, available here: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/12677839/1/Extra-Life-French-Edition Many thanks to Dyplopia!

Pink Pidgeon: Yeah, I tend to stick closer to the Japanese version for writing DR...the exceptions are the English spellings and titles because I’m used to them, and because I personally find “Super High School Level ____” to be kind of silly-sounding.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“…keep buzzing around in my head, like BZZT! BZZT! And the next thing I know, it’s morning!” Mioda-san finished, foot tapping a beat against the floor. Dark circles under her eyes were a testament to her insomnia, and even her usually-boundless energy seemed to have found a bottom.

“I-I’m sorry…” Tsumiki-san whimpered, burying her face in her hands.

“Ah, no, no, Mikan-chan! It isn’t your fault the pills aren’t working! Ibuki’s mind just races too fast for her to fall asleep! She just lies there, thinking thinking thinking, and then she starts thinking of…of that stuff, and she can’t turn it off, and next thing she knows it’s morning!” Mioda-san’s forced cheer broke, and she stopped talking. Her hands stroked Yumigami faster.

The little rabbit had become very popular when Chiaki introduced her, and was now the official group therapy rabbit. Pekoyama-san and Tanaka-kun especially liked her—Pekoyama-san was awed that there was a fluffy creature that wouldn’t run from her, and Tanaka-kun had deemed her a worthy potential vassal of his dark kingdom within seconds of meeting her. Now Yumigami lived like a queen in the hotel, where everyone could come and pamper her as they wished.

Today was Sunday, which meant group therapy in the lodge first thing after breakfast; Chiaki personally liked the symbolism of starting a week by unloading any problems you’d had with the last. Yumigami was naturally a staple in these kinds of sessions, and oftentimes needed to be held by the speaker. It had become a sort of unofficial rule that to talk, you had to “pass the rabbit”.

At first, Chiaki’s insecurities had crept back up; she’d never attempted group therapy before, and she feared being unable to handle so many people at once. Hajime had helped her for the first few meetings, and even now was ready to jump in if she needed. He could have done it himself, of course—he could have done all their jobs himself—but it had become customary for him to never step into a role that was already filled out of respect for their passion and to lighten his own load.

In the two months since that fateful reunion, their little community on Jabberwock was flourishing quite nicely. When you had a small number of people to do lots of work, everyone was willing to do their share. Some had designated jobs. Hanamura-kun cooked. Tanaka-kun cared for the livestock, and Sonia-san almost always volunteered to help him (for reasons, Chiaki suspected, that
had as much to do with the man himself as the animals). Soda-kun maintained the machines around the islands. Tsumiki-san ran the pharmacy and handled injuries. Chiaki, of course, was the therapist.

The rest of them rotated duties, doing the chores and tasks that didn’t require specific talents. Laundry, for example, or keeping stock at the supermarket, or watching for errant ships—Komaeda-kun especially had a liking for cleaning, as he was remarkably good at it. If anyone needed help, someone else was more than likely willing to offer it. Even Saionji-san would pitch in a hand when asked without much complaint.

When work was done, everyone dedicated some time to tinkering with their talent, trying to find breakthroughs that could be beneficial to the world. Togami-kun had arranged a special force that they would email their research to. Chiaki wasn’t sure how much this force knew about them—just that everything was very anonymous and hush-hush, like a secret service.

Personally, Chiaki was still hoping to experiment with video game therapy some more, perhaps design a game strictly for that purpose, but that was on the back burner while she helped her friends. And then, there was what she and Hajime had been working on…

Next to Mioda-san, the Imposter laid a hand on her shoulder. Supportive glances and sad smiles were thrown her way. Across the circle, Tsumiki-san was nodding. “I’ll get you a new prescription with stronger melatonin levels. But…we might have to experiment for a while before we find one that works.”

“Ibuki doesn’t want to wait ‘a while’! She wants to sleep noooooow!”

“Does anyone have any suggestions for Mioda-san?” Chiaki asked, looking around. “Techniques, ideas?”

“Fight ‘til you’re gonna collapse, eat ‘til you’re stuffed, and then take a good SHIT before bed!” Nidai-kun bellowed. “That knocks me out good! Most of the time it even stops the nightmares!”

Pekoyama-san looked at Mioda-san’s thin figure doubtfully. “Or perhaps you could compose songs? Running through my katas has helped me fall asleep.”

“That’s no good! Ibuki’s gonna want to jump out and play it!”

“You might try an herbal bath before bed,” Hajime suggested. “Lavender in particular has medicinal effects that can induce sleepiness.”

Saionji-san stuck her nose in the air and crossed her arms. “My dad used to make me this drink when I was little and had trouble sleeping. Worked wonders. I guess I could share the recipe.” She almost sounded completely snotty. Only the slightest hitch in her voice, the little waver on dad, betrayed her.

Mioda-san took one look at the dancer, frowned, and offered Yumigami. “Need to cuddle?”

“No, I don’t! And you’d better be grateful that I even offered!”

“Oh, I am! Your idea and Hajime-chan’s idea both sound totally awesome! Thanksies!”

“Excellent! Try those out and let us know how they work next week, Mioda-san!” Chiaki glanced at the clock, then back around the circle, picking out one face that hadn’t said much. “Komaeda-kun, you’ve been very quiet, and we still have a few minutes left. Why don’t you go now?”
He smiled and waved his real hand dismissively. “Oh, you shouldn’t waste your time listening to me. It’s far more important the rest of you get the help you need, so you can shine brilliantly!”

This was the same thing he did at every group therapy session. It saddened Chiaki, but it didn’t surprise her. Two months was not enough time for real change, not nearly. Even without counting the years they’d spent brainwashed into despair or the events of the Killing School Trip, some of her friends—a disturbingly high amount, actually—also had childhood traumas that had greatly shaped their current attitudes. Those more personal things were handled in individual therapy sessions, but Chiaki knew it would take a very, very long time for her friends to completely come to terms with those old wounds. For now, she’d start with the fallout from recent events and work her way back.

“Komaeda-kun…it’s not a waste. I really would like to hear about your week.”

A few seats down from him, Mioda-san held Yumigami out. “C’mon, Nagito-chan! Look at these big brown eyes! Yumigami-chan’s begging you to cuddle her and talk!”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly. The joint in my wrist came loose yesterday, and I dropped some medicine while helping Tsumiki-san organize the pharmacy. I don’t want to drop Yumigami too.”


“Oh, it was alright. When I swept the mess into a trash bag and brought it to the dumpster, I found another box of perfectly good medicine, so I was able to reimburse Tsumiki-san!”

“Not the medicine, your hand! I’ve told you before to drop by for tune-ups whenever it acts funky!”

“He’s right, you know!” Koizumi-san wagged a finger at Komaeda-kun. “You should take more care of yourself! Geez, and I was wondering why you weren’t using that hand at breakfast…”

“You’re our friend,” Mitarai-kun said, looking around hesitantly. He seemed to draw courage from the nods he saw, because he sat up a little straighter in his chair. “We want you to bother us with your problems.”

Chiaki nodded. “You never have to talk if you don’t want to, but won’t you at least let us help you when you hurt yourself?”

He thought that over a moment. “Well…I suppose it would give you all more chances to cultivate your talents. In that case, I’d be glad to offer my woes as a stepping stone.”

She inwardly sighed. Not quite the response I wanted…but I’ll take what progress I can. At least he’s considering coming to us for help. “Now, how has the rest of your week been? I know you like reading, have you found any good novels lately?”

“Oh, yes! The one I’ve just started is about a woman who accidentally stumbles into an alternate dimension, and a man investigating the darkness behind a manuscript! It’s quite thrilling!”

“I see, I’m glad you’re enjoying it! And has anything been particularly troubling you this week?”

“No, not really. It’s been quite an ordinary week for me, other than the routine of my luck cycle.”

“That’s wonderful to hear!” She glanced at the clock again. “And…that’s it for today. I think we all did great!”
As chairs scrapped back, she threw Hajime a questioning glance. *Is now a good time?*

He read her perfectly. Giving her a nod, he cleared his throat, drawing their friends’ attention. “Before we get going, there’s something Chiaki and I have to show you.”

“Oh my,” Hanamura-kun purred, rubbing his chin. “Is it—”

“No. Whatever you’re thinking, no.”

Chiaki shook her head in wry amusement at the cook’s antics. “Just…follow us, okay?”

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When the Future Foundation had arrived on Jabberwock Island, they’d constructed bridges connecting the islands together, rather than continue to use a ferry service. Chiaki and Hajime led their classmates across such bridge towards what they called the “Second Island”, after events in the Neo World Program. Once there, they walked further along the island until they stood before the building housing the Neo World Program.

According to Hajime, the building was exactly where a ruin had rested in the virtual world. At the entrance, there was a small memorial, flowers set in glass vases around a portrait. It had been painted by Hajime, depicting a pink-haired teenage girl and a white plush rabbit, both smiling gently. The girl looked exactly like Chiaki, only years younger, and in blue instead of brown.

Within days of Chiaki’s return, Hajime had brought her here and told her about the two AIs who had protected them. A lump had bobbed in her throat as he’d explained the one that looked like her had taken her appearance because everyone missed her so much, and that the rabbit one was based off Gekkogahara-san’s avatar, Usami.

Chiaki continued to lead them deeper into the building, until they stood within the pod room. It was an enormous, circular room, containing the pods and computers and equipment that made the Neo World Program run. Everything was dimmed from lack of activity. Her classmates looked curious as they stepped inside.

“Tell me, for what sorcerous plan have you dragged Tanaka the Forbidden One to this monument of power?” Tanaka-kun demanded.

Rather than answering, Hajime tilted his head back. “World Destroyer?”

There was a long pause; then one of the monitors above the pods flickered on. A young man appeared on the screen. With short dark hair, a neat suit, and sharp red eyes, he perfectly resembled a Hajime who didn’t have heterochromia, or an Izuru who’d cut his hair. “Creator,” he said, giving a short bow. “Nanami, Class 77. You called?”

It had been…interesting to meet him. Chiaki had never expected Hajime would make an AI of himself. But it had been necessary to wake up her sleeping classmates, he’d explained. Unlike hers, their comas had not been at all natural, and as such a natural recovery was almost impossible. It was only because of the pre-existing Neo World Program technology that he’d been able to create an AI that could piece together their fragmented minds so quickly; inventing it on his own would have taken months, if not years, by his calculations. Just one more thing to be grateful to the late Gekkogahara-san for.

"Explain and give a progress report on the Neo World Program Restoration Project," Hajime said.

"Your command has been accepted." The World Destroyer faced her friends. "The Neo World Program Restoration Project has a single purpose: to preserve and restore the Neo World Program
to its original state, including the remnants of the gestalt AI and Usami, while completing the purge of Enoshima’s virus.”

As a precautionary measure, Hajime had instructed the World Destroyer to search for and destroy any lingering data bits of Enoshima’s virus. She couldn’t do anything anymore, probably, but she was still there. And that was a risk that could not be allowed. She had to be purged from the world for good.

However, in his searches, the World Destroyer had also located traces of data for Chiaki’s AI and Usami. Not enough for them to be ‘conscious’, not even enough to restore them without extensive location and reconstruction. But enough for the possibility to exist.

A possibility that, if Chiaki was honest, had taken time for her to come to terms with.

"Their 'brother', Alter Ego, has expressed a wish to assist in the reconstruction of his sisters, which I have accepted. Restoring Usami will be a simple matter; the gestalt is slightly more complicated, as she was constructed out of memories. Depending on whether her coding retains your uploaded memories, she may not have the same appearance or personality. However, my analysis predicts a 58% chance of successful rebooting."

Owari-san frowned, rubbing a finger in her ear as if to clean it out. "Uh…I don't get all this techno-jazz. What's he saying?"

"He's killing the last bits of Enoshima's virus," Chiaki translated. "And he's working on restoring the AI's who guarded you."

"We didn't tell you before now because we wanted promising preliminary results. The World Destroyer still hasn't located all their data, but we've been making strides, and we think there is a chance that someday, they can come back." Hajime looked back at the World Destroyer. "Thank you for the report. Return to work, if you would."

"Your command has been accepted." The World Destroyer bowed again and disappeared. Chiaki looked around; her classmates looked absolutely stunned.

Koizumi-san recovered first. "Chiaki-chan…what is this? Why are you and Hinata…?"

"Hajime told me how much you all regarded my AI as your friend, and even though you thought Usami was an annoyance, you still softened towards her at the end. So…why didn't any of you even suggest trying to bring them back?"

A heavy pause descended. Her friends all looked at each other. Tsumiki-san shifted. "U-Um…w-we didn't want to hurt your feelings. I-If we suggested it, you might think we were…"

"Replacing me?" Chiaki smiled, a little sadly. "I'm going to be honest…when Hajime first told me about her, and I thought you might want to bring her back, it did scare me. After all, she's an AI. She must be way smarter, and stronger, and cooler, than me. And…why would anyone want me around when they could have a better me?"

"Whoa, Nanami, we don't—" Nidai-kun started, but she shook her head, raising a hand.

"But, gradually…I came to realize something. She wouldn't replace me. She isn't me, not exactly. Our memories and experiences are different, even if we look the same and have similar interests. I think…meeting her would kinda be like Aya Brea meeting Eve."

It was only after she'd met the World Destroyer, and spent weeks watching how absolutely nothing
changed for it, that her worries had slowly been assuaged. For all his physical and personality resemblance, the World Destroyer wasn't Hajime. He didn't share the memories they'd made, and she hadn't suddenly been overcome with crazy love for him when she'd met him. Neither did any of her classmates treat him as a substitute for Hajime or vice versa. Then, shouldn't she believe that the same would hold true if her AI came back? Besides, she owed her an unpayable debt for watching over her friends.

So, a month after learning about them, she'd finally told Hajime she was alright with bringing back the AIs. And Chiaki found that, while there was still some nervousness, there was a bit of excitement too. Her AI must surely share her love for video games, right? What would it be like, playing with someone exactly as equal in skill as her? The more she thought, the more she liked the idea. She imagined this was what it felt like to await the birth of a sibling.

“What I’m saying is… I’m okay with my AI being brought back. Hajime and I just wanted to make sure it had a chance of succeeding before telling you. That is… if it’s what you want.”

“If you’re okay with it,” Sonia-san said, smiling hesitantly, “then…yes. We’d love to have them back.”

Various exclamations of agreement arose from the rest of her friends. Smiles spread on the others faces. Even Mitarai-kun, who’d never met the AIs, seemed happy for them.

“So, Hinata-kun, if there are two of Nanami-san—are you getting both?” Everyone turned to Hanamura-kun incredulously. “What? I can’t be the only one thinking it!”

“…Yes, you are.” Pekoyama-san said flatly.

Chiaki glared at Hanamura-kun, puffing her cheeks. “We aren’t doing hareem routes. I don’t want to share Hajime, even with a version of myself, and he doesn’t want to share me with a version of himself either.”

“Oh…so Nanami-san isn’t getting two of Hinata-kun, either… that’s a shame.”

“…I don’t want to know what kind of fantasies you’ve been conjuring up.” Hajime shook his head. “But to borrow Chiaki’s colloquium, definitely no hareem routes. That’d be…too weird. I’m a one-Chiaki man.”

She melted. “And I’m a one Hajime-and-Izuru-woman.”

“Ewwwwwww,” Saionji-san complained loudly. “Can’t you two lovebirds take it to your cottage?”

“Stop whining,” The Imposter said. “Let’s just celebrate that Usami and Nanami are coming back.”

Kuzuryu-kun’s brow furrowed. “That’s gonna get confusing real fast. You share given names and surnames. It’s not gonna be easy figuring out which one of you we’re addressing.”

“Perhaps we could address the other Nanami-san as Fujisaki-san? After her creator, Fujisaki Chihiro.” Sonia-san suggested.

“I can see that working…but we should hold off on making any decisions until she gets back.” Chiaki said. “It’s her name and how she’s addressed we’re talking about; she should be the one to decide that.” That said, while she wouldn’t mind sharing ‘Nanami’ or ‘Chiaki’, it would make things a lot easier if there was some difference.
Joviality filled the air as they filtered out. Koizumi-san reprimanded Mioda-san as she loudly wondered what would happen if “the other Chiaki-chan hooked up with Destroyer-chan”.

Komaeda-kun got halfway through his speech on how hopeful their return would be before Kuzuryu-kun rolled his eye and slapped him on the back. Chiaki trailed behind, smiling fondly at her friends. Her hand reached out, instinctively finding Hajime’s. They laced their fingers together.

It didn’t matter that the World Destroyer’s chances of success weren’t a hundred percent. A future where Usami and Chiaki’s own AI were back was the future they all wanted. And at that moment, that was what was important.

They decided to change into their swimsuits and throw a beach party that afternoon, to celebrate the announcement of the Neo World Program Restoration Project. The sky overhead was clear and blue; half her classmates had joined in a volleyball game, organized by Nidai-kun, who stood on the sidelines yelling encouragements. The Imposter sat out, talking with Mitarai-kun and Tsumiki-san. Saionji-san stomped after crabs on the beach, cackling. Pekoyama-san and Kuzuryu-kun strolled along the shore. Reclining on the towel she was sharing with Hajime, Chiaki’s contented gaze kept straying between her friends and her boyfriend’s distracting and toned chest.

She sighed happily.

This was how her days went now.

There were differences in how they individually played out, of course. Saturday and Sunday, excluding group therapy, were her days off. Tomorrow, she’d be meeting with Mitarai-kun, Tanaka-kun, and Tsumiki-san for individual therapy, continuing to work with them through their guilt and regret. The day after would have different meetings, different activities, but there was a soothing, repetitive peace to everything now. She never had to fear for her friends’ lives or for their futures.

No, now she could enjoy their company, the highs and lows, the laughs and tears. And she treasured all of it. Now that they’d faked their deaths—staging a shootout with some of Togami-kun’s men weeks ago that ended with them ‘caught live’ in an explosion—they were free.

As far as Chiaki knew, the rest of the world was recovering. Even Towa City—after Towa Monaca’s disappearance, her forces there had crumbled into nothing, bereft of leadership. The fighting had finally ended, and for the past few weeks, Naegi Komaru had stayed in the city, arguing and negotiating with the resistance movement. The remaining Warriors of Hope had turned themselves in and would likely be going on trial, though between their youth and how they’d assisted Future Foundation for the past year, Chiaki imagined they would get lighter sentences.

Speaking of Future Foundation, they’d had a change in leadership after Kirigiri-san stepped down. Togami-kun had not only inherited her position as Branch Head of 14, but as leader of the entire Future Foundation as well. Now he and Class 78 were planning to use Future Foundation’s resources to rebuild Hope’s Peak Academy.

That had been a decision no one on Jabberwock Island—except Komaeda-kun—had been pleased with. It had taken a lot of arguing with Naegi-kun over video messages, listening to his reasons for why he wanted to do it and how he planned to prevent a repeat of the previous corruption, for them to stand down. Even now, Chiaki knew she still wasn’t entirely happy with it. The only good thing to come of the Tragedy was Enoshima burning that place down, in her opinion. She just couldn’t forgive how they’d experimented on, lobotomized, and locked up the man she’d loved, or their negligence in protecting all their students.
But…there wasn’t anything they could do about it. Nothing except trust Naegi-kun, as he’d trusted them. And that was something she was willing to do.

Sometimes, Chiaki had to stop and look around to make sure everything was real. It was so peaceful, so calm. It was everything she’d ever wanted and she sometimes trembled in Hajime’s arms at night, fearing it would be taken from her. But each time she did, he’d smooth her hair and murmur comforting words, and she could go to sleep, fears alleviated.

Sometimes, their roles were reversed. Because of course he too had things that haunted his dreams; the experiments done to him, her almost dying, his guilt over his inaction and actions. He never cried out when he had nightmares, but she always heard his disturbed moving and woke up, holding him tight. He’d drop his face into her shoulder, and they’d talk if they wanted or basked in each other’s presence if not.

The healing process they were all going through was rough, yes. But the trade-off was so, so worth it. Moments like this party were what she had experienced for the past two months, and hoped she would continue experiencing for the upcoming months and years.

*It’s all because none of us ever gave up.*

*Even when you mess up and make mistakes…it’s not the end. You can keep going.*

*There are still personal grievances to overcome, blocks in our road…things we could never handle alone. But we don’t have to. We’ll all handle them together.*

*I think it’s safe to say this future…*

Warm hands gently tugged her into a solid chest. “What’s on your mind?” Hajime asked quietly, breath tickling her ear.

Chiaki laughed lightly, turning in his arms and beaming up at him. “Just thinking…this future we have ahead of us isn’t so bad, is it?”

The small smile on his face grew. “No, it isn’t.”

She hummed in approval as he leaned in to kiss her, fingers going to wind in that silk-soft hair. His hand traced along her neck, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake. Warm bliss bubbled in her stomach, spreading throughout her body. “Mmm, Izuru…”

He suddenly pulled away, and fast as a blink, caught the volleyball that had been playfully tossed at him. He raised an eyebrow at their friends. “Really?”

“Just makin’ sure you weren’t getting too distracted,” Soda-kun said with a toothy grin, arms behind his head.

“So you decided the best way was throwing a ball at my head?”

“Oh c’mon, I knew you were gonna catch it…and now that you’ve stopped makin’ out with Nanami, you can join the game!”

Hajime glanced at Chiaki, eyebrows raised. “What do you think, Chiaki?”

“I’m terrible at sports. Let’s do it.”

He smiled again. As he stood, offering her his hand, Owari-san punched a fist into her palm.
“Awesome! We’ll go all-on-one! Nanami, you’re on our team!”

“Yeah, you gotta help us beat your boyfriend!”

Chiaki laughed again, shouting promises to try her best as they ran over to their waiting friends. Because really, this was all she needed. She had Hajime and their friends, and all her video games in their cottage, and Yumigami at the hotel. And most of all, she—they—had a shining future stretching ahead of them.

Yes...this is the future we won for ourselves.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *sniffs* I love happy endings. Though, writing epilogues is hard. I had a lot of ideas that had to get cut to keep this from dragging.

Creating a character out of the blue so he can solve your problems and then dropping him with no explanation? Shame on you, Spike Chunsoft. Especially since I cannot see Class 77 viewing AIs as tools after what AI Chiaki and Usami did. So I resolved what happened to the World Destroyer. If you don’t know who he is, he’s from the SDR2.5 OVA, which is currently Japan-only.

And of course, I couldn’t forget about AI Chiaki. She and Usami are both very important, after all. The notion of bringing her back was something I was unsure on, since I wanted to avoid a deus ex machina of her returning out of nowhere. But given her status as an AI and how Alter Ego could come back after being executed, I also thought it would be very odd if the notion of trying wasn’t even raised. So I went for the SDR2 middle ground—they’ll try, success is a possibility, but not guaranteed.

That said, if there’s one thing I’ve noticed, it’s that fics that talk about reviving AI Chiaki never mention the same for Usami! And that makes me a bit sad. Yeah, she was annoying, but she did want to protect everyone, too. And she was AI Chiaki’s sister. I’m sure she’d want her back.

I made Byakuya FF’s new chairman for a couple of reasons. He has the business savvy to succeed, he’s privy to Class 77’s secret, he’d probably crack down hard on any corruption after all his experiences, and after his character development, he strikes a good balance between “blindly trust everyone” and “blindly distrust everyone”. I also made Class 77’s secret arrangement with FF because, well, just living on an island for the rest of your life doesn’t strike me as really doing anything to help the world.

And...wow. That’s it. Those are my last thoughts on this fic. I wanted to end it the way Dangan Ronpa usually ends—with the main problems solved, but with some uncertainty and hope in the future. Will the AIs be brought back? Will the new HPA and FF stay on their paths? Will Class 77 overcome their personal demons? I like to believe yes, but I left it open-ended.

So, what’s in the future for me? I’m honestly not sure. I do want to take a break from writing for a bit. But I don’t know if I’m ready to say goodbye to Extra Life just yet. I have a couple ideas in this universe that might make good one-shots, so I’m thinking about putting them together in a single fic collection.
Finally, to every single one of my beloved readers—those who left short reviews, those who left long reviews, those who didn’t leave reviews at all but were still here: thank y’all so much. Your support has meant the world to me, and Extra Life has grown so much because of it. I’ve gotten fanart, requests to let this be translated into other languages, and someone wants to actually print and bind this like a real book! I never imagined any of this would happen. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Y’all are the best readers in the world, and it’s been an absolute pleasure to write Chiaki’s growth and happy ending.

Works inspired by this Extra Life AU AU by Vandalia1998, Highly Illogical by Yokaibytes

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