### Daymare

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**Daymare**

by **IntrospectiveInquisitor**

**Summary**

Izuku Midoriya has endured a decade of abuse, ridicule, and social ostracization due to his status as 'Quirkless'. Even his childhood friend, Katsuki Bakugou, has tossed him aside and made it a mission to drill his uselessness home. But despite his obstacles and the derision of his peers, Izuku will never give up on his dream of being a hero, and will never feel shame for being called Quirkless.

Because it's easier than acknowledging that he has a Quirk at all.
"Ah, yes, isn't Mr. Midoriya also planning to apply for Yuuei?"

The world buzzed like a hive of static hornets, noises ringing ceaselessly in Izuku Midoriya's ears. There was a dissonance between the almost ignorable noise and the flickering colors that infected his retinas. He could vaguely hear loud voices pushing through the static, juxtaposed against the snarling, glaring visage of Katsuki Bakugou. His (friend not a friend not anymore but he's too pathetic to admit it can't even admit he has no friends) classmate was screaming in his face, something coarse and derogatory, which Midoriya didn't even need audio clues to parse out.

"-eally think you could ever be a hero, you fucking Quirkless loser?!" A moment of clarity bled through, and Kacchan's bellows rang unpleasantly in his ears. Midoriya remembered after a moment to meet the furious red gaze, his eyes glassy and unfocused.

"I-I... There's n-nothing wrong with trying, right?" His own voice was barely a whimper, strung out and strung up on fraying wires. He knew that he could be heard only because Kacchan willed it. He knew that his words were the wrong ones to say, because explosions crackled in his face and forced him to flinch backwards. He knew that there's no such thing as a right answer when it came to Kacchan, so there was no point in trying to conjure one.

"That's your fucking problem, Deku. You fucking whine about 'trying' and 'doing your best' but you and I both know that you're fucking worthless, with your stupid shit eating smile and your garbage fucking dreams- JUST FUCK OFF ALREADY! I'M the only one in this shitty cesspool of a school that's gonna be a pro, and don't you fucking forget it." Midoriya vaguely noted the spittle that had flecked onto his desk, before twin eruptions rattled the whole thing and sent him shrinking back into his chair.

He said something else, perhaps something agreeable, because Kacchan's face twisted in an unpleasant manner before he stalked back to his seat. The world washed back into static, and Izuku Midoriya resumed staring numbly at his desk, counting the dots of ink that made up the cover of his notebook.

An indeterminate amount of time seamlessly smoothed over him, his crowded thoughts twisting together underneath the cover of static to leave him silent and motionless. He barely succeeded in stifling his unconscious murmurs, his tongue sore from the last time he'd bitten it in an attempt to stem his idiosyncrasy. The blood on his toothbrush was worth not being mocked for thinking out loud.

Lost in thought, he didn't even realize the class had begun emptying until a pair of explosive palms cracked against his desk, violently snapping him into reality. He glanced up with widened eyes, and found a scowl so familiar that it had long been etched onto the insides of his eyelids. "K-Kacchan-"

"Shut the fuck up, DEKU." It would have been a venomous hiss, if not for Bakugou's infamous lack
of volume control. "And stop calling me that stupid shitty nickname! We're not fucking kids anymore, you fucking quivering idiot! But I guess you didn't get the memo, because you still fucking prance around with fucking," Kacchan's hand darted out to twist in strands of mossy green curls, yanking Midoriya's head up and dragging a pained cry out of his throat, "clips in your hair like a goddamn TODDLER! It's time for your shitty ass to grow the fuck up, DEKU. And the first step..

Midoriya gasped when the burning pressure on his scalp was relieved, slumping back into his chair only for a strangled, half formed plea to escape when those same cruel fingers snatched up his notebook. "K-Kacchan, wait!"

"..Is to give up on your STUPID SHITTY DREAMS!" Sparks burst to life in Bakugou's clenched palm, scorching the notebook in his hand until the cover was curling and the pages were smoking. Midoriya stared in something like disbelief, tears welled up in his eyes and tracking down his face in ugly blobs. He was shocked into motion when Kacchan thundered over to the classroom's window, Midoriya nearly falling out of his desk in a mad, uncoordinated scramble. "If you really want a quirk so bad," Bakugou snarled, something twisted and almost gleeful in his bared teeth, a vicious mockery of a grin, "then why don't you dive off the fucking roof and look for one in your next life!"
With a flick of his wrist the ruined notebook plummeted out the window, landing with an audible splash in the pond beneath it. "Maybe in your next life, you'll be born as someone who isn't shitty and hopeless."

Midoriya stood numbly in place, legs frozen in position to send him leaping to save his notebook. Streams of saline trickled down his face, his lips trembling and colorless. He barely reacted when Kacchan brushed past him, rocking in place when a shoulder harshly knocked him out of the way. The slam of the classroom door echoed for a moment, before it was all consumed by static.

But, in the end, it was all okay. Izuku didn't need Kacchan to believe in him. He could endure the abuse, and the mockery, and the battering of his lifelong dreams.

After all, he already knew it was better than what he deserved.

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Izuku Midoriya had worn the title 'Quirkless' since his preschool days, when no sign of a manifesting Quirk had ever come forth. His mother had taken him to a dozen doctors that had all reached the same conclusion: despite all evidence to the contrary, Izuku Midoriya was truly without a Quirk. He had watched his mother's hopes dim until they barely flickered, until she had taken him in her arms and cried, wishing things could be different.

He too had shed tears during those tumultuous months. But they were for very different reasons. His dream to be a hero, his admiration for All Might- they had all but crumbled when, indeed, his Quirk did manifest. Young as he was, he could not truly formulate the thoughts and words so as to properly describe what his Quirk was; all he knew was that his Quirk was something so horrible, so wretched and evil, that he could never use it again.

Shaken by what he had come to think bitterly of as his 'curse', he had hidden under the guise of Quirklessness, almost relieved to be absolved of the terror that slept under his skin. He had, at some points, attempted to learn about his power. He'd tested it under cover of dark and obscurity, where he was sure nothing would be damaged by it. Unfortunately, the damage to himself was harder to avoid.

Nobody ever really questioned why he wore long sleeves and full pants year round, or why he constantly had colorful clips haphazardly stuck in his hair. It was simply chalked up to his abnormalities, filed away with his quivering grins and straying attention. He was simply the Quirkless weirdo loser, and that was easy enough to be. It was easier than acknowledging the crisscrossing latticework of scars underneath his clothing. It was easier than revealing why his
presence made others uncomfortable, why everything about him felt dimmer and gloomier.

It was so much easier to dismiss his gaudy, childish accessories as strangeness than a last ditch effort to keep all his color from leeching away, and tearing the barely functional smile from his face. It was easier to see Kacchan's face twisted in rage and awash with fury, than to see it pale and drawn and lined with fear.

But nothing had ever totally snuffed out the flame of his longing to help others; nothing could be more noble than saving people from harm, saving them from fear. He spent as many moments of lucidity as he could studying heroes, their Quirks and personalities and fighting styles and weaknesses and relationships with one another. He knew it would be next to impossible to be a hero without using his own power, which was why he had to know anything and everything there was that could give him even the slightest leg up.

And perhaps, if he managed to stand on his own two feet among the brilliant, shining light of heroes, it would chase away theering darkness that constricted him from the inside out.

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"'ust a little more time, a few months and I can apply and I can- everything will be better, it'll be better, I won't let Kacchan ruin everything, I just have to-" Midoriya's distorted thought process leaked from between his teeth, surface level thoughts surrounding him in a cloud as he attempted to work through the ones stewing deeper within. His ruined notebook was clutched in one hand, pages still damp from when he'd fished it out of the pond. It was... salvageable, he lied to himself, too weak to simply throw it away and start it from scratch.

The steady vibration of his own voice was grounding in a way that the distant sunshine and sound of cicadas never could be, which made it so much harder when he attempted to quell the nervous habit. He was quickly running out of things to cling to when his thoughts turned to static, leaving him numb and unaware of what happened around him. It was only the sound of his own voice that kept him in the moment, bouncing off the cement tunnel that surrounded him.

But then another voice joined it, one that sent an icy shiver down his spine. "Ooh, now that's a pretty handy vessel you got there, kid! Say, why don't you keep those gums flappin' and make things easier on me? I promise to make it quick!" Izuku had only a split second to look up before his entire world turned cloudy and green, a deathly chill permeating his clothes and crushing him inwards. His scream was muffled by fluids that rushed down his esophagus and through his nostrils, steadily forcing the oxygen from his thrashing body.

He was dying, he was dying he was going to die a villain had him, a villain that was choking him and he couldn't draw breath, fluids filling his lungs and everything tingled and ached, his vision darkening as panic wailed in his mind, he was going to die he was gonna DIE he had to had to had to-

"What the hell-" The villain's incredulous question swiftly bled into a warbling scream of agony, his liquid form vibrating wildly as the silhouette of Izuku Midoriya ballooned outwards, all humanoid features swallowed up by hard angles and bloated, twisted appendages. It thrashed and clawed apart the liquid prison encasing it, rending the villain to pieces even as he howled senselessly. Something dark was birthed in the air, a thousand screaming voices blended together into the cacophony of death. Their wailing song filled the entire tunnel, shook every molecule, permeated every crack of existence with despair and terror. The criminal had one last moment of clarity before his form exploded into steaming chunks of coagulating sludge, his eyes popping and sizzling like overcooked sausages and his brain shriveling into a smoking lump.

And Izuku Midoriya was left kneeling on the soaked concrete, his chest and abdomen heaving as he
spat up mouthfuls of fluid mixed with his own bile. His hands trembled as he scraped his nails desperately against the concrete, frantic for something to pull him back into himself. His head rang like a fleet of gongs, a thousand thoughts shrieking through his head, thoughts of horror and regret and disgust and self loathing because he'd done it again, he'd hurt someone else he'd become something HORRIBLE-

"DO NOT FEAR, CITIZEN. FOR I, AM HE-" A thunderous declaration, ringing with confidence and charisma, came to a halt so abrupt that the aborted effort was left to ring off the tunnel walls. A monolithic form clad in a spandex uniform of bright, primary colors peered down the tunnel, a chiseled, grinning face quickly lining itself with concern upon spotting the splattered villain and the middle-schooler knelt among the remains. All Might swiftly compartmentalized the gruesome lumps of fried organ tissue, and directed his laser focus to the trembling youth. "Young man, fear not! You are safe now!"

Izuku's head snapped up in disbelief, wide, glassy green eyes widening painfully upon the sight of the Number One hero, in the flesh. In any other situation, his elation would have nearly torn him in half. But all he could feel was fear and panic, had he seen had All Might seen what he'd become, seen his shame his curse his sin- His brain finally caught on the words spoken to him, and he managed to gasp out a reply around the urge to continue vomiting. "I-I-I didn't-All Might- I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry I'm s-sorry I didn't mean to- I didn't mean to I didn't mean to I'm s-s-sorry I-

All Might closed the distance in the blink of an eye, laying a gentle gloved hand on Midoriya's violently trembling shoulders. "Calm down, young man, it's alright. You are safe now." His mind blanked on finding more comforting words, his deeply set gaze lingering to the surely deceased remains of the villain he'd been hunting before he returned it to the hysterically sobbing boy in front of him. He settled a steady grip on the boy's shoulder, hyper aware of his swiftly dwindling time limit. "It's alright, young man, I know you must be unsettled but I promise everything is okay."

"I-I killed him," Izuku choked out, his haunted tone pulled down by a thousand barbed hooks. His voice rang weakly down the tunnel, an echo of his crushing misery, an inverse of the screaming hatred that had previously swelled within. He could not see through his veil of tears, could barely feel the grip of gloved fingers around his shoulder, kept grounded only by his broken apologies as the world was washed in static.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry-"
Chapter 2

The sun has only just begun to set, its blinding girth bloating from the curvature of the earth as it impacted the horizon. Fingers of orange light stretched across the darkening sky, casting long shadows across the earth while it yet remained to illuminate the ground. All Might could feel the sun at his back, the warm glow of late spring slowly transitioning to the humid heat of summer. And yet it was not enough to carve through the frigid shell that had locked him in place. The air hung damp and oily around him, moved only by the force of choked, dwindling sobs.

The professional hero had moved to gently rub his palm against a trembling shoulder, his grip firm enough to keep the boy from collapsing, but loose enough to not feel demanding. He patiently waited out the storm of tears that had consumed the boy, and offered soft platitudes while simultaneously tracking his time and attempting to get a solid handle on the situation.

There was a long moment of silence when Izuku's hiccups faded off into silent sniveling, his chest thick with exhaustion and terror both. When he had managed to scrape a handful of composure off the soiled ground, he glanced up to attempt to meet his idol's gaze, his eyes glazed and pupils quivering. "A-are you going to arrest me?" The wrong words the wrong WORDS he'd meant to say something, anything, a lie tell him it's okay feeling better but his fear was too demanding-

All Might blinked in shock, his neon blue pupils scanning the naked terror on the boy's face. "Let's not be too hasty now! You merely acted in self defense, did you not?" He knew it wasn't what he should say, but he didn't know what he should say, hadn't ever encountered a situation like this before- but there was no possible way that he could pin a child with the weight of death. What kind of hero would that make him?

Izuku made a twitchy motion that equated to nodding his head, his muscles feeling loose and alien. It was familiar in a dreamish way, which made a strange sort of sense; it was always a nightmare when he used his Quirk. "Y-yes... he attacked me, and I thought I was going to drown.. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to-"

All Might squeezed the boy's shoulder, his blinding grin softened into something meant to be comforting. For a moment he cursed his own stone carved visage, wishing he could more appropriately express the reassurance the boy so sorely needed. "Can you tell me your name, young man?"

Izuku blinked, momentarily jarred out of his downward spiral. The booming, confident voice wasn't as loud as he usually heard it on videos, but the solid weight to it was enough for him to latch on, to remember who he was talking to. He flushed enough to bring some much needed life to his face, and slowly rose to stand. "A-ah.. Izuku. Izuku Midoriya." He offered a barely stitched together smile of thanks when he felt that sturdy hand assist in his ascension, feeling marginally less nauseous on his feet.

"Well, young Midoriya, you have nothing to fear. You acted within your rights in self defense. While it is true that the situation is... unfortunate," and for a moment All Might seemed to dim, to almost match the haze that surrounded Midoriya before his heroic light shone through again, "you will not be held accountable. The fault lies with me; this is a villain I had previously captured, and foolishly allowed to escape. You have my sincerest apologies."

And for a moment the haze was gone because All Might had BOWED, had apologized to Izuku and he could feel his admiration blossom forth, and no matter how badly it had been stained it was genuine and filled every inch of him with a semblance of vigor. "Y-y-y-you- Mr. All Might y-you
don't have to apologize i-it's my fault I should have walked my normal route it's really okay oh gosh I really can't even believe I'm talking to you right now it's kind of a dream come true although this is kinda different than how I imagined but it's still so wonderful to meet you I'm such a huge fan and I- I've always wanted to be a hero like you and-

All Might boomed out a laugh, clapping young Midoriya on the back with enough force to send the boy rocking forward. "It's always wonderful to meet a fan! But, ahem, on a more serious note.. what happened today was a very unfortunate accident, and I don't place any of the blame on you! But it's very important for a boy of your age to be very mindful of their Quirk. You're at a volatile stage, and learning to control your power is paramount. Please, be sure to keep that in mind!" All Might flashed a thumbs up, steamrolling through words as he practically felt the seconds slip away. He turned to leap heroically out of the tunnel-

Iuzku froze as if he'd been splashed with liquid nitrogen. His Quirk- All Might hadn't seen, right? There was no way, he had to have missed it, if he'd witnessed Izuku's shame then surely the hero would have taken him into custody, or just smeared him across the pavement. Every inch of him trembled and sagged except for his smile, which fell in increments until only the underwire remained. He couldn't-he couldn't stay in the dark any longer. He had to know, had to ask All Might, had to be sure that everything he had ever dreamed wasn't worthless-

All Might made the seamless transition from earth to sky with a rocketing burst of power, soaring unhindered through the air. At least until he noticed the hindering weight on his leg, his eyes widening at the sight of young Midoriya clinging on for dear life. "What the- hey, this isn't a taxi service! Let go!"

Midoriya shook his head resolutely, teeth gritted together to ignore the sting of windburn on his exposed face. It was nothing, it was nothing compared to the pain of uncertainty, the agony every time he had to see himself in the mirror, see his mangled torso and imagine it coming apart-

All Might narrowed his eyes at the boy's bullheaded behavior, altering his trajectory in mid air to take him down to the roof of a nearby apartment complex. He landed at a full stop, taking a moment to be sure young Midoriya hadn't been scraped across the roof before he peeled the boy off his leg. "Young man, that was very reckless of you, not to mention it's an obstruction of heroic duty!"

Izuku regained his bearings after a few moments of nausea, the sudden change in both speed and altitude leaving his empty stomach roiling in discomfort. His anxiety spiked at the hero's stern words, tears welling reflexively at the sound of a raised voice. He pushed past it with nothing but muddy handfuls of determination, and tried to speak louder than the heart crashing into his ribs. "I-I'm really sorry Mr. All Might sir, b-but I have to- I have to ask you something very important! I have to know!" Izuku squeezed his eyes shut, cutting off the swimming colors in his vision before they could disorient him. "I have to know.. can I- is it possible to be a hero.. w-without using a Quirk?" There was a moment when all he could hear was blood pulsing in his ears, the hammer blows of his heart leaving him dizzy and lightheaded. The only answer was the hiss of static. Only it sounded more like.. steam?

Midoriya cracked open one eye, planting his feet more firmly in an attempt to halt the shaking of his legs. He barely managed a glimpse of color before both eyes flew wide open, gazing intently at the gaunt, sickly looking man in front of him. "W-wha..."

Toshinori grimaced heavily, the expression coming much easier from a face that seemed handcrafted for frowning. His uniform hung off him like a sheet, revealing swathes of the plainclothes he had on underneath. A heavy sigh worked its way past his teeth, which quickly became stained with blood when the sigh broke into a hacking cough. "Well.. here's number two of the things I wasn't expecting
today. I'd really appreciate if we could keep this between the two of us, kid." He finally looked up to
gauge young Midoriya's reaction, only to find something... unexpected.

Once Toshinori had pushed past his own inadequacy he could see the expected shock and disbelief
in young Midoriya's face, but there was no confusion, no lack of understanding. He gazed past the
cloudiness in expressive green eyes and found instead a bone deep misery. There was an ache that
twisted in his chest because no one so young should carry that sort of upset (like the whole world had
fallen apart, and every shard he found had crumbled to dust in his hands).

"Y-you... All Might.." Midoriya attempted to put together the puzzle in his head with only a handful
of pieces, jamming together cardboard squares so the gears in his head wouldn't just-stop, and grind
their teeth to nubs. He (pretends puts on a smile acts like he hasn't always known that everything is a
lie and misery and fear are the only truths) cleared his throat, words bubbling up out of the cesspool
in his rib cage. "A-are you okay? Do you-are you hurt? D-do you need a doctor?"

For a long moment, the only thing Toshinori could do was stare, before he laughed. He could taste
the copper on his tongue and feel the rattle in his chest, but the laugh was clear and genuine. "Jeez
kid, I get the feelin' selflessness is more an obsession than a virtue for you, huh? I'm as fine as I can
be, given the circumstances." Figuring that his hand was already laid out, Toshinori adjusted a few
layers of fabric to reveal the twisted scar on his abdomen, deep and gnarled and debilitating. "This is
a wound I got, around five years ago. The hit I took just about knocked my lungs out of commission,
and destroyed my stomach. Due to the medical complications, my power is... lessened. I perform
heroic duties for around three hours a day, and the rest of the time.." He gestured plainly at himself,
expression blank. "This is what I get to deal with."

"Y-you.. five years ago?" Izuku breathed, the exclamation more to buy himself time to remember
than anything. "There's no way Toxic Chainsaw did that."

"Dedicated fan, I see. You're right, he didn't. The guy that did... it's kinda something that's out of the
public eye for a reason. But to answer your question.." Toshinori's expression turned grave, his voice
falling with something almost bitter. "The men and women that risk their lives to protect ordinary
people use every bit of the power they were given. They train tirelessly to push themselves, to not
only succeed in the use of their Quirks, but to excel. And even then, sometimes it's barely enough.
Earlier, if you hadn't used your own Quirk in self defense... I really hate to say it, but I'm not sure I
would have made it in time. I know what happened was awful, but I don't want you to take the
blame for it. With power like yours, I have no doubt you could be trained into an excellent hero, so
don't feel ashamed or scared of your Quirk. There are plenty of schools and academies that can teach
you to use it properly."

Every word was a gouging blade, cutting across the lines marking Izuku's torso until he was sure
he'd unravel, left in a pile like scraps of meat ribbons. His eyes brimmed with fresh tears, hot and
ugly and trailing down his face like salted slugs. How could he expect All Might to understand when
he didn't even know? "I-I just.. I want to help people n-not feel scared-" His voice, broken into
chunks, was barely held together into decipherable sounds.

"That's a noble goal, but it'd be pretty difficult if you don't use your power to ensure the safety of
others. Whatever you're thinking, whatever you're feeling, I promise it isn't that bad. If you can't wait
to apply, then try looking into Quirk counselling, alright? It's nothing to be ashamed of." Toshinori
heaved a rattling sigh, and performed a cursory inspection of young Midoriya's expression.
Considering the wide, glassy eyes and trembling facial muscles, he doubted his words really got
through to the kid. As much as empathy tugged at his chest, he couldn't micro manage every young
hopeful with starry eyes and noble dreams. "Get home safe, alright?" Toshinori offered up a slightly
pitiful looking thumbs up before he made for the rooftop exit, the door slamming shut behind him.
Izuku stared emptily at the metal door, static wailing in his ears. He was frozen in place for several long minutes before his bones fell apart like linkin logs and left him lying limp on the rooftop. He couldn't hear his own breathing, couldn't feel his own chest rise and fall. It was like he'd just sunken into the ground, pulled under by the grinding whisper of concrete and consumed by the maw of wet soil.

Innumerable moments passed before Izuku could taste the wind again. Something buzzed in the back of his head, clearing thoughts in a devastating swathe. He puffed out a breath against the gravel rooftop, his face tacky from dried saline. After a moment of mental coaxing he managed to stand, legs stiff as lead and half as solid. He turned towards the rooftop exit, silence enveloping him, and briefly considered taking Kacchan's advice. Would the nightmare follow him even in death? Was that the secret to being free? ...Likely not, he decided. He still had dreams, as fragile and broken as they were. He'd press towards the light, until it either absolved him of pain or swallowed him whole.

Either one was fine, he decided numbly.
"-hy don't we head to the arcade so you can forget about that loser?" One of Bakugou's lackey's suggested, a stupid looking smirk on his face. Bakugou couldn't even remember which one he was; those fucking extras weren't worth remembering anyway.

"Or we could sneak into the bar down by the station, and pick up some chicks!" The Other One suggested, his voice raking against Katsuki's brain like steel talons. Idiot Shithead (he was pretty sure that was the moron's given title, at least) glanced at Bakugou with a leery grin, which only further stoked his blazing temper.

"Would you two just SHUT THE FUCK UP? I'm so goddamn sick of your shitty fucking suggestions. Newsflash, genius; guess what happens if I get caught fucking around in a bar tryin' to get my dick wet? I DON'T GET INTO U.A., THAT'S FUCKING WHAT!" Bakugou's face twisted into a deathly scowl, his nostrils flaring as his chest heaved with anger. Idiot Shithead took a step back (not far enough, asshole) and raised his hands protectively, an infuriatingly nervous smile on his face. "Don't even FUCKING open your mouth because I know somethin' stupid is gonna come out. I'm really NOT in the mood, so both of you just fuck off."

Dipshit Fuckhole (the one with the gross ass thumb, Bakugou vaguely placed) raised his voice in turn. "Hey c'mon Bakugou, just cuz' you're all pissy about your little Deku doesn't mean you gotta be an asshole to us!"

Katsuki froze in place, his anger stalling before he managed to shift it into the next gear. His smile was dangerous, too many teeth on display as muffled crackles emitted from his clenched fists. "I'm sorry, I think we've got some miscommunication here-YOU TWO DON'T HAVE SOME KINDA SPECIAL FUCKIN' PRIVILEGE, GOT IT?! I'll say whatever the FUCK I want, and if you two sniveling fuckwads don't wanna hear it, then GO EAT SHIT!"

Bakgou glared them down with heaving breaths, every inch of him tensed like a spring loaded firearm. And the two fucking morons apparently had enough brain cells between them to have figured out not to fuck with him. He barked out a laugh so violent it was almost a shout when they left without a word, turning back down the alley they'd been cutting through. "Fucking idiot shitheads talking back, who the fuck do they think they are?"

Katsuki turned to amble (hardly an amble from the rigid set of his shoulders and stomping footsteps) back towards his previous destination, intent on making it home on time to steal a serving of dinner to eat in his room and be fucking left alone to go to sleep. He made it halfway there when a head of ridiculous curls caught his eye, nearly black but still showing a shimmer of green in the sunlight. He could see those stupid fucking clips, and he could see the droop of weak little shoulders and Bakugou felt his internal flame rev up in fury.

"HEY, FUCKING SHITTY DEKU!"

Izuku halted so quickly it was as if he'd lost power, left to sit idly in the middle of the sidewalk as Kacchan's shout cracked him across the back. He can't-he can't handle twice in one day, not after everything that had happened, but he knew running wouldn't help. So he merely sat in place, trembling and squeezing his eyes shut and wishing he could just go home and sleep.

He could feel every footstep impact the pavement as though they were crunching on his skull, his teeth nearly chattering because the fear in his chest was too hot, too noxious, and his smile was
barely holding onto threads. He had to do something, the thought flitted wildly through his head, and it was with animalistic desperation that he pivoted around to offer his sliver of a smile to a furious Bakugou. "K-Kacchan, please."

Katsuki stopped in his death march for a moment, his head tilting in question but even that was furious, the veins in his neck prominent and his teeth grinding together. "Fuck off, Deku. If you're beggin' for mercy it's not gonna fucking cut it. You really pissed me off today, and that's proof enough I need to kick your ass to put you back in your fucking place."

"Kacchan please," Midoriya blurted again, his desperation flooding through the holes in his smile and seeping from the tear ducts in his sockets. "Please I'm sorry for making you angry you can beat me up some other time, I won't even run away, please Kacchan I'm just so tired, I-I'm so tired, I c-can't." He poured every ounce of himself into his smile, his composure slipping as he dissolved into ugly sobs, heaving and exhausted and emotionally ravaged.

Bakugou snarled in irritation at the pathetic pleas, explosions cracking in his open palm before the first sob ripped out of Deku's worthless little body. And it was enough to give him pause, because Bakugou couldn't count how many times he'd made Deku cry, how many times he'd seen obnoxious tears roll down his face with that stupid smile still in place. But.. Deku had never cried in great heaving gasps, frantically sucking in air just so he wouldn't drown in his own tears. That infuriating smile looked fucking wrong, barely even a smile, it only counted by the faintest technicality. He.. for a second, his anger skipped a beat, leaving him silent and staring and unsure.

And in Katsuki's eyes, that was even more grounds for being infuriated. "Just SHUT THE FUCK UP ALREADY! Your fucking sobbing is disgusting and so are you. What, do you think you can be a fucking hero by crying whenever a villain threatens you? You'd be lucky if they even bothered to laugh before they fucking killed you, you moronic shithead!" Katsuki surged forward, slamming a palm into Deku's chest before the blubbering idiot could even move. He stumbled backwards and almost lost his balance, before realizing there hadn't been any fire behind the blow. Bakugou sneered at the lost look behind his shitty tears. "Don't think that was me letting you off the hook, you shitty nerd. You're just too fucking pathetic and annoying to deal with today. So go fuck off home and cry where I don't have to look at you."

Izuku almost, almost thanked him, because it was the closest thing to 'considerate' that Kacchan had been in ten years, the last time being when he had only acted like he was going to throw Izuku's slice of birthday cake in the trash the day after he turned thirteen. But he knew how Kacchan thought, how gratitude and concern made him explode with rage, so he only mumbled something incomprehensible and staggered away, breaking into a run when he was sure his chest wouldn't collapse from the force of his crying. Kacchan's gaze burned into his back until he made it out of sight.

Midoriya's crying fit eventually ebbed off by the time he made it back to his apartment, and he spent a few minutes in front of the door wiping at his face until he didn't look like a total wreck. He managed to contort his face into something pleasant to greet his mother, and stumbled through a short conversation before falling into his room. The sight of his plethora of All Might memorabilia pinged through his chest like a ricocheting bullet, an endless reminder of the day's events. As if he ever would have forgotten anyway. Izuku collapsed into his bed, exhaustion creeping around the darkness that already consumed the edges of his consciousness. He managed a single self deprecating thought before he fell asleep.

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In the ten months leading up to the U.A. entrance exam, nobody really noticed anything different about Izuku Midoriya. There was little concern about him whatsoever, which for once proved to be an immense relief. Nobody said much when he began showing up with more and more clips in his
hair, bright and gaudy and wholly out of place. Someone snickered for a few minutes when he began wearing neon colored rubber bracelets that had been out of style for years, but otherwise it flew under the radar. His occasional muttering and constant scribbling were so commonplace that nobody paid attention to the five additional notebooks he carried around.

Perhaps subconsciously there was notice of his diminishing vocal efforts. Even when addressed directly, he rarely said more than a few words, in sharp contrast to his previous, cautiously friendly demeanor. He didn't seem particularly angry or aggressive, but there was an unconscious warning, hanging tattered from his shoulders, that suggested for others to stay away. Even Kacchan didn't spend much time tormenting him, ever since the day he'd first pulled a punch. Izuku could only remember one significant incident, when he'd shown up to school with various colorful stickers haphazardly applied to his face and Kacchan had mocked him, but it was virtual radio silence compared to previous days.

In some sense, Midoriya was relieved. Being the constant target of negative attention had never been pleasant, even if there was a self flagellating part of him that begged for it, demanded it to make up for the horror of his Quirk. He wasn't even lonelier, really, considering he hadn't had any friends since he'd been four years old. The fact of the matter was, Midoriya flourished in small, important ways when nobody noticed him.

And it was with that strange confidence, the knowledge of social invisibility, that led to Izuku doing something he could never have imagined. Faced with the reality of destroying his own dreams if he never used his Quirk, he had swallowed his fear in a single desperate moment, and decided to make a concerted effort to learn how to use it. It couldn't just be him locked in a terror coma and destroying everything around him. There had to be more to it than destruction, than the unraveling of his muscle fibers and the rearranging of his insides and the marks that tore apart his torso like angry, puckered scars that he wasn't even sure were real, didn't know if they only existed in his own visual feedback.

It was seven months before he even came close to a breakthrough. Every brain rattling, soul shattering moment he spent with his Quirk activated had never failed to lead to extreme nausea and a disorienting disconnect from his own body afterwards, never mind the complete lack of awareness when he was using it. He could only remember glimpses and flashes, howling voices and something-wet, pulsating, covered in spines that dripped with fluid.

He'd taken to practicing on an abandoned beach turned dumping yard, figuring that nobody would notice if a bunch of trash got destroyed or knocked around. His first time using it, he'd nearly shaken out of his own skin, and woke up surrounded by flakes of rust that had once been abandoned appliances, and the sight of a half dozen dead fish washing up on shore. It took two weeks before he was brave enough to do it again.

Every time felt hopeless, scraping away at his insides and leaving him sick with fear and exhaustion until all he wanted to do was cry and sleep for the rest of his life. It was during that seventh month that his frustration and anger had boiled over, his head flaring with a toxic concoction of rage and fear that left him surrounded by a crater of sand, and with a quarter of the garbage on the beach turned to dust. He realized, with the sort of clarity that only came when he was removed from his own twitching, vomit soaked body, that his Quirk was somehow modified by intent.

He'd been angry, and thus he'd been destructive. It wasn't much to go on, but it was something more than the dread festering inside of him, making him wish he was anyone else, making him wish he really was Quirkless so he could at least give up with no regrets. It was hope, hope that pushed him to break himself apart over and over, to feel woozy and fuzzy for almost every waking moment that he could excuse it, all for the sake of being something more.
Because hating himself would be worth it, if he could make sure nobody else ever felt the fear that he
did.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The day of the entrance exam dawned with blisteringly cold winds and overcast skies, rendering the world a muted gray that washed out the natural vibrancy of color. The wind was swift and biting, nipping harshly at any ounce of exposed flesh that it could find and leaving it red and stinging.

Luckily, Izuku had been obsessive about checking the weather in the week leading up to the exam, and had purchased a scarf marked in nauseatingly bright pinks and yellows to keep his face from freezing. It clashed horribly with the black of his school uniform, but he knew well enough that it served a much higher purpose than being fashionable. Even so, he had at least made an effort to brush his hair and line his clips up neatly on either side of his head, a rainbow of color marking both sides. He’d placed clusters of tiny stickers underneath his ears, hoping that his scarf and hair would keep them mostly concealed. The potential embarrassment of being mocked for his poor fashion was nothing compared to the relief it provided him. He’d have dumped buckets of paint over his head, if he’d thought it would be sufficient to lessen the burden of the shadows that clung to his limbs.

The train he’d taken was populated with scatterings of other examinees, and he shrunk down in his seat the entire time to avoid garnering any attention. Much to his relief, Kacchan hadn’t been on the same train, and everyone else had paid him no mind. Staring at his impersonal phone feed was mildly depressing, but it was better than having to make eye contact, or small talk.

The walk up to the building itself was nerve wracking, and Izuku struggled to divert energy into walking while also staving off a panic attack. Of course, his usual method of internal pep talk boiled down to listing the absolute worst case scenarios, which oddly helped mellow him out. If he imagined being struck by a meteor or having villains string him up like butcher’s stock, it took the edge off his nerves about the exam. It was foolproof.

At least until he lost focus and began muttering out loud, several vaguely morbid statements intertwined with useless trivia knowledge slipping free without his say so. "-Gutter Mouth would probably single us out using her Quirk is more suited to single targets, so she might bring Javelion-wait wasn't he from the silver age? Oh gosh I hope I didn't get my timeline mixed up but I was so sure she was in the same era-" He noticed about four seconds too late that the laces on his bulky red sneakers had loosened, and he was left staring at the upcoming ground with dull acceptance.... for quite a while, actually.

"Heey, you alright?" A female voice called out to him in a tone more cheerful than any he’d ever heard directed at him before. His immediate reaction was to assume it was mockery, and she had caught him by the backpack and was going to drop him as soon as he looked up- "Sorry about, uh, using my Quirk on you without permission!" Steady hands gently righted him, before the tug of gravity pulled him back onto his own feet. He stared up with bulging eyes at the sweetly smiling girl in front of him, and vaguely admired her hairstyle. "I just figured you wouldn't mind not hitting the ground."

Something in her voice—it was teasing, but not... malicious. She hadn't hurt him, or made fun of him, but she was teasing so was she making a joke? Not at his expense? Izuku stared at her in a sort of dazed wonder, before reality snapped him like a rubber band. "A-ah, sorry, uhm, thank you very much!" His face didn't know what kind of smile to pull itself into, so it just became something half thankful, and half terrified.
"No problem!" She soothed, her genuine grin making him feel both inadequate and strangely warm inside. "Hey, good luck on the exam! See you inside!" She performed a cutesy little wave and bounced away, leaving him awestruck in place. He made a strangled noise when she was already twenty feet away, and managed to make his legs move about five seconds after.

Unfortunately, the foot hooking in front of his leg helped to undo his tentative balance, sending him crashing straight into the bricks underneath him. He landed half on his face and half on one hand that skidded from the impact, leaving the palm stinging and his forehead aching. "Better fucking pay attention, Deku. That's just a taste of the shit you'll be eating later." Midoriya managed to recover in time to see Bakugou's spiky hair enter the building, his heart pulsing pathetically in his chest. He rose with slow, controlled movements, and quietly waved off a few words of concern from other test takers around him. He-Kacchan couldn't slow him down anymore. He'd get up, and he'd keep moving. Even if it killed him.

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Izuku eventually shuffled into the orientation room, a fair sized antechamber (he was pretty sure it was an antechamber, not that he was really too knowledgeable about architecture) filled with numerous seats in front of an open stage. He noticed with a spike of panic that the majority of them were already filled, and he scurried to take one far away from Kacchan.

Before long someone came up on stage (Present Mic, Izuku's hero research compartment supplied) and began greeting them with so much enthusiasm that Izuku wasn't sure if it was forced or not. Either way it garnered no reaction, but Present Mic moved on without breaking stride. It was oddly admirable, even if his loud and over-the-top presentation hurt Izuku's ears.

Strangely enough Present Mic kept the explanation pretty succinct, even if he threw in some 'whacky' lingo that Midoriya vaguely recalled hearing from his radio show. The explanation was interrupted partway by an extremely loud and terse boy that Izuku didn't recognize, but the stern, bold demeanor made him wilt a little at the thought of what the rest of the competition would be like. Well, he already knew, didn't he? If there was anyone even remotely like Kacchan, then he was pretty sure he'd just pass out before the exam began.

No, he just had to- he had to be smart. To be clever. His Quirk, however he could use it to his advantage without hurting others- he would. He'd spent hundreds of hours learning as much as he could about heroes, and Quirks in general. He had over a thousand pages filled with theories and strategies and tactics that he'd burned into his brain, helping him avoid reliance on a powerful Quirk alone. He just had to think of it as-an asset, instead of something to be afraid of. He would conquer the terror, he would rein in his fear, and he'd use it for something good, something better than he ever could without it. He could feel sparks of determination in his veins, the kind of thing that made his limbs shake with anticipation instead of dread. He would-he would. He would!

--

Every ounce of tentative determination in Izuku Midoriya's guts was swallowed whole by roiling stomach acids, his stomach battering the rest of his internal organs as he stared up at the gigantic gate that would lead them into the city block sized testing area. He was surrounded by at least fifty other applicants, the vast majority of them looking cool, calm, collected, and confident. He could already feel sweat beading under his hideously mismatched sweatsuit, his smile teetering back and forth. Everyone else looked so-well, heroic. He probably just looked like a colorblind idiot that had no idea what to do with his hair.

He scratched gently underneath his ear, fingers trembling as he brushed the slick surface of the stickers. Something bright, something colorful, something on him that didn't make everything around it worse-He glanced up for a moment, eyes catching on the same girl that had helped him out front. She probably didn't even realize he'd eaten pavement regardless, but-it was the thought that mattered. He nervously brushed his scraped palm against the leg of his pants, and made a tentative approach-
"Hey!" A voice cut through the chatter, but did not silence it. That could only mean it was directly behind him. Izuku flinched around to locate the source, blanching when he saw the same stern, humorless face that had interrupted the orientation. "What do you think you're doing, going to bother that girl? Can't you tell she's preparing for the exam?! Are you attempting to get her off balance, to lessen the competition?" He raised his head at an angle, sunlight glinting off his glasses in a bizarrely menacing display.

A vague part of Midoriya wanted to point out that the guy was jumping to a lot of conclusions very quickly, but the rest of him realized that the guy was dizzyingly tall and muscular so instead he squeaked something in fear, tears already budding forth. "N-no! I just wanted to t-thank her for-"

His defense was cut short the moment Present Mic put himself back over the airwaves, his voice as loud and wild as it had been before. At least there were no acoustics outside, Izuku reflected with mild optimism, which soon became wild panic when he realized he'd completely zoned out and everyone was already running into the course and wasn't there supposed to be some kind of countdown or something!? His upper body threw itself into action before his legs even remembered to move, and he ate cement for a second time that morning.

For a moment he wanted nothing more than to just sob into the ground and go home, maybe shift his aspirations towards gardening, where he at least couldn't make himself look stupid. But he had to move forward, he had to chase the light, he couldn't let it slip away without even trying. Izuku burst into action with a choked cry, launching himself low across the ground before even properly righting himself. It wasn't fast enough to catch up, but he could at least get in and clean up any enemies that have been left behind. If he couldn't be the eagle, then he would be the vulture.

That poetic line of thinking ground to a swift and sudden halt as a robot burst through the fabricated storefront just ten feet in front of him, sleek and mobile and about four times his size. He blanched at the realization that he couldn't exactly use his Quirk without losing most of his basic motor functions and all of his breakfast afterwards, and ducked away with a shriek when the automaton buzzed towards him. But something else buzzed as well, a high pitched noise that was instantaneously followed by the robot bursting into scrap in an explosion of dazzling light.

Izuku whipped his head around to see a boy with extremely carefully coiffed hair and a giant silver belt around his waist that was slowly dimming in the center. He managed a questioning noise when the boy winked at him, his voice rising in something of a... French accent? "Bonjour, mon ami! Gracias for the assist- I like your hair clips too! Such a shame I won't be seeing much of you from now on!" The boy laughed and skipped away, firing brilliant lasers down a side street.

"I-isn't that Spanish?" Midoriya wondered out loud because his thought processes had hit a fatal snag, until the sound of further explosions sent the gears whirring. He didn't have any points it'd been like four minutes and he hadn't done ANYTHING! He spun around to look for a route that wasn't littered with robot cadavers, only to spot the same girl that had helped him earlier. She had half a dozen of the enemies suspended in the air, and she made a very deliberate motion to send them crashing and exploding back to earth. A gravity Quirk, his mind supplied extremely unhelpfully.

He was utterly overwhelmed by the increasing sounds of battle around him, his arms itching and his fingers shaking and- and he just needed a minute, one minute, he just needed to think without something loud and terrifying happening. His prayers were answered when the tide of robots stemmed and sputtered out, students glancing around warily. He was probably the first to spot it, he realized dimly. After all, he was the only one shaking in bone rattling terror at the sight of the (he wasn't very good with judging height but the buildings around him averaged at about twelve stories and considering that the robot was at least a story and half taller) one hundred and thirty seven foot tall metal abomination that had just emerged from the ground and knocked over several buildings.
The resulting dust storm was enough to catch the other applicants' attention, a cacophony of conversation bubbling for a few moments before it popped, and they scattered.

Midoriya should have done the same, should have turned tail and looked for greener pastures because it was worth zero points but he was frozen in place and he was going to fail if he didn't get even a single one, fail he would fail a useless worthless failure just like Kacchan said he was always right, always always always-

"H-help!" Izuku emerged with a gasp from his spiraling panic, his chest thumping with uneven breaths at the sound of a call for assistance. His gaze tore through the street, stopping on the same gravity girl trapped underneath a massive piece of rubble. His heart skipped at least a hundred beats because he was sure it had stopped, why couldn't she lift it was she injured the zero point was coming and he had to, had to, had to!

Izuku sprinted down the street with as much speed as his gangly legs could take him, swift and surefooted in a way he could never manage when he actually paid attention. He moved on autopilot, his conscious mind steeling itself for the battering it was about to take. He skidded across the concrete and stopped in front of the girl, staring down at her with wide, glassy eyes. She stared up as well, confused and hopeful and- "Close your eyes, and don't open them until I say to, no matter what you hear." His voice held more gravitas than it ever had before, frayed wires wrapping together into something sturdier, something that played at true solidity, but it was enough.

The girl squeezed her eyes shut, and Izuku allowed fear to consume

Ochako Uraraka screwed her eyes closed as tightly as she could, her heart hammering in her chest. She waited for-something, an explosion or a burst of light or some sort of indication that a Quirk had been activated-but all she heard was howling, a chorus of wailing upset that drilled into her brain, her breath coming in shallow pants and her heart thump-thump-thumping until she was sure it would pop. The voices bloated the air around her, the flat colors swimming behind her eyelids turning into starbursts of ghoulish silhouettes, it felt like she was dying the terror so thick and tarry in her throat, whimpers unheard over the cacophony that plucked at her limbs with razor wires, but she couldn't move, couldn't stand, couldn't breathe.

And she had to keep her eyes closed, because if she didn't the nightmare would get her, too.

Chapter End Notes

Some wonderful fanart I received for this chapter!
https://68.media.tumblr.com/f37ba9055fb31b3e9ee1d6486151e715/tumblr_os6037EyRO1w6fyjmo1
Every camera set up in Battle Center B short circuited at the same time. The images fuzzed and glitched and went dark, blackening the faculty's view of the events taking place. There was a brief fumble to restore connection, the screens fuzzing back into view.

Where point zero had once stood, near invincible and nigh indomitable, was a mere shell of metal enshrouded in a cloud of dust. The towering one hundred and thirty seven feet of titanium alloy had been eaten away, reduced to rust and hunks of brittle metal that barely cleared twenty feet. The entire thing looked as though the ravages of time had intensified a thousandfold, reducing it to nothing but ruin in seconds. The faces of the buildings on either side of it had met a similar fate, piles of sand and concrete dust the only sign that the buildings had ever been whole.

All Might stared at the stabilizing video feed in dead silence, the rest of the Yuuei staff practically invisible around him. He frantically consulted the list of applicants in Battle Center B, but none of them had a Quirk capable of such wanton destruction in such a short amount of time-His eyes caught on a name that burned recognition into his retinas, his fingers tightening on the edges of the paper.

'Midoriya, Izuku. Examinee Number: 2234. Registered Quirk: Quirkless'. That was-but that was impossible, he'd seen the results of the boy's Quirk firsthand! He'd had to fabricate a story about the slime villain getting away, so that the teary eyed boy wouldn't inadvertently ruin his own life! "W..what the heck is this, some kinda misprint?!" His voice was a low hiss, not loud enough to draw attention but with enough volume to vent a little frustration. Whatever weirdness was going on, All Might really hoped it didn't turn out to be unnecessarily convoluted.

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"Whoa, did you see that?!"

"What the heck happened? Whose Quirk was that?"

"No idea, but it must be crazy strong."

Tenya Iida allowed the inquiries and exclamations of his fellow examinees to swirl around him like a tide pool, one shaking hand moving to carefully adjust his already impeccably balanced glasses. From what he could hear, no one else had even seen the Quirk responsible for destroying the zero point enemy, himself included. But Iida-Iida had seen the boy responsible. The one with the poorly coordinated track suit, he had been the only one moving towards the hulking machine. "But why would he...?"

A flash of brown hair caught his eye, and he was struck with recognition upon catching sight of the girl from earlier, the one that Colorful Tracksuit had been going to bother! She hadn't been running with everyone else, had she been waylaid? Was that-had that boy run back to save her?! She looked physically unharmed, but her face was ashen and she looked as if she might be sick at any moment. And the boy- Iida winced, and raised his gaze a few degrees. Well, the boy certainly had no qualms about being sick.

He just didn't understand. A boy with such a powerful Quirk.. how had no one even caught a glimpse?

--

Izuku Midoriya could feel the static on his tongue. Every sensation was wrong, flowing in a gelatinous lump like crystallizing syrup. He was vaguely aware of the blood tinged vomit dripping down his chin, his lip busted open and one of his teeth cracked from a third impact with the ground. Objectively, he knew of these things, but they were distant, like watching grainy footage of old wars
in history class. It was real, but it couldn't touch him. The flow of time and his physicality existed on a different plane to his swimming consciousness.

The only link was his voice, hoarse and cluttered with adhesive gunk and desperately repeating the same syllables. "Open your eyes open your eyes open your eyes open you-" The mantra felt important, beyond serving as his grounding. He was... it was a favor, maybe. He was doing someone a favor, they had listened and now he was...he had to let them know, because he had said he would. It was only fair.

"-alright?" Something, a snippet of another voice, its gentle strings wound tight and pulled him congruent with the accepted reality. There was an alignment, Izuku's senses slotting and clicking into place until he could see the swirl of fluids on the dusty concrete, and he could feel his bleeding palms and the ache in his tooth and his lower lip oozing blood. His hearing was the last to return, quietly slinking in once the nauseating scent of bile had already turned his stomach.

"-ould fix you right up, honey." He vaguely felt a firm pressure press against the top of his head, and there was a part of him that wanted him to make sure he hadn't lost any clips from his hair. He glanced up in confusion, everything still moving a few frames behind, and the world dimmed as if the sun had gone out when he caught sight of an older woman in a nurse's uniform. "R'covry Grl," he slurred, the stars in his eyes lopsided. The ingrained knowledge of her Quirk allowed him a moment to prepare himself when his limbs weakened, the crack in his tooth sealing up along with every other cut and abrasion on his body.

Once the buzz of pain was removed his awareness snapped into place, the world becoming whole once more. "T-that girl-is she alright?" Midoriya questioned breathlessly, swaying up onto his own two feet and glancing around frantically. The sight of her, leaning against a chunk of machinery with not a single scratch on her-relief blossomed clear and warm in his chest.

Recovery Girl's reassurances went unheard as he staggered over towards her, one arm trembling as he raised it in greeting. "H-he, uhm, are you feeling-" Her gaze, wide and glazed, snapped towards him the moment he started speaking. She was pale and shaking, flinching reflexively when he moved forward. Izuku could-he could see it, in her eyes. The same thing he saw in the mirror, whenever he forgot not to look.

He could see her fear, and it shattered his insides into dust. Every molecule of positivity erupted like firecrackers, a crawling tingle that lived far beneath his skin. Every lump of tissue in his chest had vacated, and left him absolutely hollow. All he had left was his own stuttering breaths, aching and raw and never pulling in the oxygen he needed to halt the chaotic spinning of his head. Tears spilled down his face in revolting gushes, facial muscles twitching and trembling with effort, he had to smile, he had to or it was all over, and he could feel the wires snapping and one side of his mouth could just barely move but it was still there, still barely in one piece and he would-he'd move forward, and he'd fall, and he'd rise to his feet spitting blood until he couldn't see through the tears anymore.

"I-I'm s-s-sorry-" he choked out in a whimper, turning on a heel to sprint and trip and stumble and he had to leave he just needed a minute just a minute just needed to think-

Izuku's shoes slapped the pavement as he bolted from the testing area, his back turned but the haunted gaze he'd created burning behind his tear stained eyeballs.

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The following seven days existed solely as a block of rotten time, dark and odorous and sickening. Midoriya lived through them in a strange catatonia, interspersing long periods of static with bursts of manic depression. When his head would clear he would pace back and forth, digging a rut into his
carpet as self hatred stained the walls. There were brief periods where he would sob under his covers, absolutely certain that he had failed the exam, he hadn't gotten any points he would never succeed, never be more, never escape the torture of his cursed Quirk.

And other times he would grit his teeth and scratch lines down his arms, angry at himself and the world, furious that all his hard work was worthless because he just wasn't lucky enough, just wasn't born right. He'd stand in the bathroom with his shirt off, tracing angry scars with his nails and half wishing to carve them open and release the evil trapped under them.

He'd torn down one of his All Might posters in a fit of rage, and spent an hour unable to stop crying when its scraps were left on his floor. He hadn't had enough tape to put the whole thing back together, and he'd already spent his allowance on more colorful accessories, hoping they would be enough to keep him in one piece. He shoved the remains of the poster away in one of his desk drawers and pretended it didn't matter.

The only time he ever felt even close to normal was when he had to pretend for his mother. It ripped at his heart to feed into her denial, to act the shy, loving son who didn't hate himself. It wasn't that he didn't love his mother, but the disconnect was so strong that sometimes he wasn't sure if all of his behaviors around her were artificial or not. It was almost like flipping a switch, the manner in which he engaged her in light conversation and shared old jokes and asked after her hobbies, when only minutes before he had been hardly able to think through the fuzz in his head. Whatever the case was, as long as she didn't push past his delicate web of lies, things would be okay.

The seventh day was spent huddled in the living room, notebooks sprawled on his lap and a pen digging into his fingers from his white knuckled grip. He didn't have chances of getting into U.A. were slim-to-none, but he had to prepare for the worst (best?) case scenario. If by some fluke of universal constants he made it in, then he had to be ready. He had feverishly researched information about the school's staff online, but the information present had been frustratingly vague. He knew of heroes like Present Mic, Best Jeanist, and Cementoss, but their particular Quirks and his vague sketches of their behavioral patterns didn't sound too threatening. He had to worry about anyone that would see through him, that wouldn't be simpler to trick, who wouldn't accept whatever lies he came up with on the spot.

Unfortunately, the majority of popular Pro Heroes were intelligent and likely adept at seeing through lies from so many brushes with villainy, so he simply had to rely on his own lack of social graces and anxiety to give him some sort of safety net. All he had to do was make sure-

"Izuku, sweetie! There's mail for you!" His mother's voice cut through his haze of frantic thoughts, and he spent half a moment staring into the air with a blank expression before he stumbled off the couch and lurched towards the door. "Izuku, it's your test results!" His eyes went wide enough to nearly erupt from his head, and he narrowly avoided slamming into the opposite wall when he skidded into the entrance way of the apartment.

His mother stood with the letter in hand, face already turned to smile encouragingly at him with pinpricks of tears in the corners of her eyes. He accepted the letter with trembling hands, the wax seal burning a hole in his retinas. "T-thanks so much! Uhm, I'm just gonna-go look at this in my room okay thank you mom!" He hugged her around the neck with one arm before tearing back to his room, scooping up his notebooks and slamming the All Might decorated door behind him.

Midoriya's breathing was harsh and deafening in his ears, the frantic rhythm a welcome reprieve from hissing white noise. He brushed a fingertip across the seal on the letter, dreading the future within it. It would change everything, it would either put his dreams in danger or completely destroy them. He couldn't imagine either one being worse than the other. But-he had to.
Izuku ripped open the letter with trembling fingers, a little round device clattering onto the surface of his desk. He flinched when it burst into light and color, illuminating the dark of his bedroom with All Might's staggering visage. "KA-BLAM, I AM HERE, IN HOLOGRAPHIC VIDEO FORM! ISN'T THAT NEAT?" It was a pre-recorded video, depicting All Might in front of some gaudy background. The hero glanced off-screen, perhaps receiving instructions from someone else.

"AHEM, WELL. Young Izuku Midoriya, you passed the U.A.'s written exam with flying colors! Congratulations! Unfortunately, you earned zero combat points in the practical exam. I..it'd be poor taste to congratulate him for that, right?" All Might questioned off screen, receiving an unheard response. "Well edit it in post, then! Anyway... fear not, young Midoriya! There's something I think you'd like to see!"

Another video burst to life in the corner, depicting the same girl he had saved, the same one he had—either way, she appeared rosy cheeked and lively again, approaching Present Mic with a sheepish look on her face. Izuku could barely breathe because she was okay, she wasn't terrified or withdrawn and he could barely even fathom it, couldn't understand what it was like to be afraid and have it end, for the terror not to linger at the fringes forever and ever. "Uhm, excuse me, Mr. Present Mic? Sorry to interrupt, but... do you remember the boy with messy hair and all the," she gestured at the sides of her head, "all the clips? Had lots of freckles and an ugly track suit? I wanted to ask if it'd be alright if... I maybe gave him some of my points from the exam? I could see how hard he was trying, and he even gave up on his chance to earn points to save me! And.." Her face fell from its previous exuberance, into something quiet and almost ashamed. "I think I might have accidentally upset him, after he saved me, and I really didn't mean to! And-I think he really deserves to pass!"

The video paused, nothing more than a smear of color due to the sheen of tears that blurred Izuku's vision. He twisted one hand in the fabric of his shirt, the tactile sensation just barely keeping him in one piece. He'd never- no one had ever spoken up like that for him before, had ever cared enough to ask after him, to want to help him. He swallowed down a sob when All Might began speaking again.

"Seems you made quite the impression, does it not? You, young Midoriya, have made your selflessness known in a big way!" All Might turned to face the camera directly, his chiseled face pulled into a shining grin. "For you see, the practical exam was not graded on combat prowess alone! A second factor was voted on by a panel of judges, once your actions were reviewed and corroborated by your fellow examinees! And for that reason, I am proud to say you passed with SIXTY RESCUE POINTS!" All Might flashed a thumbs up, every inch of him glowing with that heroic light, the light Izuku had sought so desperately, the light that was now within his reach-

"You passed the exam, Izuku Midoriya. Your heroic bravery and selflessness will be good a fit with us, here at U.A.!!"
"How did you do it?" Izuku grunted as his back met rough brickwork, his clothes too flimsy to cushion the scrapes he was sure he'd find later. "HOW THE FUCK DID YOU DO IT?!" He flinched, ears ringing, as an explosion scorched the brick beside his head. His heart was thundering into already aching ribs, the skin above surely bruised in several places. "What kinda fuckin' sneaky cheater bullshit did you PLAN?" Kacchan's voice rose and fell chaotically between an enraged hiss and a furious shout, his soot stained fist twisted in the fabric of Izuku's collar. "TELL ME! TELL ME HOW A FUCKING QUIRKLESS LOSER MADE IT IN!"

"Kacchan," Izuku coughed around the stench of ignited nitroglycerin, his hands flat against the wall behind him because he knew if he dared to touch Kacchan he might lose a few fingers. Tears cut through the thin layer of dust on his cheeks, and he attempted to make eye contact through the impairment. His lips were pulled into a wretched facsimile of a smile, inked with pain and upset but still barely marked in place. "J-just let me explain-"

Kacchan's free hand snapped forward, nails digging into Izuku's chin and cutting crescent moons into the skin. Furious red pits stared into his glassy eyes, a moment of silence passing before he was twisted around and shoved forward, stumbling to his hands and knees on the concrete. "Fucking talk, then. And keep it short. If you start with your fucking mumbling, I'm gonna rip your goddamn tongue out."

Midoriya spent a moment watching tears darken the pavement in tiny splotches, before he dared to rise onto his own two feet. He winced at the ache in his ribs, but managed to stand straight and shuffle around to meet Bakugou's gaze again. "D-during the practical exam, I-helped a girl, w-who had gotten stuck under rubble. T-they gave me rescue points, and it was enough to help me pass." It was as close to the truth as possible, trimmed and edited and short enough that hopefully Kacchan wouldn't explode with frustration.

Wishful thinking as always, Midoriya mused, when familiar fingers lifted him by his collar. "You smug little worthless fucking SHITTY DEKU! WHAT DO YOU THINK'S GONNA HAPPEN WHEN THEY FIND OUT YOU DON'T HAVE A QUIRK, YOU SHITHEAD FUCKING NERD?! You're gonna be out on your scrawny little ass in ten seconds flat. But you knew that, didn't you? YOU KNEW, AND YOU STILL FUCKING SABOTAGED ME! I WAS THE ONLY ONE, IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE ME AND NO FUCKING BODY ELSE! BUT YOU JUST HAD TO RUIN THAT, DIDN'T YOU DEKU? YOU WORTHLESS FUCKING INGRATE!" Kacchan had pressed in close enough that Izuku was more worried about being bitten than exploded, and he could smell traces of Kacchan's lunch on his breath.

"I-If I do get expelled.. then it'll just s-show all the other students first hand how much better you are, right?" Izuku left his gaze pointed vaguely in Bakugou's direction, sifting through thoughts to put together something he had hardly ever dreamed of; an argument that would appease his (former former not anymore and you know it) childhood friend. "Y-you can tell them about how much of a s-shitty Deku I am, and it-it'll just make sense if I get kicked out, r-right?" His heart twisted in his chest, chunks of it peeling off to flutter around and crowd his rib cage. "Y-you don't even have to do anything to prove you're b-better than me. It'll just.. fall into place, and e-everyone will know."

Kacchan stared at him for several long, nerve wracking moments, his usual fury twisted into something that Izuku couldn't read. Nerves popped like blisters in his chest, because if he couldn't read Kacchan then he didn't know what he was thinking, didn't know if he had messed up and ruined his chance- "Tch. I know exactly what you're tryin' to pull, Deku." Izuku's heart stopped, a
cold worthless lump in his chest. "But you do make a point. Your own fucking inadequacy is more embarrassing than anything I could ever do to you." Izuku choked on a gasp when the hand around his collar shoved him backwards, shoes scraping against concrete as he attempted to stay upright.

Surprisingly enough, Kacchan left without another word, his posture no more tense and agitated than usual. Had... had Izuku actually convinced him? Surely not, surely it was just a cruel lie, surely Kacchan would turn around any second and make him hurt, make him cry for ever being stupid enough to think he could get away-

But Izuku was left alone to ache and lick his wounds, to make an attempt at calming the spinning in his head, to mash together the pulp of his heart and hope it began to beat again.

"-still have a combined total of four hundred and twenty seven free pages left between journals thirteen point five to eighteen, which probably won't last much longer depending on the volume of my classmates and the complexities of their Quirks and personalities-" Izuku muttered at half awareness as he fumbled to knot his uniform tie, the end result looking mangled and incorrect but at least it would stay put. He washed his hands in the sink for the third time, carefully avoiding the colorful bandages that covered the scrapes on his hands. He'd already done his hair, washed and conditioned the night before and carefully brushed that morning, twelve clips on either side of his head lined up in inverse rainbows of warm colors on one side and cool colors on the other. His bulky red shoes had been defaced with dozens of stickers, because he was sure he couldn't get away with having them on his face.

At least his uniform was much more vibrant and colorful than what he wore to middle school, the sleeves of his undershirt loose and breathable, and the jacket light enough to not feel constricting. It was a healthy change, he decided, carefully patting his face to bring some blood to his cheeks. It helped to make him look more approachable, and less.. depressing.

"Izuku, sweetie, you're going to be late if you don't hurry!" Izuku jolted out of his quiet musings, nearly slipping on tile in his rush to exit the bathroom and scoop up his backpack. He flashed what felt like a loving smile to his mother, and caught her eyes shimmer before he reached for the door-

"Izuku.. wait, before you leave. I just wanted to say that I'm proud of you, honey."

The sincerity, the adoration, the pride and affection and reassurance on her face-Izuku wiped at his eyes with a sleeve, and returned his mother's beatific smile with something warm and bright. "Thank you." He flung open the apartment door, backpack straps digging into his shoulders, and threw himself into the morning sunlight.

U.A.'s campus, in Izuku's eyes, was a perfect reflection of the heroes' light that he so desperately sought. It was a shining monolith of reflective glass, its halls open and light and breathable in a way his middle school never was. For the moment he didn't feel stifled, didn't feel the dreadful certainty of misery waiting for him behind closed doors.

Perhaps it was because he was preoccupied by panicking about his potential lateness, the empty halls a telling sign that everyone else in his class was probably already present and waiting. He had to make a good first impression, had to do whatever he could to entrench himself, had to last as long as possible before everything crashed down around him. There was-a chance, he thought, that things could work out. One completed semester would be above and beyond his expectations, and it might be just enough to help him stand on two feet. He'd have a taste of formal training and veteran expertise to help shape him, a base from which to grow.

And that was the only thought that gave him enough drive to slide open the massive wooden door of class 1-A, his smile twitching but whole-
"Put your feet on the ground this instant! How disrespectful can you be, treating the property of this prestigious school like trash on your first day?!!" A voice that rang with authority and a peculiarly bureaucratic sort of outrage slammed into Izuku the moment he opened the door, and he paled at the sight of the bespectacled boy from the exam attempting to lecture a smug looking Kacchan.

"Hey, I'm only givin' it what it deserves; must be a trash school after all, if they let screaming shitballs like you apply." Kacchan pointedly scuffed the heel of his shoe across the top of the desk, his grin toothy and threatening.

The boy in front of him puffed up like a bird, only to exhale pointedly. "...I believe we've gotten off on the wrong foot. My name is Tenya Iida. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." He stiffly extended a hand, only to have Bakugou bark out a laugh.

"Can't even stick to your guns? Katsuki Bakugou-it'll be a pleasure to wipe the floor with your shitty face." Bakugou leaned his chair back on two legs, gaze wandering elsewhere, as if Iida wasn't even worth paying attention to anymore.

Iida recoiled in shock, an exaggerated motion that seemed entirely genuine, if the clear bewilderment on his face was any indication. "A-A direct threat?! We're supposed to be classmates, you can't just-!

"Blow it out your ass," Bakugou muttered, his wandering gaze flickering over to the door only to lock eyes with a quivering Izuku. Furious red eyes narrowed into slits, but he had no chance to speak up before Iida followed the turn of his head.

"Ah, it's you!" Tenya's exclamation was enough to have every colorful head in the room turn in Izuku's direction, his social invisibility ripped to shreds in an instant. He blanched around his increasingly anxious smile, raising a hand in greeting. "Greetings, my name is Tenya-

"I-I um, I heard," Izuku interrupted, waving his hands in a placating manner to halt Iida's incredibly intimidating march in his direction, as well as whatever lengthy introduction may or may not have followed it. "I-I'm Izuku Midoriya. It's... r-really nice to meet you!" He stared cautiously at the silvery sheen of Iida's glasses, rendering his gaze unreadable, before the other boy nodded respectfully towards him.

"A pleasure to meet you as well, Midoriya. I'm pleased to have another chance to speak with you, after the exam. I apologize for my behavior towards you-your selfless actions that day proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that I had deeply misjudged you." Iida bowed, a perfect ninety degree angle that both flustered Izuku and sent a spike of concern through him because was that really okay for his spine to bend like that?

"Heeey, now isn't that a familiar sight!" A bright, bubbly voice exclaimed from directly behind him, Midoriya's limbs locking up in reflexive fright at having been sneaked up on. He twitched around to spy the same round, rosy face of the girl he'd-he'd- The mere sight of her was so unbalancing, it made him want to sob in relief and shy away in the same moment, stricken with the possibility of doing something worse in the future- "You're the boy from the exam that helped me! Listen, I really wanted to say how sorry I am for upsetting you, especially after you went out of your way to help!" Her eyes were wide and soulful, a deep brown that shone concern and remorse from their depths.

His heart scraps twisted together into a knot, and he barely managed to force words past his numb lips. "N-no it's okay I totally understand you don't have to feel bad about it." When she chirped a contrite 'Are you sure?' he swiftly nodded, chest constricting and mind racing because he had no idea what to say.
"Phew, I'm really glad to have cleared that up." The relief on her face was palpable, and he was struck by her expressiveness the moment before she brightened again. "Man, today is already so exciting and we haven't even done anything yet! I just can't wait to meet everyone, and oh my gosh who do you think our teacher is I bet they'll be really cool-"

"If you're only here for gossip hour, then you can head home right now." A voice thick with exhaustion and flattened by apathy stopped the girl in her tracks, her smile locked in place as a dark, scraggily form loped up behind her. An older man with scratchy facial hair and limp, dark locks peered over her head, listless eyes scanning the silent room. "At least you all know when to shut your mouths. I'm Shouta Aizawa, your homeroom teacher."

His proclamation was met with a murmur of shock, students rushing back into their seats as he slunk into the room. The heavy scarf around his neck caught Izuku's eyes, and the familiarity had his breath catching in his throat. "Eraserhead," he squeaked, earning only a raised eyebrow and a dry eyed stare. He fumbled into his seat (directly behind Kacchan, of course, why wouldn't it be) and avoided further eye contact with the pro hero.

"Don't even bother sitting down. We've got important things to get to." Aizawa tossed a duffel bag onto the floor, its unzipped contents spilling out in the form of colorful gym uniforms. "Get dressed. We're going outside."

Izuku had barely caught his breath from the nerve wracking ordeal of having to change clothes near a bunch of other people who had at least kept to themselves while he nearly strangled himself in an effort to get dressed, when Mr. Aizawa dropped a bombshell that made him feel like his chest would cave in from fear.

"Quirk assessment? But Mr. Aizawa, we're gonna miss orientation!" The bubbly girl spoke up from the front of the pack, students left in an unorganized group outdoors, bleachers to their backs and open fields in front of them.

"Orientation is a waste of time. Gaudy showboating is worth less than nothing, so instead we're going to do something useful." The sunlight that shone onto Aizawa seemed almost hesitant to touch him, leaving him a black mark on the world. "Here at U.A., we don't have a 'standardized curriculum'. That affords me the freedom to direct my class as I see fit. Your previous schooling was entirely academic in nature. As a result, you've had little time to truly understand your Quirks."

Aizawa craned his neck, eyes locking on a head of ashy blond hair. "You. Bakugou. You came first in the exam, excelling in the combat portion. I want you to throw this," he fished a softball out of his pocket, a strip of electronics stitched into it, "with your Quirk. Don't hold back."

"..Sure." Katsuki stalked over to snatch up the ball, feet kicking up dust as he centered himself in the marked circle. He smirked at the feeling of eyes on his back, more than willing to show everyone exactly how inferior they were. He reeled back and hurled the ball with an eruption of nitroglycerin, a shout exploding from his throat at the moment it tore through the air, a trail of fire marking it as it disappeared into the distance. he tilted his head to catch a glimpse of awed faces, the corner of his lips curling into a vicious grin when he saw the blank terror on idiot Deku's face.

"That's just an example of the tests you'll be participating in today," Aizawa droned, holding up his phone with '705.2 m' across it. He spoke calmly over the hushed exclamations. "They'll help assess your upper limits, so I can get an accurate idea of what you are and are not capable of." Something dark flitted over his face, teeth exposed and eyes wider than half lidded. "As an added incentive, when the eight planned events are over I'm going to tally up the scores, and whomever comes in last will be face with immediate expulsion."
A much louder outcry erupted from the group, exclamations of disbelief and concern ringing out. Izuku couldn't have made out a single word if he tried, eyes wide and unseeing when the static closed in. He was going to fail, he knew it, there was no way, he wouldn't even last one day before everything he'd worked towards would be dashed into rubble, it was over it was over it was over it was over-

"Let's get to it and stop wasting time, shall we?" Aizawa flashed another of his not-quite-smiles, eyes dark underneath stringy strands of hair.

"B-but you can't do that! It's only the first day, it isn't fair that someone could be expelled already!" The bubbly girl spoke out of turn once more, her voice high and clear and loaded with something like disbelief.

"I can't?" Aizawa questioned, his tone making it extremely clear what he thought of her choice of words. "I'll be sure to remember that, the next time an impaired driver causes a fatal pileup on a highway, or a building collapses on hundreds of office workers, or a villain decides to turn half a town into rubble. I'm sure once I remind them that they can't do that, everything will work out." His tone was sharp and biting on the surface, a smooth energy lifting it from his previous dead words. He paused when the girl shrank back, looking adequately remorseful. "As heroes, it will be your duty to combat the injustices of the world with action, not words. You must make your presence known, your deeds a deterrent to any who would dare unrest the peace, and when disaster strikes you must not waste breath. Now it's time for you all to prove to me that you're here for that purpose, understand?"

He made a beckoning gesture, dark eyes alive with something that was almost passion. "And be sure to prove it with your actions, not your words."

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Izuku was trapped in a nightmare, he had to be, there was no other explanation, right? Watching in a numb haze as his classmates blew through the fifty meter dash, their Quirks dazzling and awe-inspiring and so-useful, so heroic in a way he would never, ever achieve. The sound of static was so strong, buzzing along with the locusts in his chest, it was so loud that Mr. Aizawa had had to call his name three times before he took his place at the starting line.

He could feel the man's ire, twisting around in the air like the scarf around his neck, just waiting to wring him dry and toss him in the trash where he belonged- The starting sound cracked through his bones, and his first step twisted and brought him falling into the dirt. The sound of Kacchan's explosions masked his sob as he struggled forward, regaining his footing in moments but what little dignity he had previously possessed was left to rot in the dust.

"Ten point four three seconds!" The speedometer chimed, his insides sinking and sinking and sinking. He could feel eyes burning into him, could practically taste the murmurs of uncertainty questioning why he was even there. If only he had an answer, if only he could force words through the dark squall in his rib cage, hissing and buzzing and so impossibly loud.

The second test seemed on the fast track to a similar failure, his fingers trembling around the handle of the grip testing device. He couldn't-he was so afraid, so afraid that it wouldn't be enough because it was so obvious that he was weak, that he was desperate and terrified and mired in a despair that hung from him in a foggy cloud, tainting the air with his revolting presence. He stared numbly at the device, its metal cold and smooth against his fingers and the moment he squeezed with what little strength he had there wouldn't be any other chance, he'd fail spectacularly and he'd be expelled and his mother's face would fall but she would hide her shame but he would feel it, would know it was there every day of his wasted, worthless life and he couldn't, couldn't, couldn't-
The fear squeezed within Izuku's chest, his fingers clenching and producing a squealing shriek of tortured metal. The grip tester exploded in his hand, reduced to shards of metal that cut hair thin lines across his palm as every negative emotion compounding within him erupted forth. Dark fumes curled around his trembling hand, fingers twitching and contracting unsteadily. He could feel the sudden silence even if he couldn't hear it, eyes wide and hand dripping with welling blood as he forced his lips to move, words oozing through his broken smile.

"It's okay it's okay it's okay it's okay it's okay-"
Chapter 7

Shouta Aizawa silently appraised the gaggle of young hopefuls he'd been stuck with, making mental notes of every student, from the versatility of their Quirks to the stability of their emotional states. He had a few yellow flags, including Katsuki Bakugou (driven but arrogant, too much fire in his veins, it'd burn him up if he let it rage) and Izuku Midoriya (alarming lack of confidence, shaky and unsure with no sign of his Quirk). Their records showed that they had both come from the same school, but where Bakugou's Quirk had been plainly listed on his file, Midoriya's was labeled 'Quirkless'.

Impossible, he knew. In the history of U.A. there hadn't ever been a single Quirkless student to walk its halls, though there were no explicit rules stating that someone without a Quirk couldn't attend. It was unspoken, really; everyone knew that a hero couldn't exist without a Quirk, no matter their aspirations and hard work. Determination alone wasn't enough.

And it had to be determination that he saw in the set of Midoriya's shoulders, because he couldn't imagine what else it was that kept the boy from collapsing on the spot. His performance in the first challenge had been abysmal, the slowest by a far margin. His form would have been decent, if not for his clumsiness. But even when he had regained his footing, he was utterly average. Something was odd, and Aizawa would be sure to find out what it was.

Luckily he didn't have to wait long. The grip strength test should have been over quickly, if not for the insufferable nature of teenagers that led to them chatting among one another. He kept his gaze constantly moving, making notes of those that excelled and those that fell short. It wasn't strictly necessary, considering the automatic scoring system, but reading the lines on their faces told him more than mere points ever could.

He'd seen the moment Midoriya's face crumpled, eyes wet as he stared in hysterical fear at his strength tester. Aizawa had been prepared to write him off then and there, absolutely sure that the boy would prove to be a liability at best and an embarrassment to the school at worst.

Of course, the device exploding in his hand had put a damper on that. It was lucky he had been watching so intently, or he would have missed the subtle activation of the boy's Quirk. His entire silhouette had darkened for the span of a blink, something inky and malicious zapping through the air around him. It was barely visible, a phenomenon easily missed for one without Aizawa's keen perception, but the shiver that crawled up his spine was impossible to ignore.

He waited a beat, the other students hushing into absolute silence in the wake of the unexpected event, before Midoriya's mutterings broke the quiet. Some of the braver and more personable students (Iida, Kirishima, Uraraka) approached him in concern, but the boy was absolutely deaf to their words.

"Alright, enough gawking. If you haven't completed the test yet, then stop wasting time. If you have, wait outside." Aizawa stalked over in a flutter of scarves, glaring flatly at any students that dared to linger. Uraraka was the last to file outside, worry in her gaze before the door shut behind her.

"Midoriya. Midoriya. Izuku Midoriya." Something... another voice. One not his own. Izuku swung his head upwards in an uncoordinated movement, the force swaying him where he stood. The two halves of his gaze fused together in a blur of color, until he could see dark, lidded eyes staring down at him. Eraserhead, the hero. Wasn't he... he didn't like the spotlight, nobody really knew anything substantial about him. Izuku slowly raised a hand to reach out to him, something red glistening in his palm. The motion was slow and unsure, his muscles long done moving before his hand drifted to a halt.
"Izuku Midoriya, snap out of it. Are you injured anywhere other than your hand?" The world flickered and stuttered like a television set with poor frequency, before the picture snapped back into focus. His-the teacher, Mr. Aizawa, he'd used his QUIRK and his hand was so bloody and his instinct to clench it coaxed a pained whimper from his throat, but Mr. Aizawa had addressed him and he had to-had to say something, couldn't ignore him.

"I-I'm s-s-sorry sir, I-only my hand, only that, was-where is-is everyone okay did anyone else get h-hurt?" The words sloshed out of his mouth before he could arrange them into a coherent order, hurried and frantic.

"Yours is the only injury, Midoriya. Shake the lead out; I'm taking you to the nurse's office. You'll wait there until class is over, and then we're going to have a conversation about your Quirk. Am I understood?" Izuku peeked past the layers of apathy and disinterest that coated Mr. Aizawa's tone, and found something urgent lurking between them. It took half a second for the meaning behind those words to fully register, and it instantly sent him back into a downward spiral.

Izuku wrapped his uninjured hand around his other wrist, pulling it shakily to his chest and staring teary eyed into an unforgiving gaze. "S-sir I c-can't-

"Apparently," Mr. Aizawa cut in with a barbed tone, "the only thing you can't do is follow simple instructions. You can either come with me to the nurse's office, or I can send you home. I'm sure you're smart enough to make the right decision." Mr. Aizawa turned on a heel and began stalking toward the exit, his long strides giving Izuku barely any time to spring into motion and stumble after him.

The harsh burn of sunlight made him flinch the moment he stepped outside, and the weight of his classmates' (not for long expulsion was the least of the punishment he deserved) stares, half a dozen voices immediately raising in question- "No talking. Midoriya and I are taking a trip to the nurse. You will all stay here and behave until I get back. We'll resume the assessment afterwards."

"But sir-!" Izuku flinched from the force of Mr. Aizawa's glare, even when it wasn't directed at him. The bubbly girl immediately fell silent, her soulful gaze wandering in his direction as Mr. Aizawa led him across the field.

Midoriya stared blankly at the ground disappearing beneath his shoes, counting down the seconds in his head before his dreams were crushed. There was no way someone like Eraserhead would let him hang around just to screw things up. His heart thudded until the sound of the other students' voices faded away, leaving him and Mr. Aizawa in a tense silence.

The rest of the walk to the nurse's office passed in a numb blur, packed earth transitioning into concrete, and then to linoleum tile in what felt like a single blink. The throbbing in his hand was muted, the cuts shallow enough to be ignored with some effort. It wasn't until a hand pressed firmly into his chest that he realized he had nearly walked into Mr. Aizawa's back, the educator stood in front of the clearly labeled nurse's office.

"Before you go in, I'd like to make a few things clear to you. At this present moment I have no plans to expel you, so you can stop looking so morose. You're also not in trouble, at least in the sense that you won't be receiving more than a reprimand. We'll see if that changes as the situation develops." Mr. Aizawa finally turned to meet his gaze, eyes red with irritation and lidded with exhaustion. "Call your parents when you've recovered, tell them you're helping with an after school activity or something. I really don't care."

Izuku watched his teacher's retreating back for several dazed moments, before he recovered enough clarity to actually enter the nurse's office. He mumbled something to Recovery Girl about a 'training
accident’, and was silent as she tutted and fussed over him. The drain from her Quirk left him drooping in his seat, barely cognizant of her gloved fingers gently pressing against his knitted palm. Someone told her in his voice that it was still a little tender, when she asked how it felt. Somehow he informed her that Mr. Aizawa had instructed him to wait there, and she led his shambling body over to a patient bed.

The mattress was a little thin and springy, but it was comfortable enough that he could allow his consciousness to finally unravel, floating in the unknown ether to recover. Maybe when Mr. Aizawa came back, he'd finally be in a single piece again.

--

Aizawa ran through the rest of the assessment test with a current of urgency, steadfastly deflecting all questions as to Midoriya's condition that wouldn't be satisfied by his stock 'He's fine, now focus'. He resumed his own internal cataloging of their Quirks and abilities, pushing the Midoriya situation to the back of his mind. He could already tell it would be a massive headache to deal with.

He stared impassively when the long distance run ended with flagged spirits, scarves flapping like shed skins when he lead nineteen of his students back out onto the field. Their obnoxiously willful behavior had been replaced by an uncertain silence, and while it helped his headache it certainly didn't improve their concentration.

He stopped in front of the electronic scoreboard, one hand wrapped loosely around his phone. "Now that the assessment is over, I'll be revealing your scores, first to last. I'm sure most of you have an idea of where you placed already, so I won't bother going through each of you individually." His thumb swiped over the touch screen, the board lighting up with their results.

Number twenty was, inevitably, Izuku Midoriya. Only instead of a numerical score, the box was marked with a blinking red 'N/A'. He read over their faces for a moment, relief and disappointment and arrogant assurance, before breaking the chatter that had spread between them. "Also I lied, nobody is getting expelled. It was just incentive to make sure none of you slacked off."

He could see Uraraka opening her mouth again to cry out above the exclamations of shock and bizarre relief/dismay, and pinned her with a glare before she could. "Before any of you whine about how unfair that is, take a moment to think about how a hero operates. Nobody walks into a disaster or a battle ground, assured of victory. And if they do, they're destined to crash and burn." There was a beat, before he turned to head in the other direction. "That's it for today. Don't forget to pick up a syllabus in the classroom before you head home-"

"HEY, WAIT A MINUTE! YOU CAN'T JUST WALK OFF WITHOUT EXPLAINING WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED WITH DEKU!" Katsuki Bakugou roared at his infuriatingly smug teacher's back, his eye twitching uncontrollably. He stomped through the dust, marking a clear middle ground between the eighteen other losers that'd weigh him down and the unkempt asshole. "What the fuck happened in the strength test? Is he really so much of a damn screw up that he fucking messed up his tester?!"

Katsuki stood his ground when Aizawa turned in a slow circle, pinning him with a flat glare. "If you had been paying attention, I'm sure you would have realized it was the fault of his Quirk. If you're worried about your friend I already said he was fine, it was only a few cuts. Now if you're done wasting my time-"

"THAT DOESN'T MAKE ANY FUCKING SENSE! DEKU DOESN'T HAVE A QUIRK!" His voice rang out over the field, its echo prompting murmurs of confusion from the rest of the slack jawed idiots. "He's NEVER had a Quirk, I've known him his entire shitty life and he's been Quirkless for TEN YEARS!" He could feel his sweaty palms sizzle and crackle, pent up frustration
and a refusal to believe such obvious bullshit making his arms tremble with fury.

"Then you must not have paid very close attention." Bakugou gaped at Aizawa's uncaring rebuttal, frozen still for a moment where he could only stare dumbly as the educator walked away. "Get your syllabus, head home. If you want to know more about the situation, you're more than capable of waiting until tomorrow like everyone else."

Aizawa heaved a sigh as an enraged shout echoed behind him, turning the corner around a set of bleachers and waiting a single breath to listen for stomping footsteps. When none moved in his direction, he turned back to continue walking out of sight of his students. "You'd think being seven feet tall and weighing six hundred pounds would have deterred you from sneaking around," he droned aloud, the corner of his vision locked on ridiculous locks of blond hair, hardly concealed behind a tree. "Lucky for you, your obnoxious habit of sticking your nose where it doesn't belong has finally come in handy."

All Might circled around into full view, one hand brushing stray leaves off his ridiculous yellow suit. "That was a pretty nasty trick, scaring them with expulsion right off the bat. It's important to build trust with your students, so that they can rely on you in the future-"

"Could you cut the monologue for once? I need your help with something that doesn't involve punching villains or saving kittens from trees." Aizawa briefly tracked his gaze over the chiseled, shadowed features of the Number One Hero before he jerked his head towards the main campus. "We've got a situation with one of the kids."

"A situation? Now that I think about it, you were one short, weren't you?" Aizawa could see the gears clicking behind a bulky forehead and ridiculous hairstyle. "Izuku Midoriya was only present at the beginning, was he not?"

"Yeah. We had an incident with his Quirk in the grip test. Squeezed it so hard it exploded in his hands, left him with minor lacerations. I would have sent him by himself, but I could barely get him walking in a straight line." Aizawa very carefully tucked a none of concern underneath layers of matter-of-fact neutrality. "I'm sure you've seen his registration forms. His listing as 'Quirkless' is a gross error that needs to be rectified immediately, so you're going to come with me and we're going to discuss Midoriya's Quirk with him. You'd better hope you have enough time to spare."

Aizawa only made it half a stride before he heard All Might's signature embarrassed chuckle (signature among those that actually knew him, at least) and ground to a halt. "Actually, I..." the hero's booming voice was subdued, lingering in the air for a moment, "that won't be an issue. Young Midoriya and I have been.. previously acquainted, and there was a bit of an incident with my time limit."

Aizawa took a slow, even breath, holding the air in his lungs before slowly letting it trickle out. "Well. I'd love to hear all about it on the way to the nurse's office. Be sure not to leave out any details." The array of teeth he flashed over his shoulder could scarcely be considered a smile.

All Might swallowed a lump in his throat, his grin a little more rigid than usual.

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Izuku stared listlessly up at the ceiling tiles that roofed him in, his thumb idly stroking the glassy surface of his phone. His consciousness had weaved itself back into his brain at some point, leaving him quiet and mournful and unfortunately aware of the passage of time. He'd texted his mother something about extracurricular activities, and it had apparently been enough to not arouse suspicion.

He'd attempted to scroll through his news feed as a distraction, but the sight of various articles and videos and forum posts about the heroes he idolized made his heart clench and shudder. He couldn't
even write in his journals as a distraction, because his bag had been left in the classroom. So instead he stared straight up and counted the marks on the ceiling, because if he looked at the clock it would rip him in half.

A sudden vibration of approaching footsteps had him shooting upright in the patient bed, his eyes wide and heart picking up into a manic rhythm. The door slid open, and he could hear voices from the other room, Recovery Girl and Mr. Aizawa and-and-

"Young Midoriya!" The voice of All Might boomed through the room, as friendly and casual as it could be made. He parted the curtain separating the front of the office from the patient area, flanked on one side by a humorless Eraserhead. "I'm glad to see you healed up! Now.. I believe it's time we talked about your Quirk."
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Izuku Midoriya fell apart from the inside out. His bones crumbled and crackled like aging cement, spilling forth dusted bone marrow. His organs shriveled and deflated, all functionality completely lost. His lungs popped like balloons, his stomach melted in its own acids, his throat closed up and twisted into a constricting knot and his heart, whatever was left of it-

A warm hand gripped his shoulder through his gym uniform, fingers squeezing into the muscles tightly enough to jolt him into awareness. It forced a blink out of him, eyes refocusing on Mr. Aizawa's flat expression. The touch was just barely enough, putting forth the bare minimum to keep Izuku in one piece. His fear lashed and coiled around his ribs, making them creak and strain, but miraculously he stayed upright. "I-I-I-I-" His tongue flopped uselessly in his mouth, unable to form the syllables he needed to properly express his guilt and remorse. Tears of frustration welled up, blurring the corners of his vision.

"Calm yourself, young Midoriya. I promise you are safe, because we are here." All Might's boom had been smoothed and layered, a spectrum of deep reassurance instead of rattling confidence. "As I'm sure Mr. Aizawa has informed you, you aren't in trouble. We just need to have an important conversation with you, alright?"

"Midoriya. When you registered for the U.A. entrance exam, your registration forms marked you as 'Quirkless'. That is a mistake that we need your help to correct." Mr. Aizawa was carefully neutral, and Izuku could barely imagine having the fortitude required to be so unreadable. "It's important for us, the faculty, to know everything about our students that is vital to educating them. As a hero academy, we have to know about your Quirk. Understand?"

"Y...yes, sir." It was barely a whisper, thin enough to slither between his teeth, bared in a smile held together with wire and twine. "I-I'm sorry a-about damaging school property."

"Don't concern yourself with that, it doesn't matter," Mr. Aizawa dismissed, barreling straight through to his next point. "What I need you to do is recount everything you know about your Quirk, so that it can be officially registered with the school."

"Midoriya, I need you to pay attention. You have my word that I will not ask anything of you that you aren't capable of, but this information is absolutely necessary." Izuku gasped around the vise in his throat, one hand clutching desperately at the fingers locked around his shoulder because he had to-he had to find reality again, couldn't let the fear swallow him whole.

"Young Midoriya." The voice of All Might was a rattle, its source gawky and skeletal. Izuku blinked in vague recognition at Toshinori, his suit hanging in awkward bunches but his gaze no less intense, no less compassionate. "You're safe here. I promise. Take your time." There was an awkward smile on his face, as if he wasn't used to wearing it in his less powerful form, and a dazed part of Izuku's consciousness found it endearing.

It was helpful, that willing show of vulnerability from his idol. As much as the sight of All Might inspired safety and reassurance, there was something unsettling in the cut of his jaw and the dark pits
of his eyes, forever cast in shadow. Seeing him worn and fragile but no less determined, no less sincere—it gave Izuku a spark of hope that he could manage the same.

"I-I guess I was four when it first.. happened. I had been playing with Kacchan in the woods, and we got separated, I guess. I called his name and he didn't answer. I don't really... there was a dog-wild, o-or a stray, and I was... afraid. It was-going to bite me." Flashes of frothing saliva and gnashing teeth pulsed through his head, and he shivered. "I was more scared than I had ever been... I thought I might die. I closed my eyes and screamed and-everything went dark. When I opened my eyes, it was... dead. In pieces. Like some other animal had ripped it apart. I just laid on the ground, crying and throwing up but I couldn't feel my arms, or my legs. The sun was setting when I wandered back out of the woods, and- the fear followed me out. I was still.. it was hard to think, it didn't really hit me until that night, and I was too scared to tell my mom about what happened, because.." He trembled and squeezed his eyes shut, the burn of tears trickling down his face. "I knew that only villains had Quirks that killed."

Izuku scrubbed at his face with a hand, exhaustion and a deep, thrumming hurt making him wish he could just close his eyes and vanish from existence. He didn't look up, didn't meet the gazes of Mr. Aizawa and Toshinori because the fear still held him, still crunched him into a pathetic mess, and seeing them would rob him of the strength he needed to speak. "I spent my entire childhood lying about my Quirk. It was easier to lie, to say I didn't have one. Quirkless was okay, because-a-at least I couldn't hurt anyone. I experimented with it, a few times. I would sneak out of my apartment, and go down an alley or-to the park, and let the fear build up until it came pouring out. I'd leave-damage, wherever I went. Sometimes things turned to dust, or wilted and burned. I used it- three times, I think, before I was too scared to use it again.

"That changed during my last year of middle school. When.. I met you, All Might." Izuku twitched at the memory, a wrenching pain in his chest that couldn't be ignored, screamed for his attention. "After our conversation, I wanted to just... give up. I wanted to stop trying, and never use my Quirk again, just stay Quirkless for the rest of my life. But-you were right, about what you said, and- I-I know you weren't trying to hurt my feelings or anything. So I.. trained, with it. M-My Quirk. I tried using it over and over again, hoping I could figure out something, some way to make it work—and I guess I.. sort've, did. I realized that what I felt before activating my Quirk dictated what I would do. When I used it in the entrance exam, t-that girl.. I was terrified, and I had to save her, and it... it worked, I guess." Barring the part where he'd almost traumatized a girl that had been nothing but kind to him, he reflected bitterly.

"Thank you very much for speaking with us, young Midoriya. I imagine it must have been very difficult to talk about." Toshinori was offering his slightly crooked smile again, and Izuku stared at it in a daze before he smiled back. It felt... genuine, less like the mask he wore when he was frightened, or the lynch pin that kept him together when he was devastated.

Mr. Aizawa cut the moment short, his eyes cutting and perceptive and his lips curled in thought. "You say your Quirk is controlled by intent. Is that what happened in the grip test? Describe your intent for me, whatever you felt in that moment."

Izuku swallowed a lump of scorching dismay, his gaze drifting down to his previously injured palm. He twitched each finger, one at a time, and attempted to remove his focus from his own words. "I was afraid. I was so afraid that I'd be the one expelled, and I wouldn't even get a chance to attend U.A. I m-messed up during the first test, and so-I knew I had to do something. I couldn't just skate by without utilizing my Quirk, and I was desperate to make an impression, t-to prove that I was good enough. And all that fear and expectation..." Izuku reached up, fingers trailing across the fabric of his gym uniform. "I could feel it building in my chest, until it all just-burst out. But it was-different, than before. I still felt.. loose, and incoherent, but I was still me. The fear hadn't taken over."
Midoriya shook from nerves under the intensity of Mr. Aizawa's scrutiny, dark eyes searching for something buried in his naked expression. "It's vague, but it'll do for now. Our next step is to update your records. A professional Quirk assessment isn't strictly necessary, but we need something for your file. Your Quirk needs a name, and a short description. It probably won't be permanent, but take it seriously regardless."

Izuku wilted at the gravity of the request, pained at the thought of having to speak further about the thing he was most afraid of. But-it wouldn't be so scary if it had a name, would it? Knowing how it worked, labeling and cataloging it just like any other Quirk.. maybe that would make it less terrible. "I... uhm. It's a t-transformative Quirk. It induces irrational f-fear in the user and any surrounding persons, and c-channels intention into destructive energy. The form it takes is... inconsistent, but usually i-inhuman. It's-" Izuku sucked in a breath, reminding himself that he had two of the most aptly suited heroes in the world to help him through his fear. "It's called 'Living Nightmare'."

The words fell like broken bells, their dull, rusted clanks forcing a shudder out of Izuku's body. And it was still his body, for that moment, and he had to remind himself that there was a semblance of control in his grasp, he had not been completely consumed. The darkness was still there, heavy and winding and dreadful-but it had a name. Living Nightmare was not a calculating horror that had ensnared him, deigned to puppet his limbs and twist his ailing mind for monstrous purposes. It was just a Quirk. It was just a Quirk.

"Succinct. I'll be sure to have your file updated by tomorrow. One last thing," Mr. Aizawa muttered, the tense rigidity of his frame falling out in tiny increments, allowing him to gradually slump back into the silhouette of 'impatient teacher that needed a nap' that Izuku had first seen him in. "In the interest of avoiding a meltdown in class tomorrow, you're going to let any classmates that ask know that what happened was an accident with your Quirk, and I pulled you aside because it was convenient timing to correct an error in your files. If you wanna go into more detail, I'll leave it up to your discretion."

"T..thank you, sir." Midoriya peered between Mr. Aizawa's sliver of a stare and the silent support of the Number One Hero, a gush of forgotten hero worship staining his chest and leaving him flustered. "I-I'm really sorry for bothering you both about this-"

"Hey, don't worry about it kid. We're your teachers; of course we're gonna pitch in." Toshinori's smile was lopsided and almost teasing, in the same incomprehensible way that the nice girl's (that he still didn't know the name of he was so bad at talking to people) had been, when she'd first helped him. "Aizawa brought me along solely for moral support, which should be a good tell. Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure that's the only reason he ever lets me go anywhere with him. I think I embarrass him."

Izuku stared blankly at Mr. Aizawa's instantaneous glare, doing nothing to squash down Toshinori's deadpan teasing- and the sheer absurdity of the situation forced a laugh out of him, bright and unguarded and embarrassing because he couldn't recall the last time he'd laughed and had it always been so high pitched? He flushed up to his ears when two sets of eyes turned his way, his own gaze swiftly averted. "U-uhm, sorry, did you n-need to talk to me about anything else?"

"Nope. Head back to class and pick up a syllabus. The rest of your classmates are probably on their way home by now." Aizawa kept his gaze firmly rooted forward, paying less than zero attention to the obnoxious blond idiot winking repeatedly at the side of his head. Harder to ignore were Midoriya's stifled squeaks of laughter, the kid's face inflamed with mortification. "That wasn't a suggestion. Do it now."

Izuku nodded frantically, sliding off the hospital bed and bee-lining for the door. His call of 'S-See
you tomorrow Mr. Aizawa, Mr. All Might!' rang out just before he stumbled through the door, and that was the cue Aizawa had been waiting for. "Okay peanut gallery, I have important things to do and you're already slowing me down. Don't you have a pomade factory to endorse, or something?"

He slipped past Toshinori without waiting for a response, nodding in vague acknowledgement to Recovery Girl on his way out.

Toshinori stared after him, groaning at the aches that resulted from standing up. "You're a strange man, Aizawa. But there's a reason you're a hero."

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Izuku Midoriya crept almost guiltily down the empty halls of Yuuei, the clomping impact of his bulky shoes against linoleum tile ringing out to break the silence. It felt almost wrong to be on campus past school hours, like he was up to something nefarious. Logically he knew that faculty members were still present in the building, and would likely continue to be for a while longer. He was just so used to rigidly adhering himself to rules and guidelines, terrified of being singled out if he mistepped.

But things would be alright, surely. More alright than middle school, where he was barely more than an annoyance when he even managed to blip on his teachers' radars. Mr. Aizawa and Mr. All Might (that still felt like something from a fever dream, his idol teaching him) had been so kind and understanding that it made his chest hurt. Knowing they would try to help, knowing they would work with him- maybe tomorrow he'd be able to process it, once he'd woken up and figured out that it wasn't just a dream.

The telling '1-A' sign caught his attention after minutes of walking, relief budding tentatively in his chest. He pulled open the intimidatingly large door and bee-lined for his desk, making sure his backpack was unharmed and unmolested. He'd only just leaned down to inspect the zippers when the door slid shut with a 'clack', cementing him in place. And he should have learned, should have known that dreams didn't exist, and the only things he could rely on were nightmares.

"Deku. You pathetic fucking liar." Katsuki Bakugou stepped away from the classroom door, his entire body shaking and trembling with white hot rage. Izuku could feel it in the air, like the oppressive heat of summer humidity pushing down on him. How could he have forgotten, how could he not have realized-his Quirk was not a leg up, helping him move forward. It was a weighted iron shackle, packed to the brim with nitroglycerin. And if he didn't treat it with enough care, it would explode.

"K-Kacchan please-" Izuku gasped out in pain when he was shoved to the floor, scrabbling on hand and foot to try and right himself, to press his back against the wall-

"PLEASE AIN'T GONNA CUT IT, DEKU!" Kacchan's voice cracked through the air, and Izuku flinched as if he'd been struck. He peered up into molten red eyes, his breath shortening into hysterical pants. "You liar, you fucking liar you FUCKING LIAR! I KNOW YOU DON'T HAVE A QUIRK! You might be able to fool that FUCKHEAD teacher, but you can't trick me." Izuku whimpered when soot stained hands twisted in his collar, lifting him to his feet and crushing him against the wall. Kacchan's teeth were bared in a vicious snarl, his anger radiating off him in waves. "You're not gonna RUN AWAY FROM ME THIS TIME! So save yourself some pain and tell me what the fuck you did!"

Midoriya twisted and gasped and fought for an excuse, but he knew there was no way to avoid Kacchan's rage, not anymore. "I-I'm s-sorry Kacchan," he sobbed in a wretched breath, tears pouring down his face in putrid rivers. "I'm s-sorry I lied, I'm so sorry, I-I-I was so scared, I couldn't t-tell you I couldn't h-hurt you-"
"SHUT YOUR FUCKING MOUTH," Bakugou roared in his face, his eyes manic and pupils engorged and the dread in Izuku's gut became a geyser because he could see the fear shoved down behind Kacchan's anger. "You FUCKING LOSER, SHUT THE FUCK UP! YOU'RE WEAK, DO YOU FUCKING UNDERSTAND ME?! You've NEVER been strong enough to hurt me, NEVER! YOU'RE PATHETIC!"

"DON'T YOU THINK I KNOW THAT!?!" Izuku's desperate shout, warbling and choked with misery, hung in the air for a long moment. "D-don't you think I get it? I k-know how strong you are, Kacchan. Yo-you've always been better than me, a-and that's why I could n-never tell you. I w-wasn't strong enough not to hurt you!"

"Don't give me that bullshit, Deku! You're worthless, there's nothing you could do that could ever threaten me." Kacchan's volume had fallen, but the rage and fear and uncertainty had only thickened in his venom infused tone. He tightened his grip on the collar of Izuku's uniform, heat radiating from his palms as the smell of explosive fumes filled the air. "And I'll prove it to you! I'LL FUCKING SHOW YOU WHY YOU SHOULD HAVE NEVER EVEN TRIED, DEKU."

"What are you trying to prove?!!" Izuku cried desperately, eyes blurred with tears but still staring, still unable to look away from the fear in Kacchan's burning red gaze. "I-I know you're stronger than me, I know! And-and I'll prove it to you!" Izuku shoved Kacchan in the chest, his consciousness fracturing from the heady haze of fear that threatened to swallow him whole. The shock of the shove was enough for Kacchan to let go, disbelief clear on his face.

Izuku could see the anger struggling to resurface, aching to explode in an inferno with Izuku at the epicenter-but he couldn't let it. He reached up with trembling fingers and ripped down the zipper of his gym uniform, yanking his arms through the sleeves and leaving his torso bare and exposed. Dark red lines traced across his torso in rigid, alien patterns, the skin puckered around the edges of each one. Dozens lined across his stomach, his chest, his back, dark and angry and impossible to ignore. He could feel Kacchan's burning gaze locked on them, and could taste the silence in the air. "D-do you get it, yet? This is what m-my Quirk did to m-me. Just from using it. Can-can you even imagine what it would do, if I used it on someone else? On you, Kacchan?"

Izuku squeezed his eyes shut, unable to bear looking into Kacchan's gaze, unable to handle the revulsion he was sure he'd find. When no response came forth, he shakily redressed himself, trembling so hard he could barely work the zipper. "...I-I'm sorry, Kacchan. I know you don't like when people touch you without your permission." Izuku carefully skirted around the other boy, shrugging the straps of his backpack on over his shoulders and fumbling to pick up a syllabus from Mr. Aizawa's desk.

Izuku didn't look back. He left Kacchan alone in the classroom and headed home, accompanied only by the static in his ears.

Chapter End Notes

Some fantastic fanart for this chapter!
https://twitter.com/diechrollo/status/880730650181079041
Be sure to check out the artist!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! Just wanted to say how absolutely floored I am by the incredible amount of support this story has gotten so far. Thank you all so much!

It was very telling of his state of mind, Izuku mused, when waking up so sick from fear that he had to puke was viewed with relief, because at least it happened before he ate breakfast. It was nothing that mouthwash and a thorough brushing couldn't erase, at least. He'd stopped biting his tongue over a month ago, after it had become too painful to brush his teeth and all his meals started tasting coppery. As far as he could tell there was no permanent damage, which was the best that he could hope for.

He'd layered on a plethora of clips once again, a chunk of his allowance having gone into buying ones of different shapes and sizes. The gentle weight that pulled at his curls was blissfully grounding, until the thought occurred that he might be violating some sort of school dress code with his accessories. The notion of parting with them was too painful to consider until it became a necessity, so he just allowed dread to well in his gut on the transit to school.

He checked the weather forecast on his phone while walking up to the main entrance, intent on not getting caught unawares by poor weather in the future. The rain was a nightmare to walk in, the sound of raindrops colliding with concrete so alike to hissing static that it made him nauseous. But the forecast was clear, and the sky was empty, and he hadn't been expelled, so everything was going to be-

"Heeey, Deku!" Izuku froze as two opposite stimulants collided with one another in his brain, thought process reeling as a kind, bubbly voice spouted the poisonous nickname meant only to torment him. His gears ground together for an excruciating moment before clicking into place, and he jerked his head up to meet a soulful brown gaze. He remained frozen until the kind girl bounced up to him, her smile sunny and oblivious. "I was getting super worried you weren't gonna show up!"

"W-wha-why were you.. w-waiting for me?" Izuku's gaze darted back and forth, and he couldn't imagine such a sweet girl had planned to corner him but the possibility was still there, maybe she hated him after what he did during the exam-

"I wanted to make sure you were okay! You didn't show up for the rest of the assessment, and Mr. Aizawa was really tight-lipped about what happened. Oh! I'm totally sorry, I just realized I haven't even introduced myself yet! I'm Ochako Uraraka! And you're.. Deku Midoriya, right?" The honeyed edge of her smile was blinding, and completely at odds with that horrible nickname that still made him flinch on reaction.

"I-It's... Izuku, actually. Deku is.. Kacchan's nickname for me. It's what he calls me to make fun of me." He winced the moment the words left him, so sour and gloomy and mood killing-

Uraraka's eyes widened in shock, remorse splitting across her face. "Ohmygosh I'm sorry, I had no idea! I just heard it because Bakugou was yelling about you when the assessment ended. That's a shame; it's a really cute nickname!"
"I'd really rather you not c-call me that, if that's okay," he murmured, most of his focus taken up by trying to figure out how the heck he was supposed to talk to someone that didn't want to make fun of him and wasn't an authority figure. "B-but uhm, thank you, for your concern! My hand was only cut up a little. Mr. Aizawa just pulled me out because there was some stuff wrong on my registration forms, and it was convenient timing to clear it up." The lie wasn't as painful as he had expected, perhaps because it originated from someone else.

But the earnest belief on Uraraka's face still sent a pang through his chest. "Oh, that's a relief! Everyone was really worried after your grip tester exploded. That was your Quirk, right? Is it like, strength enhancement?"

Izuku twitched, his inconsistent smile turning wire tight. "S-something like that, yeah. It's kinda complicated, a-and we'll be late for class if we d-don't hurry."

"Yeah you're probably right about that!" Uraraka agreed easily (so easy, no second guessing, no painful deliberation over what words were correct) and turned to bounce back towards the main entrance. "We can talk more at lunch-I spoke with Iida and Kirishima after class yesterday and they're both super nice, so I'm sure they won't mind if you sit with us!"

"O-oh uh, sure." It was overwhelming, the thought of not only having people willing to speak with him, but welcoming him to sit with them. He couldn't even remember eating a meal with someone that wasn't his mother (maybe Kacchan before everything had crumbled into ashes and embers). "I-I'm that's really nice of you, t-thank you."

Uraraka's answering smile was something he yearned for, an expression of pure and genuine joy that he could barely imagine adorning his own face. "C'mon, let's go! I can't wait to meet the rest of our teachers!" She took his hand with soft, gentle fingers and tugged him along, shoes clapping against the stone works underfoot.

And Izuku figured her gravity Quirk was almost redundant, because the way she pulled him in with her demeanor alone was absolutely cosmic.

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The first couple periods passed in an almost pleasant haze, startlingly mundane classes that didn't require too much of Midoriya's focus. It was easy to handle numbers and grammar because they didn't require any thought beyond simple solutions. Of course, his anxiety spiked back into overdrive (he was pretty sure that was the only available setting) when lunch period rolled around.

The bustling cafeteria proved to be incredibly difficult to navigate for someone who couldn't bear the thought of speaking up or forcibly moving someone out of their way. As a result, Izuku had pretty much stranded himself among a sea of bodies while desperately searching for the table he had been invited to sit at. His lacking height did him no favors, and he almost resigned himself to just squirreling away to a table by himself and apologizing profusely later when a loud, boisterous voice called out his name.

He snapped towards the source of the noise, catching sight of a boy with fiery red hair and a shark toothed grin standing halfway up his seat and waving an arm through the air. It had to have been Kirishima, the theory solidified when Iida stood up from the seat opposite him, making stiff arm motions and calling for Kirishima to sit properly. Izuku heaved a sigh of relief, and had just started reconsidering his life choices when he made it into earshot because the gravity of the situation had started dawning on him.

"H-hey, you guys," he called out, his voice carrying just far enough to be heard. Considering he was only four steps away from the table, it wasn't much of a feat to be proud of. He balked under the force of Kirishima's toothy grin, bright and friendly in a completely different way than Uraraka's had
"Hey Midoriya! Good to see you still got all your fingers." Kirishima gestured to the empty seat beside him and Izuku very carefully sat down, stiff as a board. "We were all pretty worried after what happened; you seemed pretty freaked out when it did. But Uraraka cleared it all up for us!"

"Yes, we are all pleased to see you have made a full recovery," Iida chimed in, his tone a lot... friendlier than Izuku had heard it before. Although maybe that was because he'd previously only heard Iida when he was lecturing someone.

"O-oh, uhm, that's.. good." Izuku desperately clawed for something to say, unable to process such a cheerful and bombastic attitude being directed at him. His eyes flickered desperately over Kirishima's face, before he simply blurted the first coherent thing that came into his head. "I-I really like your hair, how do you get it to stay up like that?"

There was a moment of silence where Izuku simply stared with wide eyes, the fingers of mortification crawling up his face, before Kirishima laughed aloud. Compositionally speaking it wasn't much different than other laughs Izuku had heard from teenage boys of a similar disposition, but the brightness leaking out made his chest constrict with an emotion he couldn't name. "Thanks, man! I basically just attack it with hair gel until it stops fighting back. You know, I was actually kinda curious about your 'do, too. What's up with the clips?"

Izuku's heart skipped a beat had he read the situation wrong was Kirishima mocking him he didn't know, hadn't had anyone mention his accessories in so long without it being cruel and derisive- "I-I j-just-th-they're, I-I mean I, u-uhm..

"Hey, hey, slow down, man. Don't think I'm tryin' to rip on your style or anything," Kirishima soothed, his expression still open and friendly and Izuku was pretty sure it would be weird if he cried because of it but the urge was hitting him really strong-

"Yeah! I think they look super cute!" Uraraka's pleasant lilt wound around him with pure sincerity and good cheer, his heart tearing in multiple directions.

"It certainly lends you a unique presence. Very bold," Iida commented, gesturing widely with a pair of chopsticks and utterly unaware of the eruptions in Izuku's chest cavity.

"I was just curious about 'em," Kirishima continued, before the lunch room became a flood zone due to a downpour of tears, "I wanted to know if they were like, a Pride thing or something but I wasn't sure if that was weird to ask."

Izuku blinked, momentarily thrown for a loop. "A.. pride thing?" Was that a thing people did? Pride was such a foreign concept that he couldn't be one hundred percent, but he was pretty sure 'pride' things were constituted by adornments like medals, or owning expensive cars and sunglasses.

Kirishima winced, and somehow even that was so friendly that Izuku half wondered if he'd walked into a mirror dimension on accident- "Yeah, you know, like a Gay Pride thing? All the colors just kinda put the idea in my head, and I'm totally cool with it if it is, I just wanted to know."

Izuku's face burned like a kerosene lamp, his embarrassment physically pulling his hands to splay over his face. Uraraka giggled sympathetically, and he could vaguely hear Iida lecturing Kirishima about 'how presumptuous of a question that was you know some people are very sensitive about matters of that nature'. In a weird way it was relieving, because it afforded him enough time to formulate a response that wouldn't just be flustered stuttering. "N-no, it's not-uhtm, that. N-not that I have a problem with t-that stuff! It's just, t-these are.. it just makes me f-feel better to wear them, is
Izuku had to choke down a whimper when Kirishima beamed at him, bright as the morning sun, and reached out with bold friendliness to ruffle the nest of green curls that weren't held down by clips. "Well they totally suit you, man! And it's pretty damn manly of you to wear 'em without carin' about what other people think."

Izuku sat in a daze as the conversation switched gears, turning to speculations of course work and jabs at their teachers, and he dared to wonder if he'd simply died and ended up in heaven by mistake.

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The first few minutes of Hero Studies was met with a buzz of excitement among class 1-A, whispers and rumors travelling across the room in an ebb and flow of conversation. Izuku had taken to doodling in one of his notebooks that wasn't dedicated to Quirk research in an attempt to steady his nerves, but his shaking hands made every drawing come out wobbly. The sound of the classroom door being flung open ripped a gasp out of him, and every eye in the room turned towards it.

"BOOM! I AM HERE, OPENING THE DOOR TO EDUCATE YOU ALL LIKE A HERO!" All Might's booming cadence was loud enough to rattle the door frame, the bulky hero frog stepping through the door in a manner that allowed him to strike several poses per step. The latent excitement in the room erupted in a sea of exclamations, further bolstered by the Number One Hero's choice of Silver Age costume.

"Oh man, All Might really is a teacher here!"

"This year is gonna be so crazy, I can't wait!"

"Oh my god, is that the outfit he wore when he fought Madame Mercury? That's so nineties!"

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to your most important class here at U.A. High! Here you will learn the basic foundations of heroism, the building blocks of every great hero!" All Might struck a pose that made his triceps bulge, his grin bolted in place. "And today, we'll leap in head first, with some TWO ON TWO BATTLES!" An explosion of noise answered him, and he laughed, deep and rumbling. "But before we can get to the good stuff, we have to look the part, don't we?" He pulled a remote out of... somewhere (Izuku knew for a fact that the uniform didn't have any pockets) and activated it, twenty steel containers hissing and parting from the classroom wall. "TIME TO SUIT UP, FUTURE HEROES! When you're all kitted out, meet me at training ground Beta!"

Izuku ducked down to avoid the mad scramble of students looking to retrieve their uniforms, his own excitement ebbing at the thought of his costume. It had been a bit.. short notice, considering he'd long ago trashed his original costume ideas (all derivative of All Might) once he'd learned about his Quirk. Hopefully the sketch he'd come up with would be enough to suit him, and it wouldn't look too stupid.

He waited for an ebb in bodies before he quickly retrieved his own uniform, rushing out of the classroom to avoid being left behind. It was time to dive in head first, and wrest control of his Quirk into his own grasp.

--

Izuku nervously crept through the tunnel leading into the testing grounds, pulling at the edges of his costume. At least they'd gotten his measurements right, and had taken all of his requests into mind: unobstructed mouth, wide color pallet, breathable and easily removed. He stepped out into the glare of sunlight, absolutely stunned by the sight of his fellow classmates, shining and heroic and so-so-
"Now that's what I'm talking about! You, young ladies and gentlemen, are the physical embodiment of young heroes-to-be! Let your costumes be a mark of identity, the symbol of your justice! Wear them proudly, and let them say: I AM HERE!" All Might thrust a fist into the air, his smile a monument, and he was met with cheers of exuberance from the majority of the class.

Izuku let the words wash over him, a comforting notion that had no chance of ever truly sinking in. He shuffled up to the back of the class, the motion catching Uraraka's eye. "Oh my gosh, Izuku you look so cool! That costume is totally not what I expected. I wish mine suited me that well!"

Izuku flushed, partially from the sight of Uraraka's form fitting and absolutely suiting costume, and partially because he was unable to handle compliments. "Y-you really think it looks okay?" He peered down self consciously, picking at the fabric again. His costume was fairly simple, in that he had few accessories or articles worn over the base outfit. The material was soft and breathable, thick enough to feel protective and thickened further at key impact points, like his knees and elbows. He was done up in bricks of numerous colors, vibrant enough to stand out but muted enough to not be an eyesore. Dark red lines marked up and down the torso, a series of hard angles that kept his other colors separated. His sleeves and pant legs were bricked halfway down, before transitioning into soft whorls of airbrushed color, blending together until they disappeared into his bulky shoes and a pair of sturdy white gloves. He had numerous zippers, located at his wrists, elbows, shoulders, knees, and neck so that each section could be easily removed. A belt was looped around his waist, designed to easily be snapped off and used as a restraining tool. His protective mask was an opaque white and left his mouth open to the air, swooping black lines like the edges of a smile curling up at the sides. It fit snugly over the fabric covering his neck and jawline, held in place by a clasp on the back of his head. The same red lines trailed up his neck and bled into the false grin, the mask cut off just above his cheekbones.

"Yeah! It kinda reminds me of a painting at an art museum, or something. Totally abstract!" Izuku wasn't sure if those were the qualities people looked for in a hero costume, but Uraraka's sincerity still made his chest tight and his eyes burn. He opened his mouth to compliment her outfit, to somehow describe how cosmic and compelling her mere presence was without sounding stupid-

"Now that we're all ready and rarin' to go, let's get this thing rolling!" All Might's voice cut through the air, immediately grabbing the attention of the assembled students.

Iida immediately raised his hand, the motion impossibly smooth and quick even in his suit of armor. "Sir! Considering the fact that this is the same testing grounds where the entrance exam was held, does that mean this will be an urban combat simulation?"

"Not quite, young man! While the majority of villain battles broadcast on television happen outside, they are quite uncommon compared to indoor battles! The truly intelligent criminals don't put themselves out in the open so easily! For this exercise, I'll be dividing you all up into teams of two, and pitting you against one another in the roles of heroes and villains!"

All Might pulled a folded piece of paper out of his costume sleeve, and began glancing down at it intently. "Here's the scenario we've cooked up for you all: A pair of villains have been reported as having a stolen nuclear weapon in their possession! The heroes, tasked with quelling the threat, must head indoors and neutralize the danger! The heroes will be victorious if they either retrieve the weapon, or subdue the villains. On the flipside, the villains will prevail if they defend their payload until the time runs out, or they take out the heroes. Now, in the interest of saving time, we'll be deciding teams by drawing names," All Might produced a top hat as if from thin air, showing that the inside was filled with paper strips, "from this hat!"

Iida's hand shot up like a missile, his voice ringing out from inside his helmet. "Sir, isn't there a
more.. professional manner in which we can choose teams?"

"In the heat of a battle, heroes rarely get a choice in who they team up with. They have to improvise on the spot, because villains won't wait for them to pick someone they synergize with," Izuku mumbled out loud, freezing up when a few heads turned to look at him. "I-I mean, uhm-

"Hm. I suppose that makes sense," Iida mused, before his voice straightened out into an iron bar of surety. "Yes, this is a wonderful way of simulating the chaotic nature of hero work! Excuse my interruption."

All Might immediately waved him off. "Don't worry about it, now let's get started!"

--

The sight of Izuku's name up in the air next to Uraraka's was so startling that he couldn't even respond when Uraraka expressed her delight. He fidgeted with the end of one of his gloves, the material suddenly stifling. The fear of hurting her burned hot and dark in his chest, a sizzling lump that siphoned the breath from his lungs. He-there was still so much about his Quirk that he didn't understand, he could barely control it, could barely use it at all without being left sick and distant.

He'd just-avoid using it except as a last resort. And if he did use it, he wouldn't cause any physical harm, no matter what. It would all be fine, and it didn't even matter if he lost, because it was just a training exercise, and failure was a learning experience, right? It would hurt to let Uraraka down, but hopefully she wouldn't hate him if he did. And if that wasn't the case... well, it wasn't like he'd never been friendless before.

Izuku watched with glassy eyes as All Might thrust two hands in the air, each one clutching a ball marked by a team's letter. The last thing he heard before his senses turned to white noise was the hero's voice, booming with finality. "FIRST TO FIGHT ARE.. IIDA AND BAKUGOU, VERSUS URARAKA AND MIDORIYA!"
Every beat of Izuku's heart resonated through his quivering flesh, a church bell locked away inside his chest. Hours felt like minutes and seconds felt like years, withering him away until he was nothing but a husk fused to the concrete. Fear was everything, and everything was pain. A pair of burning red eyes glared at him from the clawing darkness, and surely being consumed by them was better than losing himself, right? He stared in a daze, thoughts gelatinous and oozing, and his fingers twitched with the need to fall into furious red eyes. His lips moved, numb and loose, voice barely a whisper. "Just hold on just hold on just hold on just hold on-"

A hand jostled his upper arm, the physical stimulus from another warm body sending him screaming and crashing back into reality. Izuku gasped for air, one hand slamming to clutch against his chest as the other groped for the human touch, warm warm warm-

"Izuku? Izuku, are you okay? Can you hear me?" That hand flexed underneath his desperate grip, Uraraka's voice wrapping sweetly around his buzzing head. He lurched towards her, muscles lax and difficult to command. Her rosy round face and glimmering eyes entered his field of view, concern shining bright through her visor. "You spaced out when All Might announced the teams. Are you alright? Is.. this because of your Quirk?"

His lips and teeth and tongue mashed together for a moment, before slotting back into working order. "I-I'm-I'll be alright. I'm, just really.. nervous. Kacchan-I-I might have made him u-upset, the other day."

"Kacchan? You mean Bakugou?" Uraraka hummed in thought, her brows pinched together. "You two knew each other before coming to U.A., right? Is there something up with you two? You seemed a little more than 'nervous' when All Might said he'd be on the other team." There was no judgement in her tone, merely a smooth blend of concern and curiosity.

"It's r-really complicated, w-we-we're probably going to start soon anyway-" Izuku flinched when the loudspeakers set up around them burst to life with a hiss of static.

"Alright everyone, let's get the lead out! Your time starts now!"

"Guess that's our cue, huh? What floor do you think we should start on? I can get us up quick with my Quirk." Uraraka's face had been set with determination, her eyes scanning over Izuku's face.

He faltered for a moment, caught off guard, before hastily attempting to analyze the situation. "W-well considering this is a training exercise and not a real disaster, Mr. All Might p-probably went with an odd numbered floor for the first test to try and throw us off. H-he's pretty straightforward, so his randomization methods are probably pretty basic. There's no way he'd have it on the first floor right away, and the fifth floor is too obvious, so o-our best bet would be the third. I-I think. Even if it's not, i-it's a good middle ground to w-work our way up or down from."

"Sounds like a plan to me! Anything else I should know before we head inside?" Uraraka regarded him with a disarming smile, idly activating her Quirk on herself before pressing a hand to Izuku's shoulder. He gasped when all his mass suddenly stopped obeying gravity, legs quivering in an effort to stop from just floating away.

"U-uhm-Kacchan is really a-aggressive and not very trusting, s-so he probably left Iida to guard the bomb, and he'll be coming after me-I m-mean, us. B-be careful and watch your c-corners, I guess; he moves r-really fast."
"Get ready for an ambush, got it!" Uraraka flashed a thumbs up, leaping lightly off her feat and floating effortlessly up the face of the building. She snagged her fingers around Izuku's wrist before moving out of range, giggling when he yelped and flailed his feet once he was airborne. She sailed up to the third highest window, hauling herself through the opening and gently pulling Izuku in after her. She waited until he had found his footing before releasing her Quirk, a quick sigh spilling past her lips. "Alright, we're in! Let's move quick."

"R-right!" Izuku fed off the scraps of her confidence, his legs trembling but his steps sure footed as they hastened down the hall, surrounded on all sides by dull steel plates. The building was cold and impersonal, which made sense due to it being a mere testing shell, but it still sent shivers of unease down Izuku's spine. Any corner, he could turn any corner and see Kacchan's snarling face and fistfuls of explosive power, a comet of unstoppable destruction.

He let Uraraka take point, his footfalls following half a beat behind hers as they carefully combed the third floor. The high ceilings and narrow corridors felt like they were closing in on him, murky and poorly lit and just waiting for him to slow down, to blink, to think he was safe for even a moment. His heart beat against his ribs like a starving bird against its cage, breaths strangled to be as noiseless as possible.

Something prickling at the edge of his senses forced him to act, reaching forward to grasp for Uraraka's shoulder and stop her in her tracks. She glanced back questioningly, and it took him a moment to clear his throat and force out words. "I-I think I heard something," he whispered, his legs dragging him forward to investigate. He stopped half an inch from entering the next intersection, his breath turned to sludge because he knew... "GET BACK!" Izuku yelled and lurched backwards, half an instant before a devastating explosion erupted inches from his face.

The burst of heat and force made the exposed parts of his face sting, but his reaction time had left him unharmed. He backpedaled desperately away from the source of the explosion, lingering embers lighting up Bakugou's livid expression. "DEKU, YOU FUCKER! Running away like you always do, huh?! What a fucking surprise." Bakugou's costume only enhanced his naturally intimidating demeanor, his eyes flaming with anger behind his mask. "Why don't you just fucking lie down and cry, get this over with. We both know you're too scared to fight me."

Izuku shakily straightened up from his hunched posture, one trembling hand reaching down to snap his belt off his waist, the thick rectangle of fabric sturdy in his grip. He thumbed the top button on his belt buckle, inner clamps releasing to allow him more fabric to work with. When pulled taut, it was half again as long as it had been. He met Kacchan's furious gaze, words gushing forth before he could stop them. "I-I'm not afraid of you, Kacchan."

Katsuki froze in place, but Izuku knew he wasn't stricken, knew that the explosive blond wasn't shocked or caught off guard-panic screamed in Izuku's chest as Bakugou's rage shifted into next gear. "THEN I'LL REMIND YOU WHY YOU SHOULD BE!" He lunged forward with a vicious shout, his right arm hooking around, explosions bursting to life in his palm-

And Izuku slid around the predicted attack, snapping out with his belt to catch it on the priming pin of Kacchan's arm guard. He tugged with all his might, deaf to Bakugou's yell of shock when he was ripped forcibly off balance. Izuku tried to dive low, to pull Kacchan to the ground and twist his arm around his back-

But he was too slow, and Katsuki's left arm swung around in a wild blow, explosions cracking through the air as the solid arm guard caught him in the temple. The world fuzzed out of focus, pain ringing in his head as he stumbled away. His belt slipped from his hold, still tangled around the right arm guard. "Uraraka, run!" Izuku's voice rang off the walls, only exacerbating the splitting pain in
the side of his head. He couldn't feel any blood, but that was the least of his worries with Kacchan stalking back over to him. He saw the blond prime his hands to launch him forward, and Izuku took his chance. He threw himself down a connecting hallway, shoes crashing against the tile in his haste to get away.

"DEKU, YOU FUCKING COWARD, GET BACK HERE!" Bakugou's bellow felt like it could peel the skin from his bones, so hot with anger and hatred that it made Izuku's eyes water. He tore off down the hallway, taking random turns to throw off the footsteps pursuing him. He was so terrified, so impossibly scared that Kacchan would find him, would force him to fight alone, but he had to lead him away. Uraraka could find Iida in the meantime.

"YOU LIAR, YOU GODDAMN SHITTY LITTLE WORTHLESS LIAR! THAT'S ALL YOU'VE EVER DONE! YOU LIED ABOUT BEING QUIRKLESS, YOU LIED ABOUT FLUNKING OUT! EVERY STUPID, PATHETIC SMILE ON YOUR FACE IS A FUCKING LIE TOO, DEKU! SO GET BACK HERE, AND I'LL SHOW YOU WHY YOU SHOULD BE AFRAID OF ME!" Every word struck like ice picks, punching Izuku so full of holes that he could barely stay in one piece. He ducked away into a side room, trembling and aching and unable to hold back the tears that trickled down his face.

He fumbled to activate the communicator in his ear, a crackle of static pulling a whimper from his throat. "Uraraka? C-can you hear me?" His voice came out in a breathless hiss, syllables wobbling unsteadily.

["Izuku, yeah, I'm here! I'm on the fifth floor, I found the bomb! I don't think Iida has seen me yet. Did you lose Bakugou? Can you get to me?"]

"I-I can still hear him, he's still too close," Izuku whispered, squeezing his eyes shut when he heard a muffled explosion. "I d-don't know if I can get to you in time, I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry-"

"NOT YET YOU AREN'T!" Katsuki's yell was punctuated by a deafening explosion and a squeal of metal hinges, the door Izuku had been relying on to hide him blown across the empty room. Izuku cried out in terror, scrambling to jump to his feet, to create some distance- "A-aah!" He choked on his own spit when a burst sent Kacchan flying towards him, the force of their collision slamming Izuku into the metal wall and leaving his head ringing. "K-Ka-

"SHUT UP, SHUT THE FUCK UP, I'M SO FUCKING SICK OF YOUR VOICE!" Izuku choked as hands stinking of sulfur strung him up by the front of his costume, slamming him into the wall hard enough to knock his breath loose. He gasped for air, Kacchan's strength leaving him dizzy with fear. "You never had a chance of escaping me, Deku. NOW IT'S TIME TO LOSE! IT'S TIME TO PUT YOU BACK IN YOUR PLACE!" Bakugou's face was so close to his own that the heat of his breath condensed on Izuku's mask, so impossibly close and so impossibly strong. "Don't look so scared, Deku. I won't hurt you so bad that they have to cancel the exercise!" His words were immediately followed by a fist to Izuku's gut, strong enough to force a cry from his throat.

Izuku could barely breathe, could barely see, his eyes stinging from nitric fumes and his entire body aching, the fear in his chest a howling monstrosity that wound through his limbs. Kacchan was strong, so strong. But what Izuku feared the most was something even stronger. He felt his limbs fall, limp and useless, every ounce of his consciousness being ripped apart from his body. But he had to fight back, he couldn't allow it to hurt Kacchan, couldn't hurt Kacchan, couldn't-

Katsuki snarled in Deku's unresponsive face, screwed up in pain and terror, but it wasn't enough. He had to hear the words, had to force the worthless little shit to admit how much of a pathetic loser he was. He raised his fist for another blow, his teeth bared and grinding together-and froze. The entire world hung from a thread around him, swaying back and forth like a pendulum. His muscles turned
to muck, cold and dead underneath his skin. All the fight in his bones and hatred in his gut were quenched by icy fear, like a fire drowned in ink. His breath caught, trapped amidst a cage of razor wires, and his eyes widened until he was sure they would explode out of his head.

Deku was staring straight ahead, both eyes unnaturally wide. They were piercing, cutting through Katsuki's flesh and stringing him up by delicate internal tissues. Two black hole pupils pulled him in, one bloated and writhing and consuming the color around it, and one shrunken to a vibrating pinhole amidst a toxic green ocean. Katsuki's trembling lips parted, and the breath was stolen right from his throat.

"Kachaaan," Izuku purred like a ball of steel wool trapped in a blender. He reached out with fluid fingers, gently peeling away the frozen grip that held him against the wall. He pulled Kacchan's fingers away, distantly aware that he could snap them like toothpicks, if he desired. He leaned in, leaned so close he could taste the harsh pants of Kacchan's breath. He studied quivering red eyes, pupils twitching over his own face. "You're afraid, Kacchan. That's good. You should be honest about your feelings."

Izuku gently splayed his hand over Kacchan's face, fingers sliding just beneath the coverings of his mask, and he smiled. His lips parted and his jaw widened, dozens of curving, misshapen teeth sprouting from his gums and crowding his mouth. Distantly, so distant, he could feel them cut into his gums and the roof of his mouth, blood staining his tongue. Pain was an afterthought, control had been wrested away. His limbs swayed under their own power, his distorted voice hazy and barbed and spouting words he had no decision in. "You're always afraid, Kacchan. It's nothing to be ashamed of; everyone is afraid. What's important is knowing what they're afraid of."

Katsuki's chest rose and fell in shallow heaves, his head fuzzy and aching and he was so sure he was drawing breath but the edges of his vision were turning dark, and all he could see was Deku (no, the thing using his face, using his voice) trailing affectionate fingers across his cheek.

"You're so afraid. But it's okay, because I've always known that. I could see past your anger, and your violence, and your bravado. I know why you hate me, Kacchan. I understand." Izuku was screaming somewhere, the sound coming to him like a cellphone ringtone on a packed train car. It was so indistinct, so incapable of affecting him. "You're scared of not being good enough. Of not being strong. Of not living up to your own expectations. You're terrified of coming up short. And it made you feel strong to torment me. Someone too weak to stop you was proof, right? It proved you were strong. It proved you were good enough, when you could hit me until your own hurt went away, at least for a little while."

Katsuki wanted to scream, to deny everything and beat Deku into pulp and move, he had to move, but his limbs were dead weight and Deku was gently pushing him out into the hallway, the shadows thick and tangible and trailing off his silhouette like smoke. He managed to twitch his lips, frozen in a scowl, but it wasn't enough to free him from the spacial rendings inside Deku's eyes.

"So you used me to relieve yourself of your inadequacies. After all, how could anyone think you were weak with little worthless Deku around?" Izuku's lips spread wider, his mouth an angler's maw spewing poison. Every world left him in a sweet, breathy tone, wrapped in static and sinking into the cracks in the walls. "But it's alright, Kacchan. It's okay to be afraid. And I promise you'll feel much better, if you just give up. Give up and let me win."

Rage burned unhindered in Kasuki's gut, building and building and feeding off itself, incensed by Deku's smug voice and the horrible mess of his face, still pulled into a self assured smile. It was infuriating, it was maddening, the pull of devouring green eyes and the scorching heat in his limbs
fighting against each other. All he could think about was getting away, making Deku shut his mouth forever, never having to hear his voice again. Katsuki blinked.

Izuku was ripped back into reality instantaneously, the pain of his battered stomach and bruised temple and bleeding mouth hitting him with a sledgehammer's blow. The excess teeth in his mouth were gone, his vision was even, and all he could see was a trembling, hyperventilating Kacchan. Guilt ravaged his insides with enough force to have him seeing stars, the sheer pain and remorse bringing tears back to his eyes. His lips trembled, his fingers twitched, a desperate apology rose into his throat-

And it became an agonized scream as his entire world was consumed by fire, noise, and agony.

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"[Uraraka? C-can you hear me?]" The sound of Izuku's wobbly voice, soft and tinny in her ear, made Uraraka sag with relief. She scooted further down the wall she was pressed against, hidden around a corner that was just out of Iida's field of view.

"Izuku, yeah, I'm here! I'm on the fifth floor, I found the bomb! I don't think Iida has seen me yet. Did you lose Bakugou? Can you get to me?" She waited patiently for a response, her voice a soft murmur to avoid alerting Iida.

"[I-I can still hear him, he's still too close.]" She could hear a muffled explosion through the communicator, and felt a brief vibration in the floor at the same moment. "[I d-don't know if I can get to you in time, I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry-]" The moment where her heart would have broken at the sound of misery in Izuku's voice was eaten up by an indistinct shout from Bakugou, followed by a booming explosion and crashing metal.

"Izuku, are you okay, did he find you?!" The only answer was a pained cry, before a cacophony of jostling bled through. A moment after the communicator buzzed with static, the noises it picked up coming through choppy and incomplete. "Izuku, can you hear me? Izuku?" She glanced around the corner to find Iida still patrolling, quickly ducking back into cover and daring to raise her voice a notch. "Are you alright? Can you hear me?" Faint snippets of raised voices answered her, impossible to understand.

Uraraka bit her lip, torn in indecision. She wanted to win the exercise, of course she did, and her window of opportunity was quickly running out. But thinking about Bakugou's behavior when he first found them, his screaming anger and hyper focus on Izuku—it made dread curl in her chest, uncertainty pushing her to make sure her friend was okay.

A sudden burst of noise shrieked through her communicator, howling static that burned straight into her eardrum and forced a cry from her lips. She ripped off her helmet and plucked out the communicator, the ringing in her head so painful that she didn't even realize the flickering lights weren't her impaired vision.

The noise that had come through the communicator, she had heard it before. Horror dawned on her in half a moment, her painful recollection of the entrance exam thrust to the forefront of her mind. Izuku's Quirk—there was no way he'd use it unless he was under extreme duress, right?

Decision made for her, she came around the corner and stepped into the bomb room, Iida's gaze immediately locking onto her through his full helmet. "Well little hero, you've come at last! And alone, at that. Your confidence will be your undoing, and this blunder will be the last mistake you ever make!"

Uraraka threw her hands up in a surrendering gesture, words piling on top of each other in an effort to make it out of her mouth. "Iida, wait! I think something's really wrong! I was talking to Izuku
when Bakugou found him, and Bakugou was so angty before, and-and I think I heard Izuku use his Quirk!

The gravity in her tone was apparently enough to convince Iida to drop his villain act, concern clear in his voice when he spoke next. "Are you sure? Where are they located?"

"On the third floor, we need to get there before they really hurt each other-" She cut herself off when Iida raised a finger, urgency tingling under her skin. She waited for him to press his finger to the communicator in his helmet, listening to whatever was coming through.

"Yes sir, we believe Midoriya and Bakugou's conflict is the result. Uraraka approached me in concern that their fight was taken too far. Yes sir, we'll investigate at once." Iida lowered a grave look at her, hands stiff at his sides. "That was All Might. He said the camera feed went out on the third floor, and he wants us to make sure everything is alright. The match is on standby."

Uraraka's heart skipped a beat, and she nodded resolutely, determination settling in to flatten out her worry. "Okay, you go on ahead. I'll catch up." She wasted no time in rushing for the nearest staircase, flinching as Iida's Quirk sent him blitzing past her. She scooped up her communicator on the way there, wincing at the blast of noise that persisted until she switched channels. "All Might, sir, can you hear me?"

["Loud and clear, Uraraka. Do you have eyes on the situation yet?"]

"N-no, not yet. Iida went on ahead, because he's faster. I just.. I think you should have Recovery Girl on standby. I'm really worried, sir." She forced her voice to stay steady, focusing on the easy rhythm of her footsteps. She cut around the edge of the stairwell, skipping the first three steps in her haste to make it down.

["She's already on her way. Don't fret, young Uraraka, we'll do everything in our power to ensure the well being of Midoriya and Bakugou."] All Might's voice, even when framed by fuzz and urgency, sent a spike of relief through her. He was the greatest hero in the world for a reason. He could handle any situation thrown at him.

She stumbled on the last step leading to the fourth floor when Iida's voice carried up the next stairway, skewered with barely contained panic and urgency. "-I found them, sir, both unresponsive! Bakugou is unharmed and conscious but he won't answer me, and- Midoriya received grievous wounds on his face, and is bleeding heavily. I turned him on his side to prevent blockage to his airways, but I'm afraid to move him any further. Sir, please hurry!"

Uraraka choked on the wellspring of tears that burst forth, her eyes misty and burning. She activated her Quirk on herself, leaping down the entire set of stairs in a single controlled motion. She tumbled to the ground the moment she released her zero gravity, nausea roiling in her stomach for more than one reason. "Iida! Iida where are you?!!"

"Down this way, take a left!" Iida's voice rang off the walls, leading her frantic pace towards him. She skidded into the hallway to her next left, a cry of shock ripped from her throat at the sight of the incident.

Iida was on his knees, his helmet tossed carelessly to the side and his face twitching with concentration. Sweat beaded down his brow, his hair tussled and matted from the helmet. Bakugou was three paces away, absolutely still and absolutely silent. His hands were held out in front of him, palms open and trembling up to his elbows. And Izuku was splayed from the shoulders up across Iida's lap, limp and unconscious. Spatters of blood marked the wall opposite Bakugou, and to her horror there was more of it staining the front of Izuku's uniform.
"Oh no, oh no oh no, Iida what happened?!" She rushed forward, sinking to her knees when she was only a few feet away. She read the tension in Iida's shoulders, so tight that she was sure he would snap, and refrained from moving any closer.

"The damage to the right side of Midoriya's face is-severe," Iida gritted out, hands infinitely gentle as they angled his classmate's head. She could see glimpses of blood marking his thighs, and failed to stem her tears. "Bakugou is unresponsive. I couldn't coax him into speaking, or into moving. The structural integrity of Izuku's mask failed under the force of what I presume to be a point blank attack, but it likely absorbed some of the damage. He-the facial scarring will undoubtedly be significant," he whispered, voice pulled taut. "You don't want to see it."

"Oh god, oh god," Uraraka whispered numbly, hot tears running down her face and dripping onto the tile. "It's-he'll be okay, Recovery Girl will fix him. R-Right, Iida?"

Tenya was silent for a long moment, gloved hands carefully adjusting Midoriya's head with micro movements. The blood flow had been redirected, no longer trickling down his throat. It instead stained the legs of Tenya's uniform, indistinct against black fabric and leaving only minuscule trails down the armored plates.

"...Yes," he forced the word out, his gaze unable to be torn from the damages. The right side of Midoriya's head was smeared with blood, matting into his hair and running down into his uniform collar. Glistening red teeth stared up at Iida, peeking between the ragged holes where Midoriya's cheek was supposed to be. The flesh bordering the worst of the damage was blistered and raw, likely from the heat of Bakugou's explosion. Iida stared into the mess of blood and damaged tissue, swallowing the bile in his esophagus. "Yes, she will."
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The world returned to Izuku in pulses and clouds, inky droplets of sensory information bleeding into his watery consciousness. The first to return was pain, dull and throbbing but not debilitating. It was something of an afterthought, a footnote to be reviewed later. He was horizontal, laid out on a comfortable surface and covered up to the middle of his chest with sheets. His toes twitched, free of his shoes. His hands felt.. mostly okay, unharmed but a little chilly from the room temperature. His mouth was sore, though, and that soreness extended into a mural of numbness and a deep ache on the right side of his face. He could feel his skin pulled tight by something-gauze and medical tape, most likely.

There was an IV taped to the inside of his right elbow, but he was unsure of what drip he was on. It had to be either saline or a mild painkiller, he imagined, but couldn't confirm. He couldn't hear any beeping, so his wounds weren't severe enough to require him being hooked up to an EKG. He tried to yawn, confused when the right side of his face didn't move, and blinked open his eyes as concern settled into place.

The sight of sterile white sheets and soft, unassuming colors drew his gaze, recollection click, click, clicking into place. He was in the nurse's office, he was-he was injured, the training exercise, he'd-Kacchan, his Quirk-

"Oh, you're awake! Faster than I expected." Recovery Girl's voice rang out, and he flickered his wobbling pupils over to find her entering the patient area. "How are you feeling? Any pain?"

Izuku took a long moment to formulate words, shoving back the tide of guilt that threatened to drown him from the inside out. "M-my face hurts a little, b-but it's mostly numb. H...how badly was I injured?"

"Quick and to the point. At least you're a well behaved patient." Recovery Girl stood at the side of his bed, inspecting his IV. "You sustained a few minor lacerations to the inside of your mouth, as well as surface level bruising on your ribs and right temple. Those healed up quick. Your right cheek, on the other hand, was seriously damaged. You lost seventy percent of the tissue present, and received second degree burns around it. Your burns should be mostly healed, and your tissue should be all but recovered, but you're going to have serious scarring once it's finished closing. There was nerve damage as well; the numbness in the side of your face is permanent, I'm afraid. However, once you're recovered, there's always the option of reconstructive surgery, which the school will cover."

Izuku stared straight ahead, the numbness in the side of his face infecting the rest of his body. His fingers trembled, his left hand twitching with the subconscious desire to touch his face- "I-I... will I be able to e-eat okay?"

"Yes, you will. My Quirk was able to restore everything but the full epidermis and the outer layer of nerves. You're extremely lucky, young man." Recovery Girl busied herself with removing his IV, and the brief sting went completely unnoticed. He could barely even feel her swab the inside of his elbow clean, and tape gauze over it. "I want you to check in here for at least the next three days, so I can change your bandages and repair some of the scar tissue. Now, I believe you have a visitor."

Izuku watched her leave, unblinking, and heard the door to the office click open. She shared a few words with a voice he didn't really recognize, sneakers clapping against tile as they entered past the
curtain. It was-someone from his class, he was sure. Toko.. something. His appearance was striking and unforgettable, considering his avian visage. Izuku stared blankly at the curve of his beak, the sharp set of his eyes, and the sleek crown of feathers sprouting from his head.

"Midoriya. Mr. Aizawa sent me to check up on you." The feathered boy's voice was much deeper than Izuku had expected from a fifteen year old, and there was very little inflection in it to go off of. "I don't believe we've been properly acquainted as of yet. My name is Fumikage Tokoyami."

Were he in a sound state of mind, Izuku would have read the other boy's stiff posture and general air of uneasiness, and kept his words to a minimum. But considering the majority of his brain power was going into preventing a panic attack, he merely spouted the first thing that came into his head. "Y-your feathers are really shiny, do you use shampoo on them, o-or is there like a special product that you buy?"

Tokoyami gawked at him, completely thrown off guard. Izuku patiently watched his classmate fumble for words, before slowly falling back into his stride. "I -yes, I do use shampoo, as well as an oil that keeps my feathers healthy. But that is not the purpose of my visit. I am here to confirm your recovery, and transfer information." Tokoyami dug into his pocket, holding out a laminated card for Izuku to take. "Mr. Aizawa wanted you to have this. It's account information for the school's website, that will allow you to view the footage of our training exercise today. Every match is available for viewing, except for your own."

"T-the match," Izuku stuttered, heart clenching as the gears in his head finally clicked together. "I-Kacchan, is he-is he okay, was he hurt?!"

Tokoyami's eyes narrowed, more in confusion than any sense of hostility. "Bakugou was physically unharmed. After assuring everyone you'd be alright, All Might spent several minutes trying to talk to him before he responded to outside stimuli. He demanded to see you. Very violently, in fact. All Might ended up sending him to speak with principal Nedzu. Rumors are circulating of his expulsion, but there's no concrete evidence yet."

"E-expulsion-" Izuku felt sick, a churning, noxious brew melting through the lining of his stomach. He couldn't let Kacchan be punished for his mistake, couldn't rip away his goals, couldn't hurt him anymore. "I need to see him-he can't be expelled, he-"

"Mr. Aizawa told me you would ask to see Bakugou, and informed me to make it explicitly clear that you are not permitted to do so." Tokoyami stood like a statue, his expression difficult to read without lips. His voice was stern, however, and brokered no argument. "There is also another reason for me being here. Mr. Aizawa pulled me aside, and informed me of the hardships you faced with controlling your Quirk. He went into very little detail, but made it clear that you are struggling, and he chose me to speak with you for a reason."

Izuku sat up in bed, panic bubbling and crackling and so close, so close to pouring out of his mouth in a scream because he had no control, couldn't handle everything happening so suddenly and terribly around him. "H-He t-told you about-"

"Midoriya. Please, calm yourself. He didn't go into any explicit detail." Tokoyami cleared his throat, sitting stiffly at the edge of Izuku's bed and maintaining eye contact. "Are you aware of the particulars of my Quirk, Dark Shadow?" Izuku stared, frozen, before slowly shaking his head. "Understandable. Dark Shadow is a Quirk that manifests as a shadow being, whom I can command to assist me in battle. It is weakened by bright lights, and strengthened in the dark. And for a very long time... I was frightened of it. A being of pure shadows, residing forevermore within my very being-as a child, it was extremely daunting. I was afraid to use my Quirk, for fear of the potential danger it posed.
"And there are times when I am still unsure. Where I do not know if I should turn out the lights when I sleep. But this entity, Dark Shadow.. It could not be wrested from me, could not be removed. So I did not reject it; however, nor did I embrace it. There is a balance between the two of us, an understanding. I doubt Dark Shadow will ever truly 'belong' to me. But it is still a part of me, and thus I must accept it." Tokoyami blinked, hands curled neatly on his lap, and maintained steady eye contact. "I've seen your Quirk first hand, Midoriya. It is extremely powerful. And for you, I imagine it is extremely frightening. Am I correct in saying so?"

"..Y-yes," Izuku whispered, tears clinging to his lashes as he furiously blinked them back. He curled his hand in the bedsheets, thumb rubbing against the threads to afford him some sort of tactile grounding. "My Quirk is.. it's based off my own f-fear. The more afraid I am, the more powerful it is. And.. I-I'm always afraid."

"I see.. I will not be so vapid and callous as to say that I understand your pain. Everyone knows pain, Midoriya. Everyone knows fear, and uncertainty. But that does not invalidate your own turmoil. Let it be a comfort, to know that there are those who will know of your pain, and offer their support. Your struggle is unique to you, but that does not mean you must struggle in vain." Tokoyami cleared his throat, stiffly offering a hand out towards a teary eyed Izuku. "If... should you so desire, I will assist you in this. You are not alone in the darkness."

Izuku's gaze locked on the offered hand, his heart throbbing in his throat and stealing his breath. Had he been even a single degree more desperate, been even slightly less aware of Tokoyami's discomfort, he would have thrown himself at his classmate and bawled. But he still had some strength left. He could still shove back his desperation, still control himself. He accepted the handshake with trembling fingers, his grip solid and clinging. He released Tokoyami's hand the moment social customs demanded it, not wanting to make his classmate uncomfortable.

"T-thank you. Th-that-it means a lot to me, Tokoyami." He offered a smile, not one that had been practiced in a mirror for hours on end, but one that he couldn't stop from growing on his face, even if he tried. Tokoyami looked almost stricken, and Izuku had to imagine it was because of the bandages on his face.

Tokoyami cleared his throat, rising onto his feet and smoothing down a wrinkle in his uniform jacket. "Yes, well, I believe we should be getting back to class. Homeroom is very close to over, but Mr. Aizawa wished to speak with you before the end of the day."

"Y..yeah, okay." Izuku slowly climbed out of the patient bed, his legs a little wobbly from the toll of Recovery Girl's Quirk. He followed after Tokoyami's retreating back, lingering only to utter a quiet 'thank you' to Recovery Girl before they left the office.

Silence hung cool and still around them for a long few moments, the two students accompanied only by their footsteps. Izuku didn't mind it; it gave him time to formulate his thoughts, and Tokoyami didn't seem too keen on conversation anyway. Izuku could understand. Though his natural inclination was to try to be open and friendly, social interaction could be extremely exhausting, even when he was prepared for it.

And he was absolutely unprepared for when Tokoyami opened the door to the 1-A classroom, an instant clamor exploding from inside the room. At least ten different heads crowded the door, the only one he even recognized by name being Kirishima.

"Heey, if it isn't the firecracker himself, Midoriya! Wait that was kinda a bad choice of words wasn't it-" Kirishima's voice rang out first, his grin wide and toothy, good humor shining through even the brief embarrassment of his misstep. "We were just wonderin' when Tokoyami would get back with you! Good to see he didn't kidnap you into the underworld or somethin'."
Tokoyami merely scoffed in response, working his way around the crowd in the doorway to seat himself. That did nothing to deter the crowd, a girl with bright pink skin (and hair, which was tousled in a seemingly deliberate manner) pushing her way forward. "We were just checking out footage from the exercise, and it really sucks that your footage with Bakugou was corrupted, you were so cool when you stood up to him! I'm Mina Ashido by the way, and I just can't get over how brave you were-like wow!"

Izu shouted further into himself with every word spoken, blood rushing up to flood the left side of his face with mortification. His eyes darted pleadingly to Kirishima as more voices piled on top of each other, the only comprehensible information being everyone's introductions.

Kirishima seemed to catch on to his plight after a moment, and cheerfully shoved everyone else out of the way. "Alright alright, don't crowd him you guys! He's probably totally beat from his trip to Recovery Girl." He flashed a not very subtle wink Izuku's way, and was rewarded with half of a smile.

"Y-yeah, I'm feeling pretty worn out. I-It's really great to officially meet all of you guys, though!" He injected a bit of energy into his tone to downplay how exhausted he really was, and it seemed adequate enough to buy him some breathing room. After a few teasing comments he was left to sag in place, the conversation carrying to the other end of the room. "T-thanks, Kirishima," he mumbled.

"No prob, bro. You were lookin' kinda overwhelmed. Not good with crowds, I take it?" Kirishima laughed when Izuku turned a deer-in-headlights expression on him, razor edged teeth flashing. "Sorry man, it's kinda hard not to notice. You looked like you were ready to hurl in the cafeteria earlier."

"Y-yeah, I.. y-yey," Izuku muttered in embarrassment, too tired to come up some some sort of excuse or deflection. "S..speaking of lunch, I-w-would you mind if I invited Tokoyami to sit with us tomorrow? He-we um, talked a bit, and he seems r-really nice."

"Tokoyami, huh?" Kirishima tapped his chin, scanning over the mostly full classroom. "Considering he didn't drag you into the shadow realm, yeah! It's totally cool with me. The more the merrier, right? I'm sure Iida and Uraraka will be chill with it, too."

"He went home early. You.. you were really banged up, Izuku," she whispered, gaze removed from his own. "I didn't see the worst of it, but Iida did. He might feel responsible for what happened."

"I-I-I-.. uhm, i-it's okay, Uraraka! I-Recovery Girl fixed me up, I-I feel fine, promise!" Izuku fidgeted nervously with his fingers, trying and failing to sound reassuring. "I just.. you were in pretty bad shape when we found you, and I'm so glad you're alright." She pulled her expression into a weak smile, rubbing at her eye with a palm.

"I-I-I-.. uhm, i-it's okay, Uraraka! I-Recovery Girl fixed me up, I-I feel fine, promise!" Izuku fidgeted nervously with his fingers, trying and failing to sound reassuring. "Is.. where is Iida?"

"He went home early. You.. you were really banged up, Izuku," she whispered, gaze removed from his own. "I didn't see the worst of it, but Iida did. He might feel responsible for what happened." The tremor in her voice resonated in his bones, striking the impulse in his brain that made him so
desperate to help others, and relieve their pain.

"I-I'll make sure to talk to him tomorrow. I don't want him to f-feel bad about what happened. It wasn't his fault." Izuku dredged up silty handfuls of bravery, the grains sliding through his fingers. "It's not your fault either, Uraraka. I promise. I don't blame either of you." He tried not to shrink away from the dewy shimmer in her eyes, determined to ease her mind. He maintained steady eye contact, attempting to make his sincerity known through half of a fractured smile. "It'll be okay."

A sudden burst of noise from the back of the classroom cut the moment short, voices raised in laughter over something that Izuku had missed. He squeaked at the sight of Mr. Aizawa rising up like a vampire from behind his desk, hair matted on one side of his head and his eyes red and irritated. "Alright you loiterers, that's enough. Class is over and you're impeding on my nap, so get out." He watched with a critical eye as everyone filed outside, Izuku managing a meek wave in response to Uraraka's departing smile. "Except for you, Midoriya. Stay put."

Izuku nodded nervously, settling into his desk with slow, careful movements. When Mr. Aizawa didn't react, he loosened some of the tension from his shoulders and slumped back into his chair. "Tokoyami said you wanted to talk to me, sir."

"Correct. I'm sure you're smart enough to realize that today's incident isn't something that can just be swept under the rug." Mr. Aizawa made eye contact so intense that Izuku had to physically prop up his head to not shy away. "Katsuki Bakugou is currently in the principal's office, with his parents. Similarly, your mother was informed of the situation and is on her way here to have a very important discussion. But that won't be for a little while. So until then.." Mr. Aizawa dragged his chair from behind his desk, the screech of the legs against the tile making Izuku wince. He watched with hitching breath as the homeroom teacher set it down only a few feet away from his own desk, and fell into it. Even when he was sitting down, Mr. Aizawa's presence felt like a looming shadow, nearly causing him to break into goosebumps. "You and I, are going to have a talk."

Chapter End Notes

Some adorable fanart for this chapter! Be sure to check out the artist!
https://www.tumblr.com/dashboard/blog/cricketmilk/162546636514
Izuku quailed under the force of Mr. Aizawa's inky gaze, feeling as if he had lost all sensation in the tips of his fingers and toes. He couldn't even imagine how debilitating it would be to have Erasure used on him. How villains didn't just faint from fear, he would never understand. "W..what do you want to t-talk about, sir?" His voice was trembling and ragged, sagging under the weight of his physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion.

"I doubt that you don't already have a fair idea. The incident with you and Bakugou isn't something this school can take lightly. What happened wasn't a training accident, or a few scrapes from roughhousing. This was a deliberate and damaging attack on another student. Coupled with an extremely hostile and uncooperative attitude, expulsion is looking to be the most likely outcome." Mr. Aizawa's tone was perfectly flat, but lacked any of the tiredness present in his face. His gaze was unwavering, and Izuku barely dared to even blink.

"Y-y-you-e-expulsion?! I-It-you can't expel him, i-it was my fault, not Kacchan's--" Izuku twitched and clamped his mouth shut when Mr. Aizawa's stare intensified.

"Midoriya, I feel like there's something I need to make very clear to you. Selflessness and self sacrifice are admirable traits, and are paramount to being a hero. But there's a term for when those attributes are taken too far." Mr. Aizawa's glare cut right through his retinas, and Izuku flinched when the hero's voice fell like hammer blows. "Self destruction. You don't seem to understand the gravity of the situation, so I'll put it in very clear terms. You could have died. Had Bakugou put more force behind his attack, he could have torn your jaw off. Had he aimed a little higher, he might have destroyed your right eye. The injury you received could have been debilitating in addition to disfiguring. Do you understand me?"

Izuku couldn't put forth the strength to stop his tears from falling, hot and ugly and shameful. His chest hitched with hiccuping breaths, and he did everything in his power to force the words past his misery. "I-I do understand, I p-promise! But-I u-used my Quirk on him, Mr. Aizawa." The words left him in a putrid whisper, burning like steam against the back of his teeth. "H-he was terrified. I could feel it. And-and I get that it was wrong, and h-he could have seriously hurt me, but-sir, Kacchan--"

His words caught among a net of nettles, pinpricks cutting lines down his throat. But he had to say them. Had to make the truth known.

"Kacchan isn't well, sir. H-he's hurting very badly, and he doesn't k-know what to do about it. He doesn't-he needs help, Mr. Aizawa, not punishment!" Silence rang in his ears the moment after his words died in the air, his eyes screwed shut and leaking saline down his face. He could feel the edges of his bandages moistening, just underneath the skin of his eye socket. "I-I broke my promise.. I p-promised I'd never let a-anyone be afraid the way I am, a-and I-I have to make it up to him!" His words stripped his insides open, weakness and honesty oozing forth in a slurry he had no hope of containing. "...I know Kacchan isn't a bad person. I-I know he isn't," Izuku whispered, unsure if he was trying to convince himself or Mr. Aizawa.

A long moment passed before Izuku was brave enough to open his eyes again, vision blurry even when he halfheartedly wiped the tears away. He dared to look up, and found Mr. Aizawa's face was carefully neutral. He didn't seem as intense as before, thoughts quietly moving behind his nothing gaze. "..Do you think yourself exempt from the same, Midoriya?"

Izuku made a questioning noise, honest confusion on his face, and Mr. Aizawa sighed deeply. "You say that Katsuki Bakugou is hurting, and needs help. Selflessness and self destruction are not far removed, Midoriya. Do you think yourself beyond requiring the same care as Bakugou?"
Realization flashed through Izuku like a lightning strike, ozone hot and sparking in his chest. "N-no, sir, I don't! I just-it's just, Kacchan-he's, he really needs h-help, and I can-I don't w-want to impose on anyone, I-I'm-it's not s-so bad-" Every argument he could conjure fell apart like burning paper, ashes drifting around him in smoking trails under the heat of Mr. Aizawa's stare.

"You're fifteen years old, and you walk around like the weight of the world is on your shoulders. The way you interact with your classmates makes it explicitly clear that you have no experience with having positive relationships with your peers. You fold like a wet piece of cardboard when someone raises their voice. Don't be so dense as to let someone else's pain invalidate your own. I know you're smarter than that." Mr. Aizawa sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose as his words resonated inside Izuku's skull, twisting and melding with Tokoyami's advice. "We'll discuss this further when your mother gets here. Hope you're ready."

Izuku nearly leapt out of his seat when the main door of the classroom slid open, eyes wide and nervous before he recognized the impossibly familiar face looking in, lined with worry and marked by tear tracks. "Mom!"

Inko Midoriya was unravelled. Only half of her hair remained in the bun Izuku had seen her put it in that morning, green strands hanging loose and frazzled. Her makeup had been hastily washed off, flecks of mascara still clinging to her eyelids. Her entire demeanor was shaken to the core, and Izuku's heart burst like a supernova at the thought of the pain he'd put his mother through.

"Izuku! Oh, my baby Izuku, my baby boy-" Inko made distance irrelevant, clearing the classroom in what felt like a single stride. Izuku barely had time to stand before he was smothered by an embrace, tears springing to his already irritated eyes. He buried the left side of his face in his mother's shoulder, breaths hitching and catching and stuttering in his slowly tightening throat. He squeezed her with as much care as he could muster, the desire to bawl and cling to her as tightly as he could held back only by crumbling foundations.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he muttered in a broken mantra, voice muffled by the fabric of her clothes. He was barely aware of Mr. Aizawa, present only on the absolute fringes of the moment. He couldn't bring himself to be embarrassed—it was too painful to do anything other than cry.

His mother pulled back after what felt like an eternity, embrace released but her hands still lingering on his arms. "Don't apologize, sweetie. You have nothing to be sorry for." She cupped the uninjured side of his face, her unsteady smile only hurting him more, because it was the same thing he saw in the mirror every morning. "I'm just happy you're safe, Izuku."

Izuku could only nod, his shame a frigid burn in the pit of his stomach. He twitched at the sound of Mr. Aizawa quietly moving another chair across the classroom, metal legs lightly clacking against the tile floor. His teacher didn't say anything, and his expression was impossible to read, considering he wasn't in Izuku's direct line of vision.

His mother had apparently heard the noise as well, giving him one last squeeze before she removed herself from his person. She turned to meet Mr. Aizawa's gaze, looking more stable than a few moments before. "I'm so sorry, sir. I'm Inko Midoriya, and you're.. Shouta Aizawa, right? Again, I'm really sorry, thank you for having me."

"Don't worry about it, Mrs. Midoriya. I understand that this is an emotional situation." Mr. Aizawa's tone wasn't quite reassuring, but it was certainly more polite than the barely contained annoyance he usually spoke to Izuku's class with. He gestured at the chair he'd dragged over, gaze half lidded. "Please, take a seat. Both of you. We have a lot to talk about."
Mr. Aizawa waited a few beats for Inko and Izuku to sit, before he settled heavily into his own chair. "Mrs. Midoriya, I'd like to begin by personally expressing my remorse for the situation at hand. Though today's training exercise wasn't technically my responsibility, Katsuki Bakugou is still one of my students. I should have recognized his animosity towards your son much sooner, and made an effort to create some distance."

Inko shook her head firmly, looking touched by Mr. Aizawa's words but still determined to refute them. "You have nothing to apologize for. You shouldn't be expected to understand everything about your students by the second day of class."

Mr. Aizawa blinked at the warm smile sent his way, gaze flickering to Izuku before it resettled on his mother. "Regardless, what happened was a gross error on the part of the U.A. facility. Your forgiveness is appreciated, but that doesn't excuse the lax handling of our students. From now on, we'll take much greater care to watch for signs that can help prevent incidents like this from occurring. Other than that, I'm here to speak with you on behalf of the school about the option of pressing charges for the incident. Your son has already expressed his desire to forgive his aggressor, but as his mother you have the final say."

Izuku's heart stuttered and buffered in his chest, functionality momentarily lost when his mother didn't say anything right away. He had just mustered up enough resolve to open his mouth when she spoke, quiet and calm. "I can't say I've ever been one to hold a grudge. Mr. and Mrs. Bakugou are good friends of mine, and I couldn't possibly burden them in a time like this. My only request is that little Katsuki gets the professional help he needs to control his anger."

Izuku breathed a sigh of relief; he hadn't truly doubted that his kindhearted mother wouldn't go through with legal charges, but the minuscule chance was still enough to cause anxiety. A moment later, he almost wished he'd kept that breath in, so he'd have a few more seconds to last before suffocation.

"Speaking of mental health care, I wanted to speak with you about the possibility of your son seeing an on staff psychiatrist from now on." Izuku wanted to curl up and die just from the peripherals of Mr. Aizawa's stare, weighty and piercing. "Your son is very intelligent and very determined, Mrs. Midoriya. He has a lot of potential, and I'd hate to see that wasted because of a mistake that could have been prevented."

Part of Izuku urged him to simply burst into flames of mortification, Mr. Aizawa's version of glowing praise barely computing at all. He glanced in his mother's direction, unsure of what he expected to see on her face.

"To be honest.. I had been considering the same for a few years, now." Inko's words were tinged with melancholy and regret, her volume subdued. "But I know how independent Izuku is, and I-guess I got it into my head that I'd be encroaching on that independence. I suppose that's something I'll always regret. Not trying harder." She blinked away tears, Izuku's heart shattering at the sight of his mother's upset.

"N-no, mom, it's-please don't feel bad, I-I know you were doing your best-" Izuku choked on his reassurances when his mother turned to give him a soft look, the motherly smile he was so used to seeing filled to the brim with love and pride tainted by a regret older than he was.

"You're the sweetest boy a mother could ask for, Izuku. That's why I wish I had done so much more for you." She dabbed at her eyes with a hand, uttering a quiet word of gratitude when Mr. Aizawa wordlessly handed her a tissue.

Mr. Aizawa regarded mother and son with a critical eye, silent and unreadable for a long moment.
"It's an important life skill to be able to reflect on our missteps to avoid repeating them. But dwelling does nothing except cause more uncertainty. What's important right now, Mrs. Midoriya, is doing everything you can in the moment to support your son, which is why I strongly recommend he begin regular sessions with Ms. Atsuko. She's been working with us here at U.A. for almost eight years, and is an extremely well accredited psychiatrist. If you'd rather consult a professional that isn't affiliated with the school, feel free."

"I'll be sure to look into it," Inko promised, wiping her face clean and balling up the tissue. She cleared her throat, meeting Mr. Aizawa's gaze head on. "I'd also like to make it very clear that if a situation like this happens again, I won't hesitate to pull my son from this school and file charges against it. I understand that what happened today was a very, very unfortunate accident. But twice is negligence."

Mr. Aizawa nodded firmly, a begrudging respect surfacing in his eyes for all of a moment. "I understand entirely. I promise that we'll take measures to ensure the safety of your son, as well as the rest of our students."

Inko's expression softened, and she rose from her chair a beat after Mr. Aizawa stood up. She practically took his hand hostage once more, shaking it with vigorous gratitude. "Thank you so much for speaking with us, Mr. Aizawa. I'm glad my son has such a well spoken and compassionate teacher."

Mr. Aizawa stared at her as if he wasn't sure when she'd walked into the room, before shrugging one shoulder. "My job is to help kids like your son be the best they can. I'm just doing what I'm paid to."

Inko didn't look even remotely fazed by Mr. Aizawa's brusque response, her eyes shining. She bowed respectfully before turning to Izuku, startling him into clumsily rising from his chair. He hesitated halfway across the room, turning back to gaze hopefully at his teacher. "Mr. Aizawa? U-uhm... a-about Kacchan-

"Yeah, yeah. I'll look into it, Midoriya." Aizawa pretended not to notice Midoriya's eyes fill with grateful tears, steadfastly looking in the other direction as his student failed to stifle his sniffles. He waited until the door to his classroom closed before he slumped, proper posture completely thrown out the window. He stared at his desk for a moment, part of him longing to crawl underneath it and nap in the nest he'd created, but unfortunately he had other matters to attend to.

"Paid vacation days are the least of what I'll need after this headache," he muttered, loping out of the classroom and towards the principal's office, silently preparing himself to make a complete about-face on his stance towards expelling Katsuki Bakugou. Nedzu would never let him hear the end of it.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Just wanted to let everyone know that the daily updates may or may not slow down from now on.

Waking up the morning after the combat training incident felt more dreamlike than anything Izuku had ever experienced while unconscious. Instead of waking up with dread fumes building in his chest and last night's partially digested dinner spilling from his lips, he felt... almost okay. He'd pretty much resigned himself to the fact that he'd never feel good, that the taint of his Quirk would darken anything and everything for the rest of his life. But beyond that, there wasn't a whole lot he was instantaneously fearful of. It was a new day, full of potential for things to get better.

So he completed his morning routine smoothly, brushing his teeth with only a faint sting from his healing mouth wounds, and washing his face in the sink while taking care to avoid touching the bandages. The numbness in the side of his face was disconcerting, but easy enough to ignore for the moment. At least he hadn't been forced to see the scar tissue yet. He fought his hair with a brush until it no longer looked like he'd slept in a wind tunnel, and carefully placed an assortment of clips in the strands. Feeling almost whimsical (if whimsy had been disemboweled and left to die in a gutter, at least) he gathered up the scruff of hair at the back of his head and put it into a short ponytail with a rainbow hair tie. He considered himself in the mirror for a while, glancing at his hands and idly wondering if his mother would help him paint his nails.

After a few moments of deliberation he decided to bring it up by texting her in the middle of the day, too embarrassed to bring it up in direct conversation. He endured motherly kisses on his way out the door, face burning as he carried the packed lunch that he was incapable of refusing. He did everything he could to avoid noticing the sadness in her gaze, and forced himself not to read into her lingering embrace.

Even his transit to school was fairly peaceful, the train quiet enough for him to zone out on his phone and skim the multitude of hero fan forums he frequented. He intently tapped his phone screen with both thumbs as he stepped off the train, writing up his fifth paragraph in response to a post questioning the validity of Pro Hero #213, The Unshakable Hero: Steadfast's Quirk when he was suddenly assaulted on all sides by an eruption of noise.

"Hey kid, tell us what it's like to be learning under All Might-"

"Can you offer a statement about what All Might is like when the cameras are off?"

"Can you confirm true or false whether All Might is definitely involved in a secret villain conspiracy!?"

Izuku shrank away from the amalgam of steadily raising voices, an arsenal of microphones boxing him in place. His breaths shortened into quick, desperate pants for air, his thoughts whirring and crashing together while the anxiety in his chest spiked until it reached crush depth, constricting his airways until he was dizzy with fear. Dark spots danced in his vision, the world barely visible outside his swiftly shrinking cone of panic.
A sturdy hand on his shoulder pulled a yelp from his constricted throat, the noise cutting out only to be replaced by a familiar, reproachful bellow. "HOW DARE YOU HARRASS ONE OF MY CLASSMATES ON HIS WAY TO PURSUE A HIGHER EDUCATION?! THIS BEHAVIOR IS UTTERLY SHAMEFUL AND REFLECTS EXTREMELY POORLY ON ALL OF YOUR PROFESSIONAL CAREERS! I STRONGLY SUGGEST YOU CEASE AND DESIST BEFORE I CONTACT THE FACULTY AND HAVE THEM CALL THE AUTHORITIES TO DISPERSE YOU ALL!" Iida's glasses gleamed with authority in the light of the morning sun, his posture reminding Midoriya of a territorial bird.

The moment Iida's hand left his shoulder to be used in his exaggerated posturing, another one clapped down in the same spot, fingers thick and squeezing with friendly familiarity. Izuku turned enough to be met with red hair and a shark toothed grin, Kirishima's voice coming out in a whisper-shout. "C'mon Midoriya, we should give Iida some space to do his thing. I kinda wish I had a bouquet of flowers to throw at him or somethin'."

Izuku flinched in shock when a bubble of his own laughter completely blindsided him, cheek reddening as he nodded in acquiescence. He let Kirishima lead him around the crowd of bewildered reporters, their pace quickening to enter the school gates before they were noticed. Izuku almost felt disappointed when Kirishima released his grip, yearning for contact that didn't bring him suffering.

"Jeez, those guys sure are persistent. I had like three of 'em tryin' to tail me on the way here! Kinda hard to hide a camera crew, though." Izuku stared in a daze at Kirishima's blazing grin, so impossibly carefree and open and expressive. He was startled out of his reverie when red eyes turned his way, a moment of disconnect leaving Izuku woozy. The shade of Kirishima's eyes was more blood orange than anything, so unlike the raging inferno locked in Kacchan's. He idly admired the color for a moment, feeling loose and indistinct.

A hand waving in front of his face snapped him back into focus, Kirishima's voice fading in. "-orried there for a sec. You totally spaced out on me, man. I know I'm pretty stunning to look at, but-

Izuku immediately sputtered to construct a believable defense, every inch of visible skin on his face inflamed. "N-no, t-t-that's not it! I-I mean, n-n-not that you a-aren't, u-um, I-I-I'm not trying to s-say you aren't um-g-good looking- UHM-

A note of ringing laughter met his ears, forcing a whine from his throat as trembling hands instinctively moved to cover his face. "Hey, hey, calm down man! I'm totally flattered, but I was just messin' with ya." Kirishima tapped him on the back of one hand, and Izuku stifled a flinch before tentatively lowering his finger shield. He could feel the moment his classmate's gaze drifted towards the gauze on his face, the edges of Kirishima's smile softening. "I'd say it was fortunate that those paparazzi gave me an excuse to talk with ya, but that'd probably be pretty insensitive considering how messed up you looked with them around. I really wanted a chance to ask, though... how're you holdin' up? After what happened, I mean."

Izuku averted his gaze, unable to handle the full brunt of Kirishima's concern. "I.. I'm okay. A-and I really mean it, I'm not j-just--... It d-doesn't really hurt, a-and I h-haven't seen how it looks yet, so..I guess I can wait to f-freak out until then." He flashed a smile that he could barely feel, a façade of strung up porcelain. "I-I'm more worried about Kacchan, actually. H-he.. I don't blame him f-for what happened. I k-know he wouldn't hurt me like that on purpose."

Kirishima made a noncommittal noise, scratching one hand through his hair thoughtfully. "Can't say I really got a chance to talk with Bakugou yet. He certainly seems like he's a pretty big asshole, but.. yeah, he didn't strike me as the kinda guy that'd seriously hurt someone for no reason. All Might heard what he said before the footage cut out, too. 'I won't hurt you so bad they have to stop the
exercise." Izuku shrunk when he was turned under a critical gaze, one hand knotting nervously in the fabric of his jacket. "...Somethin' must've gone wrong between the two of you when the cameras went out, right?"

Blood sloshed in Izuku's ear canals, scorching hot with fear. The question would come any moment, Kirishima would ask about his Quirk, would want to know about it, know the truth-

"Hey, don't look so frazzled, man. Whatever's goin' down, it's your business, okay? I'm not gonna pry if you don't want me to." Like a match lit in a cave Kirishima's grin sprung back to life, one hand reaching out to muss a nest of green curls and the other jammed casually into his pocket. "C'mon Midoriya, let's get to class before Cementoss gets the chance to lecture us. I swear, it takes that guy like ten minutes to get through a sentence."

Izuku squeaked when an arm was flung casually around his shoulders, loose and friendly and in no way constricting. It was more like an invitation, Izuku realized suddenly, and flushed when he decided not to remove it. He fell in step with Kirishima, letting the other boy's voice wash over him.

"I really like the hair today, Midoriya, the ponytail's a nice touch! You plan on growin' it out?"

"O-oh! Uhm, t-t-thanks! I'm, I don't know, maybe? M-my mom isn't super strict about me g-getting my hair cut, so I guess I could t-try to grow it longer-"

The knots of tension in every joint Izuku possessed slowly loosened, the conversation easing him by a noticeable margin. He paused to spare a glance over his shoulder when they entered the school, before refocusing. He'd speak to Iida after class, when they could be alone. He'd make things right.

The majority of Izuku's morning classes consisted of him paying attention with half an ear to mundane subjects while simultaneously attempting to sort his crippling, volatile emotions into neat little categories that he could deal with at his own pace. He absolutely recognized that it was pretty much a futile effort, considering how strongly all his negativity affected him even back when all he had to worry about was Kacchan saying something cruel to him, but it made him feel a little bit better to at least make an attempt.

Unfortunately he didn't notice when his focus started slipping, his attention more and more consumed by his own thoughts as the day wore on. His state was only exacerbated when he stopped by the nurse's office to have his bandages replaced and his scar tissue healed, Recovery Girl's Quirk leaving him yawning. It came to a head when he wandered into the cafeteria at twenty percent awareness, and somehow managed to trip and smash his face into the linoleum tile. Luckily he'd managed to avoid both breaking his nose and exacerbating his wound, so he considered it an optimal outcome.

He clung to his packed lunch while ignoring the ache in his cheekbone, and snatched up as many condiment packets from the lunch line as he was comfortable with taking.

The table he'd been invited to the day before had already been populated, Kirishima's red hair a dead giveaway and Tokoyami's dark sheen a pleasant surprise. He scurried his way over, apologizing under his breath to anyone he accidentally bumped into, and slid sheepishly into the seat next to Uraraka. "H-hey, guys!"

Uraraka and Kirishima both responded immediately, so overflowing with good vibes that his eyes watered. Even Tokoyami spoke up, a slightly stilted 'Greetings' that struck Izuku's heart, the sincere effort behind it twisting in his chest. However, the simple nod Iida graced him with threw a darker shade over his mood. He quirked his lips into as warm a smile as he could muster, attempting to help the taller boy relax. It faltered a little when he received no outward reaction, but the beginning of a conversation swept his concerns aside for the moment.
"Glad to see you made it through the lunchroom jungle, Midoriya!" Kirishima's boisterous tone rang out, Uraraka giggling into her lunch. "Uraraka and I had just coaxed Tokoyami into speaking full sentences!"

"Quite the untruth, Kirishima. As I recall, you both assaulted me with inquiries until I had no choice but to appease you." Tokoyami's tone was difficult for Izuku to read, but he couldn't really detect any actual annoyance.

Uraraka spoke up over Kirishima's easy 'Same difference', her eyes wide with excitement. "Yeah, he was telling us about his favorite bands! He's super into the ones where they have the really neat outfits- visual kei?" She questioned, receiving a brief nod from Tokoyami. "Yeah, that stuff. And um, you also said you were into.. what was it again?"

"Post industrial dark ambient soundscapes," Tokoyami intoned deeply. "To be lost amidst a conflagration of noise, the raw utterance of grinding metal and emptiness of a civilization long abandoned and be made commiserate of the ashes left behind-it creates a resonance deep within me that I cannot ignore."

A long moment of silence followed Tokoyami's impassioned words, Uraraka's lips parted in shock and Izuku's eyes blown wide, before Kirishima whooped and roughly patted Tokoyami on the back. "Holy crap man, that is so freakin' manly!" He seemed entirely oblivious to the outcome of his actions, which involved Tokoyami wheezing to recover the breath that had been knocked out of him.

"T-that really does sound cool, Tokoyami," Izuku shyly spoke up, his hands busy preparing his lunch to his preferred specifications. "M-maybe you could recommend some albums? I-I'm usually more into, u-uhm, movie soundtracks? Because a lot of the time they're really.. heroic sounding I guess? And it's pretty inspiring to.. listen..." Izuku trailed off when he realized there were three pairs of eyes staring intently at his hands. He glanced down, pausing in the tearing open and applying of his fifth hot sauce packet. "W-what's wrong?"

"Wow Izuku, that's a crazy amount of hot sauce! How can you stand to eat food like that?" Uraraka questioned loudly, her focus flickering between his worried gaze and his spice laden lunch.

"Yeah, that's kind of a lot, man. Even for me," Kirishima piped up, his expression a strange mixture of astonishment and nausea.

"O-oh, uhm, I-I just-" Izuku shrank down in his seat, half wondering if he could get away with just hiding underneath the table. "U-uhhm.. I'm not really... a big eater? N-not that I don't eat, it's just- sometimes I have trouble concentrating on what I'm doing, especially eating, and I'll just.. stop halfway through because I'm thinking about something else. But if I make my food really spicy, it burns my tongue so that I don't forget to actually... y-you know. Finish eating it." He flashed a nervous smile, the expression an absolute disaster of teeth and lips.

"Hey, whatever works for you, man." Kirishima offered a reassuring smile in return, something infinitely more complete and put-together than the mess Izuku had to work with. "I gotta say though, you must have an iron stomach to-" The rest of his words were cut off by a loud, piercing note that ripped through the cafeteria, loud enough to drown out the resulting outcry of shock. It blipped out after a moment, leaving a shocked silence in its wake.

"Geez, that was so loud!" Uraraka complained, futilely rubbing at her ear. "What the heck was that, anyway?"

"...It didn't come from the loudspeakers," Iida began, speaking for the first time since Izuku had sat down. "Most likely it was the school's alarm system. Perhaps they're performing maintenance, and
activated it by mistake."

"Y-yeah, probably just a malfunction," Izuku hesitantly agreed, voice soft and his thrumming desire to speak with Iida buzzing just under the surface.

"Why would they be workin' on it during school hours, though? Could'a at least cranked the volume down." Kirishima's gaze rested on Midoriya's half eaten chicken katsudon, mentally weighing the pros and cons of enduring what looked like half a liter of hot sauce.

"It most likely has to do with those soulless barbarians treading upon our gates," Tokoyami began, seemingly oblivious to both the shadowy claws reaching up from under his side of the table and Izuku's reaction to them, which consisted of him jumping so high in his seat that he banged his knees on the underside of the table. "Like vultures they circle, stalking the lame and the weak so that they might feast while the flesh is yet warm." He leveled a glare in roughly the same direction as the school's front gates, which required him to twist around in his seat. He offered no comment on the claws playing with his chopsticks.

The loudspeakers crackled to life a moment later, principal Nedzu's unflinchingly jubilant voice pouring through a moment later. ["Attention, students! It's me, your beloved principal! I just wanted to reassure you all that the noise you heard was a malfunction that resulted from routine maintenance on our security systems! Sorry about that! Now, all of you feel free to resume your lunches!"]

Izuku blinked when Tokoyami's chopsticks clattered to the table, the inky hands that had been manipulating them having vanished while he was distracted. ".I-I'm not the only one that saw that, r-right?"

"Saw what?" Tokoyami turned away from his glaring to catch sight of his misplaced utensils. "Oh yes, worry not. That was merely Dark Shadow. It is quite mischievous, when the mood strikes it. I imagine it is pent up at the moment, considering I haven't had a reason to draw forth its power yet today."

A question formed on the tip of Izuku's tongue, and he forced himself to swallow it back. He-as nice as everyone was, he couldn't reveal the extent of his Quirk to them. Not yet. Maybe not ever. But Tokoyami's words stuck with him, revolving in slow, meandering circles. If he could relieve his own Quirk, just by using it..

Kirishima mulled over the information for a moment, before a wide grin slid across his face. "Mischievous, huh? Hey Tokoyami, you think Dark Shadow would be up for helpin' with like, pranks and stuff?"

Tokoyami scoffed, folding his arms across his chest. "What a trite inquiry. I will have no part in something as juvenile as 'practical jokes'." He started when a shadowy limb emerged from the space just underneath his folded arms, the roiling darkness shifting to form a giant thumb's up. Kirishima's face brightened like the sun, and Tokoyami muttered something about 'asinine shenanigans' under his breath as Dark Shadow retreated.

Izuku hid a smile behind his palm, Uraraka giggling unashamedly beside him. The brief levity was dampened, however, by the brush of gauze against his fingers and Iida's subdued demeanor. All he had to do was wait after class, and he could make things better.

Izuku filed back into 1-A's classroom once lunch ended, his gaze drawn thoughtfully towards his sticker laden shoes. Some of them were peeling; he'd have to buy more to replace them. Maybe he could look into something small to make a bit of extra money, so he wouldn't feel bad about wasting his mother's money just to hide his own insecurity. He was so lost in his own slowly darkening
thoughts that he didn't realize Mr. Aizawa was standing by the door until an envelope was slipped into his lax grip. He flinched in shock, head snapping up to meet his teacher's half lidded gaze.

Mr. Aizawa said nothing to him directly, only turning to stalk closer to his desk and turn his exhausted gaze on the class. "Midoriya and Ashido, you're swapping desks. Don't whine about it, because it won't change anything." He barely even waited for them to move before he continued speaking, his voice an apathetic drone. "Also, All Might couldn't make it in today, so your Hero Studies class has been cancelled. You'll get an optional study period instead." A chorus of groans rang out, and his lips pulled into a halfhearted scowl. "Don't complain to me, complain to All Might when he actually bothers to show up."

Izuku slunk across the classroom while Mr. Aizawa continued to speak, offering a weak grin and a one shouldered shrug to Ashido when he passed her. She merely wiggled her fingers in greeting, seemingly not too concerned with her new seat behind Bakugou's empty desk.

He tore his gaze away from the empty desk, focusing instead on the envelope Mr. Aizawa had slipped him. It was completely plain and a little bit crumpled, with 'Don't open until after class' marked on the front in slanted handwriting. He frowned down at it, as equally curious as to the contents as he was dreading them, but he would follow the directions given to him.

"-need to choose a class rep. I don't care who it is or how you do it, as long as it's done quick." Mr. Aizawa circled around behind his desk, the ends of his scarf trailing behind him. "And keep the noise to a minimum." He fell like a rock the moment after, disappearing underneath his desk to insulate himself from the buzz of excited chatter.

Izuku clutched the letter against his leg, thumb rubbing gently across the side of it that was unmarked. He was aching to know what was inside, a minuscule part of him bleeding delusional hope like a lesion. He squeezed his eyes shut, attempting to forcibly convince himself that it probably wasn't even anything super important. It shouldn't have caused his chest to tighten, his eyes to water, his being pulled apart into threads at the mere thought of what he hoped it might be.

Whispers of static curled around his head, breaching the blessed silence he had finally achieved. He choked down a whimper, twisting his free hand in the fabric of his pant leg. A call of his name ripped him out of his decline, eyes blinking away starbursts to focus on Iida, standing impassively in front of his desk.

"We need your vote before we can finish the election for class representative, Midoriya." Iida presented him with a sheet of paper and a pen, his gaze distant and his voice subdued. It-as much as Izuku imagined how someone could feel snubbed by the cold behavior, it merely deepened the chasm in his heart. Just-just a little longer, and he could do something.

He marked a tally next to Iida's name on the makeshift ballot, handing both it and the pen back with a taped together smile. Iida made eye contact in the brief moment the items exchanged hands, and he looked stricken before he hurried off. Probably guilt over the bandages, Izuku surmised gloomily.

He zoned out for another few minutes, chastising himself over a half remembered thought to text his mother earlier. He desperately wanted something more tangible to bring life back into his colorless visage, but he still recognized how embarrassing it would be to ask his mother to help him paint his nails. He could always look up tutorials online, but that didn't exactly help him with acquiring the necessary materials-

"-Midoriya, pay attention!" Izuku snapped up in his seat so hard that he fell out of it, scrambling to catch himself before he smacked his face off the tile for the second time that day. He straightened to his feet when Mr. Aizawa's glare intensified, trembling under the force of it. He could see
Yaoyorozu standing by the blackboard, her expression one of barely contained suffering.

"W-what's-" He froze at the sight of the blackboard itself, listing the names of every student in the class. Every name was ordered by the number of votes they had received, a chunk of them containing either one or zero votes, before he saw Yaoyorozu's name with two, and his own with four. "...T-that's-I'm h-having a nightmare, right?" His voice was faint, so wrought with tremors that it felt like his vocal cords would come loose.

"Nightmare, position of authority-they boil down to a common theme," Mr. Aizawa muttered, jerking his head in a motion that sent Izuku scrambling towards the front of the room. The majority of his classmates eyed him with mild envy or annoyance, excluding those he'd already connected with. Kirishima grinned encouragingly, flashing an incredibly unsubtle wink. "Midoriya, you're class rep. Yaoyorozu is your deputy. Your first official duty-" Mr. Aizawa paused, allowing the bell to stop ringing, "is to get out of here, class is dismissed."

Izuku bolted the moment he could, which was a few moments after over half the class had already filed out. The weight of the letter in his pocket and the responsibility suddenly hanging from his shoulders made him unsteady on his feet. But he was desperate to make it outside, to make some part of what had happened okay, to make it so that Iida could look him in the eye again.

The sight of a broad back walking swiftly down the school's main path spurred him into action, his feet acting of their own will and his voice rising in a shout. "Iida, wait!"
Chapter 14

Katsuki Bakugou stomped down the sidewalk towards U.A.'s campus like a squall of rolling thunder. It was barely six in the morning and he wanted nothing more than to lock himself in his bedroom and stare at his phone. Unfortunately, the crackpot fuckhead psychiatrist his parents had forced him to see the day before, right after he was done being chewed out by Ugly Rodent, Unkempt Bastard, and All Might himself, had suggested he write an 'apology' letter to him, and leave it with his teacher to deliver. The dip shit doctor said something about how he needed to 'begin paving the way to closure for his regrets, so that he could move on to healing earlier wounds' or some other bullshit.

At least when he was outside, he couldn't think about what had happened, Katsuki reflected bitterly. Sleeping had been nearly impossible, scenes of bloody teeth and vaporized flesh and pupils like black holes flashing behind his closed eyelids. His lacking sleep only compounded his anger and frustration, and his psychiatrist's patronizing tone when they spoke still infuriated him.

Of course he fucking understood that what he did was wrong. Of course he understood the gravity of his mistake. Of course he fucking got it, of course, of course-Of course, the moment when he'd truly proved himself to be stronger than Deku would be the moment when everything came crashing down around him. It figured that his triumph over that idiot loser's secret Quirk (hidden, he'd hidden it for ten years and Katsuki was too stupid to figure it out, to realize Deku had been lying through his fucking teeth the whole time) had blown up so spectacularly in both of their faces.

His parents had done a total role reversal in the principal's office; his hothead mother had been cold and disappointed, and his normally soft spoken father had been barely able to stop raising his voice every few words. He wasn't supposed to care what they thought, but every word they spoke had served to bury him further and further in the blasted mud of his mistake. His goals had been so close to slipping away, lost forever because he was too much of a raging asshole to not fuck everything up for himself the first chance he got.

A week's suspension and mandatory anger management therapy every day was the closest thing to a lucky break he'd get, he supposed. Obviously that did nothing to repair his surely destroyed reputation at U.A. He didn't care if people hated him-but if they actively worked against him, it would be a problem. He couldn't have a bunch of self righteous bastards trying to undermine his last chance.

And then there was the giant, green eyed problem that he'd had for a decade, blown up to unreal proportions in the span of a few days. How the fuck could anyone ever expect him to look that fuck in the face after he'd blown it open (hysterical with fear and barely aware of how much force he was putting behind his Quirk) and just act normal? He'd always been careful, always been controlled, but his blunder proved how simple it was to have all that practice come undone. He'd been scared, so he lashed out. Just like he did every single goddamn time he'd ever been unsure.

It made sense, Katsuki reflected with a sour taste in his mouth, that the only people who didn't think he was stupid were the ones that saw his test scores. His fingers twitched with the urge to crumple the letter in his hand and blow it into paper scraps, but the brief satisfaction it'd provide him wouldn't be worth the hour long lecture in his next session. He snorted under his breath and refocused on getting to the shitty school in time-

When he was bowled over, another body colliding with him and sending him stumbling to the ground. "FUCK," he growled when he slammed his elbow against the hard pavement, his letter and his student I.D. spilling out of his grip. He twisted to his feet, furious gaze resting on a pair of opaque
sunglasses, belonging to a man over a foot taller than him. "Watch where you're going," Katsuki snarled, forcing himself not to scream in the middle of the street.

"Hoo, sorry about that, kid! Must'a had my head in the clouds!" The man was dressed like a shitty cliche tourist, in a hideous pink-and-orange shirt covered in flowers, along with khaki shorts, sandals, and a poorly made straw hat. His Japanese was flawless, however, with no hint of an accent, so Katsuki had to assume he was just a fucking idiot that didn't know how to dress himself. The man reached down to scoop up Katsuki's letter and I.D., barely even glancing at them before he handed them over with a wide grin. "U.A., huh? You're pretty lucky, kid! Be sure to put in some great hero work for us when you graduate!" He tilted his head as if winking, the motion lost behind his sunglasses.

Snarling under his breath, Katsuki shoved his items in his baggy jeans pocket, fighting the urge to insult the man for how fucking atrocious his outfit and his shitty cheerful attitude were. "Whatever," he muttered, giving the man a wide berth (and ignoring the part of him that demanded he slam into the shoulder of someone both taller and weightier than him just to prove his worth, and he realized that it made no sense because the whole fucking crux of the issue was that he'd fallen over from colliding with the asshole but the urge was still strong) and continuing on his way.

He could hear the man walking off in the other direction, replaying the incident in his head. He half wondered if the guy was some lesser known pro hero, which would explain his stupid outfit. And.. Katsuki could've sworn he'd heard a camera shutter click shut, the noise sticking irritatingly in his head, but he dismissed it. Probably just some idiot on the other side of the street taking selfies.

Katsuki resumed thundering towards the U.A. campus, giving the brief collision no further thought. --

"Iida, wait!" Midoriya's voice rang out with a desperate edge, the sound of it convincing Tenya Iida to halt in his hurried departure. He slowly pulled in a deep breath, holding it for several moments before calmly releasing. He waited until he could hear clomping sneakers stop just a few feet behind him before he turned around, face set in a rigid smile.

"Hello, Midoriya. Did you need something?" It hurt, it hurt to sound so neutral and impersonal and dispassionate but-if he let anything through the cracks, the whole wall would crumble down. He just needed more time to process things, but apparently the source of his troubles would have none of it.

He met Tenya's gaze head on, dull green eyes shimmering with tears. But there was no fear within them, only a deeply rooted determination. "Y-yes, I do. I.. I need to apologize to you."

Tenya's posture went stiff, and he utilized Midoriya's momentary lull to interject and hopefully give himself some breathing room. "If this is about the election for class representative, you have nothing to worry about. You won fair and square, after all. No hard feelings-"

"T-that's not what I meant, Iida! A-and I know you know that!" Tenya fell back a step, briefly shocked by the sheer volume coming from his soft spoken classmate. He opened his mouth to try and carve some other avenue- "I don't blame you, Iida. I p-promise," Midoriya continued, stonewalling any chance Tenya had of changing the topic of conversation. "I-I don't blame anyone for what happened, s-so please don't feel responsible."

"I'm afraid I'm unsure of what you mean," Tenya blurted, words barely reviewed because he knew what was coming, and he was too much of a coward to face it.

"Uraraka told me you might be feeling guilty," Midoriya murmured, tugging anxiously on his poorly knotted uniform tie. Tenya had the brief impulse to show him how to tie it properly. "And you shouldn't, Y-you did everything you could to help me, and-t-that means so much to me, y-you don't
And that was enough. The chisel of Izuku Midoriya's meek, tearful kindness fractured the flimsy wall of indifference he'd hastily propped up, and allowed everything to spill free in an instant. "But I DIDN'T do everything I could!" Tenya's voice rose until it was nearly a yell, hands stiff and curled into fists at his side. "I barely did anything! You, my classmate, were grievously injured and all I could do was just-sit there! I could barely move, because I was so frightened! Those are not the qualities a hero should possess! I was worse than ill prepared-I was completely ignorant of what to do, and that is UNACCEPTABLE!"

Tenya was only made aware of the fact that he'd been gesturing along with his outburst when his hands fell limply to his sides, his chest heaving with the emotion he'd attempted to suppress. He remembered himself the moment he refocused on the shocked expression Midoriya wore. He immediately fell into a perfect ninety degree bow, shaking with the effort to hold it. "My apologies, Midoriya. That was uncalled for."

He started at the press of a hand to his shoulder, straightening up from the bow to find Midoriya had closed the majority of the distance between them. His eyes were glossy again, tears tracking down the uninjured side of his face. "Iida... t-thank you for being o-open with me. I.. I know it has to hurt, wanting to help someone and not being able to do more for them. Maybe y-you're right; maybe a pro hero w-would have known what to do. B-but you're not a pro hero yet, Iida. A-and that's okay! We're all here because we want to learn how to help, r-right?"

Tenya nodded slowly when Midoriya pinned him with a patient stare, and was rewarded with a half smile. "Then that means i-it's okay to not know what to do right away. W-we're all at U.A. to learn. B-but.. you'll never have the chance if you dwell on the fact that you didn't know already!" A moment of silence passed, Tenya tenuously mulling over his classmate's words. "..It's okay, Iida. T-the fact that you were so determined to help-t-that's what'll help you become a great hero."

Tenya studied his classmate for a long moment, his lacking height and shy demeanor suddenly coming across as something more. He had certainly pinned Midoriya as someone with a kind heart, but to have that kindness opened to him- Tenya pushed up his glasses with a hand, rubbing firmly under his eyes. "..Thank you, Midoriya. You've given me much to think about. And.. you have my sincerest remorse for how I've treated you today. You didn't deserve that coldness."

"I-it's okay," Midoriya mumbled, his smile crooked and his unadorned cheek dusted with color. "I knew you w-weren't angry with me, or anything. Especially after you helped me this morning. T-thank you s-so much, by the way!"

"Think nothing of it, my friend! After all, there was no possible way I could leave you to be harassed by those reporters!" Tenya blinked when he realized he'd unconsciously begun striking a boastful pose, clearing his throat and straightening his posture. He steadfastly overlooked Midoriya's choked back squeak of laughter. "Also.. should you require any aid with your new representational duties, I'd be more than happy to assist."

The reminder of his new position made Midoriya balk to an almost comical degree, and Tenya had the strangest urge to smile. "Y-yyeah, that'd b-be super helpful. T-thanks, Iida. Y..you're a good friend." He offered a minuscule departing wave before turning to depart, leaving Tenya to stand and consider their conversation.

"I suppose you've opened an avenue I had never even considered once more, Midoriya," he stated to the empty air, expression contemplative.

"Welcome home, sweetheart! How was your day at school? You're back earlier than usual." Inko's
"Our last class was cancelled kinda last minute," he replied absently, before he processed her actual question. "I-it was... interesting," he continued after a moment, slipping off his shoes and wiggling his cramped toes. "And kinda overwhelming. I-I got voted to be class representative, somehow."

"Congratulations, sweetie, that sounds wonderful! You must have made a good impression on all your classmates." The barely contained joy in his mother's tone was nearly crippling, because he could scarcely remember the last time she had sounded so pleased.

Izuku swallowed the knot of razors in his throat, carrying his shoes by the heels to his bedroom so that he could reapply his stickers. "I guess so. I-it's kinda scary, though-I have no idea what a class representative is supposed to do. Iida said he'd help me if I had any issues, at least." He nudged open the door to his room, setting his shoes inside and closing it behind him. "Honestly, Iida seems like a much better suited candidate anyway. I'm sure he'd do a much better job."

Izuku paused halfway down the hall, locking eyes with his mother from around the kitchen corner. She had that sad smile again, the one he was seeing more and more of. "I think you'll make a wonderful class representative, sweetie. You got voted in for a reason, didn't you?"

"Y..yeah. I-I'll just have to do my best," he mumbled to appease his mother, only half believing his own words. "Oh, uhm, my-the sessions with Ms. Atsuko start on Monday, so-I'll be getting home an hour later than usual."

Inko flashed him a thumbs up, ducking back into the kitchen to attend to something bubbling noisily. "I'm really glad you'll finally have someone to talk to, sweetie. I just wish..." Izuku could feel her sigh in his bones, soft and dark and littered with holes. "Either way, I'm hoping it can help you, Izuku. I'm sure you know that, as your mother, you can tell me anything, and I'll love you no matter what. But I understand how hard it can be to share certain things, even with people who care."

"I-I'm sorry," Izuku whispered, a thread of noise that wound through his teeth and hung in the air. And there were so many other things he could have said, so many lies he could have unraveled, so many wrongs he could have righted in a single moment. But his fear was all powerful, a toxic miasma that shadowed his limbs and plagued every moment of his consciousness. And so all he could do was walk into the kitchen to hug his mother, and offer a smile pulled together by fraying wires. "Y-you meet with your book club tomorrow, right? What were you guys reading, again?"

And it was fear, he imagined, that allowed him to carry on. It was his fear that pulled him through another night of falsities. And it was fear that forced him to place the unopened letter on his desk, its crisp edges burned into his vision until consciousness left him.
Part of Izuku dearly wished that weekends would be completely abolished and done away with, just so that he wouldn't have the time to prolong his inevitable suffering. Saturday and Sunday had clung to the calendar with strings of adhesive, the slow pace of the days allowing him the perfect opportunity to overthink everything. He'd only been at U.A. for three days, but life felt strange and incomplete when he was away from it. It was such a departure from his previous quiet misery, a place of noise and color and life.

He'd done everything he could to reconstruct that departure, during the weekend. He spent nearly every waking hour outdoors, walking through parks and visiting his tiny, secluded beach. He ran errands for his mother, and tagged along with any errands she normally ran by herself. Izuku was too frightened to stay in his room for anything other than sleep, too afraid of the chance that his torment would seep through the walls and drown him when he'd only just tasted fresh air. The letter taunted him every time he walked past it, and he knew that if he tried to shove it out of sight, the temptation would be too powerful for him to resist.

Izuku couldn't avoid it forever, of course. If the contents were what he imagined (and he was at least ninety eight percent certain they were) then he'd be making his own promises meaningless, and his inaction would only further serve to hurt someone he cared about. He just-needed to think. He just needed to wait until the right moment. He had to be prepared to see what lie in wait.

He clung to that line of thinking as the weekend wore on, broken up only by his visits to U.A.'s campus to have Recovery Girl check up on his scar. The tiniest of sensations returned with each healing session, and he'd somehow managed to avoid seeing his scar tissue in any of the myriad of reflective surfaces in the nurse's office. That could wait too. It could wait until he was ready.

Though it was possible that all his quickly compounding fears had the potential to be shoved aside until he was emotionally stable enough to deal with them, the lengths he would have to go through to make that happen were entirely unrealistic. Without the luxury of infinite time to quantify and eliminate his problems, Izuku was left with the rest of Sunday evening to muster up the courage to remove his final set of bandages, and read the letter on his desk.

But instead of doing those things, Izuku spent the evening helping his mother cook dinner, and having her assist him with painting his nails in return. Though he'd been sufficiently mortified upon requesting it, his mother had accepted with little fuss, perfectly pleased to have an excuse to spend more time with him.

And that was how Izuku ended his weekend, swathed in the stink of nail polish and quickly mounting dread.

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Izuku Midoriya woke with a start, exhaustion clinging to him like iron chains. He glanced quickly around his bedroom with unfocused eyes, different parts of his brain at uneven levels of awareness. He gulped down a lungful of air, his throat dry and stinging with thirst. His need to use the bathroom became apparent the moment he shifted his legs under his covers, a whine of urgency slipping out. He shimmied out from under his bed covers, shivering as cold air nipped at the flesh exposed by his flimsy pajamas.

He stumbled out of his bedroom, his upper body twisting to hold the All Might nameplate still so that
it didn't bang against the door. One hand reached up to scrub at his eyes, half numbed by pins and needles from sleeping in an odd position. He shook out his wrist on his way into the bathroom, flicking on the secondary light over the shower so that the main ones didn't blind him.

He relieved himself while only paying half attention, mind caught in cobwebs of fading dreams. Izuku had never really been much of a dreamer—anything he remembered ended up murky and indistinct once he made it further into the day. Ironically, he'd never had a problem with nightmares, either. He'd half rationalized it by figuring his Quirk's drawing forth of his fear took such a toll on him during his waking hours that his brain didn't have enough left to torment him when he was unconscious. A small blessing, Izuku mused, but he'd take what he could get.

He fumbled to work the sink's faucet after flushing, washing his hands for longer than was absolutely necessary. He ducked down and awkwardly craned his neck to catch a few mouthfuls of water, just to relieve the uncomfortable ache in his throat. The ends of a few curls ended up moist, but he just flipped them out of the way and silently regarded himself in the mirror. The bandage over his right cheek was a sterile, pristine white, a beacon of light on his gloomy visage.

Recovery Girl had told him that he didn't need it anymore, considering he was finally as healed as he was going to be. It was—he couldn't bother her for more, just because he was insecure. It'd be rude. He steadfastly picked at the edges of medical tape with trembling fingers, his breath tightening into a bottleneck of anxiety. He pressed his tongue along the inside of his cheek, nerves coming to life under the soft pressure. It was okay, he reminded himself hysterically, his nerves were fine on the inside, it didn't matter if they worked on the outside or not. It was only a small part of his face, it was still him, he'd still be—he wouldn't look like a monster. The quiet boy from his class with multicolored hair—he had facial scars, and nobody made fun of him, or pointed them out. It'd be okay, he'd be okay, everything would be-

Izuku ripped the last of the tape free, unveiling the flesh that had been hidden from him. He slapped a hand over his mouth to stifle a loud sob, his other hand digging into the counter top so hard that his fingers were aching. It was—larger than he'd hoped. A stretch of ragged skin, discolored a dull, sickening purple-red that began just a finger's width above the corner of his lips, flared out to encompass the majority of his cheekbone. It encroached on his eye socket as well, on the border of where the bone structure became concave under his lower lid. It faded to a patchwork of smaller blotches near the far right of his jaw, a fainter red than the dark, angry mark that had become the entire focus of his face.

Izuku stared numbly into the mirror, his wide eyes blank and unblinking. It was a strange dissonance from the pathetic noises escaping his throat, chest shuddering and trembling fingers muffling his horror. It was worse, so much worse than he'd hoped it would be. He removed his aching hand from the counter, fingers shaking so badly he was sure they'd just crumble, and pressed the pads of them to his scar. He couldn't feel anything in the side of his face, only the pressure feedback from inside his cheek. The skin itself was textured, reminding him more of melted candle wax and weather worn bricks than his own face.

If only he did have nightmares instead. If only Izuku could trade everything for a sleep that would never give him peace, would never let him feel refreshed and energized. Because at least nightmares weren't real. At least they couldn't haunt him under his skin and in his bones, a rattling terror that had physical form. His fear would live in him forever, would mark his torso with rigid red lines and disfigure his face with his own mistakes.

He staggered out of the bathroom on uncooperative legs, fumbling to shut the door behind him. He barely had the focus to open his own bedroom door, the handle slick and icy against his wire frame digits. It was only once he'd somehow locked the door behind him that he remembered the letter on
his desk, crisp white surface distinct against his clutter. It'd be better to just get everything over with at once, right? It'd be like ripping off a bandage.

A hysterical laugh pulled itself from Izuku's throat, echoing back at him as the cry of a wounded animal. He tore apart the exterior envelope, scraps left in a pile on his desk. It was hard to see through his tears, fingers slipping in their search for an edge of the folded paper he'd ripped free. He blinked away saline watercolors, pupils scanning the surface of the paper. It was written in massive, angry letters, pressed so hard into the page that the graphite had smudged in dark streaks. It wasn't signed, but it didn't need to be. There was no mistaking who had written it.

'IM SORRY. YOU SHOULDN'T FORGIVE ME.'

And that was enough. Izuku stared at furiously penned characters until his tears dotted the page, wet splotches making the material flimsy and transparent. He felt like he'd been transported to the bottom of the ocean, the weight of trillions of tons of water collapsing him inward with titanic force. It was like he'd been unfolded, his entire body carefully pulled apart at the seams and spread along until all his insides were showing. It was a scorching volcano, molten rock liquefying him until he was nothing but ashes on the wind—it was an injection of glass dust, splitting apart his veins and drowning him in blood from the inside out—it was-

It was too much. Ugly, misshapen sobs ripped out of Izuku's chest, malformed specters birthed from devastation. He collapsed back onto his bed, curling futilely in his sheets and hiding his face in his pillow. It was enough to muffle his despair, his remorse, his agony. It was all just too much, the endless downpour that drenched him with his own tears. All he wanted was his mother, to hold him and reassure him. All he wanted were his friends, to cheer him up and support him. All he wanted was to be strong, stronger than his Living Nightmare.

But Izuku was alone in the dark. And so he curled in his bedding, pillowcase dampened by tears, and closed his eyes until the shadows closed around him.

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Izuku cracked open his eyes at the sound of his phone's alarm, a snippet of the opening theme to an All Might TV series that had only managed two seasons before being cancelled. From what he recalled, the main reason behind the cancellation was the fact that one of All Might's fights (versus Killamari, a villain that could sprout giant tentacles) had destroyed the studio. Also it hadn't been very well written, and the guy playing All Might had never managed to properly emulate the hero's bangs. Izuku had watched his DVD of it so many times that the disc suffered laser burn.

Izuku rolled bonelessly onto his side, watching with a fractured gaze as his phone's screen lit up his nightstand, as well as the ceiling above it. It was plugged in, which meant the alarm would continue indefinitely if he didn't stop it. After half a minute of contemplative silence, he managed to free an arm from where it had been half twisted under his chest and slapped his phone screen, the alarm silencing. The deafening quiet that followed was scarcely better.

He rolled out of bed in stiff, halfhearted movements, his limbs fully cooperative but his will running on fumes. He peeled off his pajamas with one hand, throwing them into his hamper and missing by several feet. Izuku would have just left them there, but he knew his mother liked to tidy up his room when he wasn't home. He scooped them off the floor with the end of his foot, and flicked them halfway into the hamper. Good enough.

Izuku pulled on his school uniform at one fifth his normal speed, eyes drifting to rest on Kacchan's letter every few moments. It was an aberration among the organized clutter of his desk space, impossible to ignore and impossible to forget. He tore his gaze away in favor of staring down at his tie, fingers twisting together in his failed effort to tie it. He was even worse at it than usual, frustration
wellling in the empty chest cavity he'd woken up with. He eventually just left it untied around his neck, trying to force back the prickle of frustrated tears. If he cried again, it'd all just come pouring out at once. He had to push the chunks together, had to stop himself from falling apart. Pain was temporary; it'd pass eventually, and leave him functional again. But his fear was forever, twisting and manipulating him into giving his pain more time to fester. Izuku wondered what was worse: being ignorant of the reasons for his illogical and erratic emotional state, or being completely aware and unable to do anything about it. Sometimes he wished he didn't know better. Likely, the grass just looked greener.

Izuku shuffled quietly into the bathroom, hearing the telltale audio cues that meant his mother was awake and likely cooking breakfast. He locked the door behind him with a soft 'click', making a rote effort to complete his morning routine. He brushed his teeth with the bare minimum effort, and had to retrieve his toothbrush after putting it away because he'd forgotten to rinse it off. He tugged futilely at his wild curls with a hairbrush, prickles of pain emanating from his scalp with each inelegant motion. His fingers shook when he put in his clips, uneven and out of order.

And the entire time, all he could see was the scar on his face. It made the rest of him look drained, skin pale and sickly around the nauseating red disfigurement. He looked like something that was ready to be buried. He ran the water in the sink until it was piping hot, splashing handfuls on himself to try and give the illusion of life. The end result just made him look like he'd spent too long in a hot shower.

The sound of knuckles on wood dragged him partially from his daze, his mother's voice ringing out from behind the door. "Izuku, breakfast is ready! You should come eat soon, so you won't be late!"

"I-I'll be out in a second," Izuku called back, his voice cracking halfway through the first word. He made one last desperate effort to knot his tie, hands too unsteady to do anything useful with. It ended up looking even worse than usual, but at least it wasn't completely loose. He fumbled with the lock on the bathroom door, spilling out into the hallway and nearly tripping over his own feet on his way to the kitchen.

"Good morning, sweetie!" His mother chimed, her back still turned as she dished out breakfast. "I sent in your field trip permission slip for the year, so don't worry about having to get anything signed last minute. I also talked to Ms. Atsuko on the phone, to confirm your sessions. She seems very sweet, I'm sure you'll have an easy time talking-

She paused the moment Izuku was within her field of view, silent for only a moment. Her lack of reaction was easily readable, her tiny micro adjustments to relax her posture and the brief shimmer in her eyes blaring at Izuku like neon signs. "Oh, Izuku, honey, what did you do with your hair? You usually make it look so neat in the morning." She turned to set down her armful of breakfast dishes, bustling over to usher Izuku into his seat. "You eat breakfast, and I'll grab a brush. We've gotta make sure you look handsome for all your friends, right?" She patted his cheek, unflinching when she came in contact with molted scar tissue, and turned to go retrieve a hairbrush.

Izuku stared after his mother, his heart thumping a bittersweet rhythm. A few tears escaped his notice, slipping down his face and dripping onto the table top. The smile on his face grew without his say so, twitching with sincerity and adoration. "T-thank you, mom," he whispered, something small and warm buzzing in the inky depths within his chest.

Chapter End Notes
Some wonderful fanart for this chapter! http://ttfn-moulting.tumblr.com/post/162746359093/the-bnha-fanfic-daymare-has-eaten-my-heart-and#notes
Be sure to check out the artist!
Izuku breathed a soft sigh into the fabric of his pink lemonade scarf, having knotted it around to cover as much of his face as possible. It wasn't really cold enough to warrant wearing a scarf, and it did little to actually conceal the scar that took up a quarter of his face, but it helped in other, smaller ways. The scent of laundry detergent and dryer sheets, the lingering warmth from his own body heat, and the comfortable weight around his neck all gave him grounding points to hold onto.

His newly painted nails served a similar purpose, constantly catching his eye with bursts of color whenever he could see them. He'd been adamant in wanting to paint every single one a different color, despite his mother's gentle suggestions that he start out with something more subtle. Considering it was extremely unlikely that he could get away with just painting every inch of himself in dazzling colors, his nails would have to suffice.

The train was practically empty when he boarded, leaving him free to huddle in a corner with his backpack on his lap and his scarf pulled up over his nose. He took deep, steady breaths, his phone loaded up with pictures of small animals that he occasionally scrolled through. It'd-he'd be okay, Izuku attempted to convince himself. He couldn't hear the static over the sound of locomotion, and diverting his attention to his phone between breathing exercises helped him feel a little more aware. He wouldn't lose himself. He wouldn't fall apart. Living Nightmare wouldn't surface to feed from his terror.

Hissing breaks caught his attention, and Izuku reluctantly unraveled from his flimsy cocoon to exit the train station and continue on to U.A. He started at the sight of figures lingering near the exit, pulling his scarf over the bottom of his face and shrinking into himself. He attempted to hurry past them, only to be accosted on either side by fiery red hair and compassionate brown eyes.

"Heeey Izuku!" Uraraka greeted him, her voice so cheerful that it made Izuku dizzy. He yelped when an arm was thrown around his shoulders, Kirishima's sharp grin on full display.

"'Sup Midoriya, how ya been?" Izuku glanced frantically between the two of them, attempting to process the fact that not only had they known the train station he'd be coming from, but had also decided to wait for him there.

"Ugh, I hope your weekend was more exciting than mine," Uraraka complained lightheartedly, her smile lighting up her whole face and Izuku was so confused-

"I know, right? Hard to be excited about hangin' at the arcade and doing chores after a few days at U.A." Kirishima's voice washed over him like liquid cashmere, so warm and overwhelming that Izuku was forgetting how to breathe.

"Exactly! It's just a whole new level of excitement! Everything else just kinda got knocked down a peg, y'know?" Izuku bit down on a shriek because he was ninety nine percent sure that Uraraka's hand had just bumped into his own, she was so close and he only just realized they were moving towards the school, leaving the safety of the train station behind them.

"G-guys?" Izuku piped up hesitantly, wilting when Uraraka and Kirishima ceased their conversation to fix him with curious looks. "I-I.. sorry to interrupt, I just- why were you guys w-waiting for me?"

A moment of silence followed, where he could feel them exchange a meaningful look.

Uraraka was the first to speak, her smile shut away in favor of a concerned frown. "Well, Kirishima and I were talking after class on Friday, and we kiiinda.. were worried about you. So we, maybe
might have exchanged numbers and made plans over the weekend to make sure you'd be alright?"

"I really hope you don't think we're tryin' to step on your toes, or anything," Kirishima continued, the bombast in his voice lowered down to a more tolerable level. "It's just that the kinda stuff that happened on Thursday.. it's not the easiest thing to bounce back from. So we're just here to make sure everything is cool. And if it's not.. we're totally willing to help out with whatever." Uraraka nodded in firm agreement, her face set with determination.

Izuku's heart wasn't sure whether it should began thundering or fluttering, caught in a strange series of palpitations that cut his breath short. His first impulse was to craft some sort of bland placation, to slap on a smile and brush past everything. But the burning weight in his cheek and the constant loop of Kacchan's apology were too heavy. It was all too much, he couldn't carry it by himself anymore. For a single moment he managed to grasp a handful of bravery, tears staining his vision and chest hitching with the beginnings of sobs. "I-I'm not o-o-okay," he croaked, each word infused with leaden fear, so heavy he was sure they'd crack the pavement. But the moment they left his mouth, their weight became a little more manageable. A few of the crystallized pockets of agony hidden in his flesh bloomed outwards, spurting in searing gushes that scorched his insides. They were broken, no longer present to lock him into numb agony. And it hurt so much, so much that he wanted to scream.

But he wasn't alone. The arm around his shoulders tightened reassuringly, and a second, slimmer pair rested firm around his torso. He was lost in a sea of sensation, warm bodies and gentle voices and light. It was nearly blinding, the heroic glow that he had sought with so much bitter, pleading envy. And it was there with him, an encompassing force that left him boneless.

Izuku collapsed into Uraraka's embrace, sobbing freely and openly. Tears dotted the fabric of his scarf, the garment slipping to reveal patches of the horrible mark on his face. He was unaware of the genuine worry in Kirishima's eyes, reflected back at him by Uraraka. He just-he just needed a moment. Just one moment to regain his composure. He managed to scrape together enough tact to stand under his own power, instead of leaning most of his weight on Uraraka. The top of his scarf was wet with tears, which he decided was a better place for them than Uraraka's uniform.

Izuku cleared his throat of gunk, his voice coming out hoarse and unsteady. "I-I'm sorry, I-I didn't m-mean to-"

"You don't need to be sorry, Izuku! It's okay to cry, don't apologize!" Uraraka boldly rested her hands on his cheeks, showing no hesitation in touching the abhorrent thing on his face. The look in her eyes was nothing less than empathy, strings of concern wrapped around wires of pain.

Izuku shook his head weakly in her grasp, barely able to speak past tearful hiccups and the threat of frame wracking sobs. "I-it isn't o-okay! It m-means I'm still n-not st-strong enough!"

"That's not true," Kirishima proclaimed, his voice lined with an intense seriousness that made Izuku shudder, "There's nothing stronger or more manly than being able to reach out when you need help. Nobody can do everything alone. It takes a heck of a lot of strength to admit that."

Izuku sniffled, trying to drag back the mess of fluids he'd spilled everywhere. He tried to soak in his friends' reassurance, tried to let it be enough to soothe him- "I ju-just don't k-know what to d-do anymore. I'm-I'm so scared all the ti-time, but I have t-to be strong, so I c-can make sure n-nobody else has to be a-afraid like me!"

"And you can do that, Izuku," Uraraka replied fiercely, tears budding in the corners of her eyes."But you need to make sure you're okay, first." She made brief eye contact with Kirishima, who gazed
worriedly back at her. "I think maybe we should wait with you to catch another train, and walk you home. One absence won't be a big deal."

"I-I can't," Izuku denied stubbornly, scrubbing at his face with the heel of his hand. "I-I've got a therapy appointment, I-I can't miss it."

Uraraka bit her lip, visibly unsure if she should let Izuku go to class when he was so out of sorts, and looked to Kirishima for some indication of what to do. He merely shrugged one shoulder, a helpless look on his face. "Alright. But only because of your appointment! And after school, we can all meet up and go somewhere relaxing. Okay?" She pressed his cheeks together until he let out a squished sounding affirmation. She released her grip, expression soft, and resumed her position by his side.

Izuku flushed when she firmly laced her fingers with his own, Kirishima's arm remaining a steady weight around his shoulders. He was silent for a few minutes as they walked, half-listening to their quiet chatter. When he did speak up, his voice was soft and scratchy, but contained no threat of further upset. "I'm sorry for dumping all of this on you guys. Y-you've only known me a few days, a-and I'm already a mess."

"Don't worry about it, Izuku," Uraraka soothed, squeezing his fingers. "We wouldn't be here if we didn't care, alright? We want to help you, because you're our friend."

"I-it just feels like I'm taking advantage of you," Izuku argued back weakly, more to express his disbelief than any actual denial of her words.

Kirishima snorted, and glanced at Izuku with a teasing grin. "Bro, no offense, but I don't think you could take advantage of a two-for-one coupon, let alone other people."

Izuku opened his mouth to retort, only to pause and slowly close it. He flushed and looked in the other direction, embarrassment clear in his tone. "It feels like stealing."

He flushed up to the tips of his ears when laughter rang out on either side of him, unable to bite down on an irrepressible smile. Laughter was so scarce in his life, a grand luxury that he could only occasionally catch glimpses of. To be able to laugh was a joy, something that made his insides sing sweet notes around the howling fear. To incite that laughter in others, to bring them the same joy he sought so strongly... It was more like a blessing.

Izuku's morning classes passed about as smoothly as he could have hoped, considering all the factors that were perfectly capable of ruining his day. He endured a few brief stares from his classmates when they first saw his scar, but nobody made any direct mention of it. Iida and Tokoyami had asked after his well-being, and seemed at least placated when he told them everything was alright. Iida had seemed closer to 'normal' as well, his demeanor loud and rigid. He'd insisted on tying Izuku's tie for him, coming up with some sort of speech on the spot about the importance of wearing his uniform and how it tied into his future chances of being a professional hero. Izuku had been just as impressed as he was daunted.

Later on, Izuku had nearly fallen over himself in shock when he'd received other mentions of concern, from classmates he hadn't had much chance of speaking with. He had at least half a dozen two sentence conversations where he confirmed that he was alright, each one leaving him dazed and oddly pleased.

Ashido had practically cornered him at his desk before second period, her queries as loud as they were sincere. She'd looked almost a breath away from mentioning his scar outright when he kept deflecting, but an interruption from Kaminari (who had hair that Izuku kind of wanted to marvel over) had stopped her short.
Another girl he'd spoken little with, Asui, had asked him in very frank terms if he was recovered enough to be attending school again. Caught off guard by her straightforward demeanor, he'd fumbled with his words before somehow managing to convey that he was as recovered as he could be. She'd seemed pleased enough with that answer (at least he thought she was—her expression was nearly impossible to read) and had let him be afterwards.

Increasingly overwhelmed by the kindness and compassion of his classmates, Izuku had just managed to slip out of class with the excuse of having to use the bathroom. He dragged himself down the hallway, feeling uncomfortably exposed without his scarf. He stared down at the tips of his shoes, cheap stickers glittering back at him with every step. He vaguely wondered if he could get away with wearing colorful socks too, or if that would go into 'uniform violation' territory.

His musings were cut short when he heard another set of footsteps, head snapping up to catch sight of Toshinori. His teacher had apparently seen him at the same moment, because there was a beat where they both simply stared at one another.

"Oh hey, Midoriya. What're you doing out of class?" Toshinori sounded mildly surprised, but not reproachful like Izuku had expected.

"I-I was-just.. g-going to the bathroom," he stuttered, feeling like he was lying even though it technically was where he was going.

"Hm. Well, I hate to take your time up, but.. d'you think we could have a short talk in the teacher's lounge?" Toshinori looked... almost ashamed, though Izuku couldn't possibly figure out why. "It'll just take a minute."

"Y..yeah, sure. O-okay." Izuku trailed after the pro hero, curiosity welling up. What did All Might need to talk to him about? He desperately hoped it wasn't more talk about his Quirk; he was only just starting to feel normal after his awful weekend.

Toshinori led him down the hall for a few minutes, an awkward silence hanging in the air around them before his teacher spoke up. "Sorry about not bein' here on Friday; I got caught up in a bunch of talk show nonsense."

"Y-you.. i-it's okay, you must be r-really busy, being the world's g-greatest hero and everything. I j-just hope you didn't get in trouble for it." Izuku spoke slowly and hesitantly, trying to figure out exactly what kind of conversation they were supposed to be having.

"Not quite as busy as I used to be, but the media sure love to jerk me around." Toshinori paused to open the unassuming door to the unoccupied teacher's lounge, furnished by comfortable couches and a kitchenette containing everything an overworked teacher could need. Izuku slipped in behind him, quietly closing the door on his way in.

"S-so... what did you need to t-talk to me about, Mr. All Might?" Izuku rubbed the hem of his uniform jacket between his fingers, his nerves slowly ramping up into outright anxiety.

"Don't worry, you're not in trouble," Toshinori began, his tone low and calm. A bit of tension left Izuku's hunched shoulders, and that was apparently the cue his teacher was waiting for. "I'm.. I wanted to apologize to you, young Midoriya. Your injury at the hands of Katsuki Bakugou is my fault, and my responsibility. I was too short sighted to realize his animosity towards you ran so deeply, and allowed things to proceed well beyond when I should have intervened. You have my sincerest apologies."

Izuku was struck with a dark pulse of deja-vu when All Might bowed to him, blond hair hanging...
limp and his frame shaking from holding the position. He had brief flashes of a dark tunnel, stinking of sewage and stomach fluid and the bone powdering fear he had felt. "I-it-it's okay, sir, y-you don't have to a-ap-"

"Please, young Midoriya. Don't make excuses for me," Toshinori interrupted, all his casual friendliness and boisterous outgoing nature replaced by a solemn melancholy. "As your teacher, it's my explicit duty to watch out for you, and I failed to do so. You do not deserve what happened to you. I don't know if I can ever make it up to you, but I promise to do better. I promise to be the teacher you deserve, to give you an environment where you can learn, and prosper, and feel safe."

Izuku covered his mouth with trembling hands, tears streaming down his face and running down his fingers. His unshakable belief that it was his fault, that everything was his fault, shuddered and groaned as the foundations crumbled, just a little. He swallowed down a sob, strained noises slipping through as his shoulders heaved and buckled.

He didn't know how to handle it—so much kindness, so much understanding, from everyone around him. It was so much, so much, so overwhelming that he could barely stay standing. He didn't even flinch when a warm hand rested on his shoulder, the grip firm and reassuring. His mouth moved of its own will, words slipping through the widening cracks in his fingers in a mantra that could only brush the surface of his gratitude.

"Thank you thank you thank you thank you-"
Chapter 17

After several long minutes where Izuku made a concerted effort to both pull himself back together and assure All Might that he really was fine he'd just been overwhelmed and he really should get back to class, he finally managed to extract himself from the teacher's lounge and recuperate in the bathroom. He'd only been able to leave after accepting the pack of tissues All Might had insisted he take, and he found himself grateful that the teacher hadn't budged on the issue.

He gently dabbed at his tear streaked face with a lavender scented tissue, grimacing at himself in the mirror. The fluorescent lighting washed him out horrifically, and made his scar look even more gruesome. He wished he could just scrub it right off his face, but that unfortunately wasn't an option. He thought back to what Recovery Girl had told him about facial reconstructive surgery, running a fingertip around the edges of the scar.

He'd been a bit too hysterical in recent days to actually look up information about reconstructive surgery, but it sounded like the sort of thing that would take a lot of time to recover from. He didn't want to inadvertently stumble into a scenario where he had to miss weeks, or even months of school because of medical reasons. And.. it didn't physically hurt him, or anything. His face was technically fully healed, except for the missing nerves, and he was fairly certain there was no surgery that could fix that.

He'd look into it further when the school year ended, he decided tentatively. He had to get stronger, and being so vain that a (hideous gruesome grotesque) little scar on his face could hold him back meant he wasn't strong enough.

Held in one piece by a filmy layer of resolve, Izuku forced himself to leave the quiet safety of the bathroom and return to class.

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The rest of the day passed by peacefully enough that Izuku allowed himself to relax by the smallest of margins. Nothing terrible had happened, nobody had mocked him for his scar, and there had been no unforeseen disasters. The most exciting (and daunting) incident merely involved trading numbers with his friends, and making plans to meet up when he was out of his therapy appointment.

The idea of the appointment itself was also a little nerve wracking, but Izuku firmly repeated to himself that it was meant to help him, and nobody was forcing him. If it didn't work out, he could make the issue known with Mr. Aizawa, and he could let his mother know to find him another psychiatrist.

The logic he applied to the situation did little to appease his trembling hands, however, as he ventured to a part of the school he hadn't yet been in. U.A.'s main building was larger than any high school he'd ever seen, but it wasn't quite as labyrinthine as he'd feared. He checked the slightly creased school map in his hands again, trying to pinpoint exactly which office he was supposed to be going to.

He was so absorbed in the thoughts muttered under his breath that he didn't even acknowledge the voice calling his name, until it was accompanied by a hand locking around his wrist. Izuku yelped and whirled around, heart squeezing into his esophagus when he locked eyes with the heterochromatic Todoroki.

He felt it flutter in his throat as he was pinned by his classmate's intense gaze, the fingers around his wrist solid as iron. After a few moments of silence he shakily raised his other hand in greeting, attempting to find his voice in the meantime. "H-h-hey, Todoroki... d-did you need... s-something?"
Izuku forced back a flinch when Todoroki released the grip on his wrist, instead digging around in his pocket for something. He quickly produced a piece of paper, shoving it out towards Izuku in a motion so abrupt that he really did flinch. He waited a beat before forcing his will on muscles tensed for a blow, meekly accepting the paper. A list was written on it in impeccable handwriting, and he glanced away from it to meet Todoroki's gaze in confusion.

"It's a list of ointments. They should help reduce scar tissue." Todoroki's voice was flat and scratchy, lacking even the disinterest and annoyance that sometimes colored Mr. Aizawa's tone. Izuku was entirely unable to read into it, could parse nothing from the other boy's stone faced expression.

Izuku was shocked into motion when Todoroki just.. turned around to walk away, clearly not intending to wait around for a response. Izuku reached out as if to grab for the other boy's hand, only to stop himself at the last second. Those were the first words Todoroki had ever even spoken to him; it wouldn't be wise to push boundaries already. "T-than you," he settled with instead, voice soft and still containing faint traces of confusion. Todoroki slowed for half a step before he continued on, showing no other reaction.

Izuku watched him leave for a few beats before a thought suddenly occurred to him. He stepped forward again without thinking about it, voice raising. "H-hey, uhm, Todoroki!" He shrank a little when his classmate halted, glancing at him over his shoulder. "U-Uhm.. I h-have an appointment to get to, b-but after that my friends and I a-are going to hang out. D-do.. y-you could join us, if you want!"

"I have prior engagements," Todoroki responded so quickly that Izuku didn't even have the chance to look for a flicker in his face. "It's nothing against you. I just can't miss it.

"N-no, that's okay, I-I totally understand! M-maybe another time, then?" Izuku forced his face into a hopeful smile, more of a rough sketch than a natural expression. He wilted when Todoroki turned back around, disappearing around the next corner after a few steps. "T-that was weird," Izuku muttered a few moments later, hesitantly turning to walk the other way. "I wonder if h-he's always so hard to read. D-does he not like me? Did I annoy him without even realizing? It seems unlikely but sometimes it's so difficult to judge exactly what other people are thinking and Todoroki really does have an amazing poker face I wonder if he practices it he seems like the kind of guy to work hard at everything he does and he must be really talented if he made it into school on recommendation maybe he just has a hard time talking to other people if so then that probably took a lot of effort for him to do maybe I should get him something to express my gratitude I hope that wouldn't seem weird-

Izuku bit down on a squeak when the door he'd been muttering in front of swung inward, both hands flying up to clasp over his mouth. A woman peered out at him, expression momentarily curious before it transitioned into pleasant surprise. "Oh, Izuku Midoriya! You're right on time for the appointment. Please, come inside.

Izuku faltered for a moment before hastily stepping through the door, and into a comfortably decorated office. He stood awkwardly in the middle of the room while the woman (whom he was fairly certain was Ms. Atsuko) busied herself with a filing cabinet. He glanced around, taking in the earthy decor and the numerous abstract paintings framed on the walls alongside a number of degrees. There was a desk in the far corner, tucked beside the filing cabinet, and a pair of bookshelves on the opposite wall. Directly behind him was a dark, plush couch covered in throw pillows, and in front of him was a leather recliner. "Please take a seat, Mr. Midoriya. I'll be with you in just a moment."

Izuku hesitantly lowered himself to sit on the couch, sighing as he sunk into the cushions. He slid a throw pillow onto his lap, running his fingers along the textured edges. "U-uhm.. Ms. Atsuko?" His
voice trembled with nerves, and he received a noise of affirmation from the woman digging files out of her cabinet. "S-sorry, I j-just.. I w-wasn't sure if I'd w-walked into the wrong office or not. I-I mean obviously I d-didn't, because y-you mentioned my name and appointment directly so it'd be extremely unlikely that I somehow wandered into an appointment I hadn't even known about that was going on at the same time, I just-wanted to be, u-uhm.. sure."

Ms. Atsuko turned towards him, a mostly empty manila file in one hand and a small stack of papers in the other. Izuku’s pupils twitched over her face, reading over her almost sleepy friendliness and soft features. Her hair was wine red, and just long enough to pull into a small bun. She was dressed.. about how he expected a female psychiatrist to dress, which involved more office attire than the hero uniforms most of the U.A. staff wore.

She offered him a calm smile, settling into the armchair and spreading the file across her legs. "I can assure you that you're in the correct place, Mr. Midoriya, and you arrived exactly on time." She shuffled the papers in her hand, sorting them in a particular order. "How was your day, Mr. Midoriya?" She asked offhandedly.

"V-very overwhelming, actually. I'm having a really hard time coming to terms with receiving so much positive attention after years of basically being ignored and ridiculed by everyone but my mom." Izuku was silent for a few beats, where he almost serenely ran his fingers over the pillow in his lap, before suddenly jumping in shock and slapping his hands over his mouth. "O-oh my god why did I say that-"

Ms. Atsuko looked up from her papers, that same calm smile firmly set on her face. "Quite an opening answer. My Quirk, Mr. Midoriya, is called Tell All. It is an empathy Quirk, which, in basic terms, makes people tell the truth. However, in reality, it only works on those who wish to tell the truth. I begin every session with a new patient the same way I have with you; I ask a direct question, and then nature of their answer allows me to get an idea of their cooperativeness. Your answer is very telling, Mr. Midoriya, because it lets me know that you are someone who is open to receiving help, even for issues they may feel uncomfortable with bringing up. However, please don't think you are obligated to continue seeing me, if the particulars of my Quirk make you uncomfortable."

Izuku stared straight forward with wide eyes, taking a moment to process the bulk of information that had just been dumped on him. He slowly lowered his hands from his mouth, which twisted in an embarrassed smile. "N-no, I uhm.. y-your Quirk sounds really interesting, Ms. Astuko. I can understand why it would be useful.. i-in a psychiatric setting, at least. Have-d-did you ever do.. professional hero work?"

"For a brief time, yes," she replied in a lax tone. "I was a sidekick for.. maybe two and a half years, at a fair sized agency. My hero name was 'Open Heart', and my talents were used primarily for interrogations. With enough focus, my Quirk is capable of forcing honesty out of those that are unwilling to provide it. However, eventually my own sense of morals and ethics got the better of me, and I retired in favor of additional schooling." Izuku barely refrained from jumping when he realized Ms. Atsuko was reading his expression as well. "Do you want to be a hero, Mr. Midoriya?"

"M-more than anything in the world," he answered immediately, almost compelled to spill his feelings. "That's pretty much my entire goal in life. I want to help others, to save them from danger and stop them from being afraid, t-the way I am." He paused, allowing the moment of serenity to wash over him, before biting his lip. ".I-I've always been inspired, by heroes like All Might. S-seeing him save people, it.. made me feel like I could do the same. I-it made me feel like I have a purpose."

Ms. Atsuko peered at him with raised eyebrows, her expression more focused than it had been a few
moments ago. She hummed in thought, her lips pulling into a kind smile. "That's very noble of you, Mr. Midoriya." She pulled out a sheet of paper from the stack she'd organized, glancing at it for a moment. "Now.. let's begin, shall we?"

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Izuku emerged from the front gates of U.A. approximately four minutes after his session had ended, footsteps carrying him on autopilot as he tried to work through his thoughts. His time with Ms. Atsuko had been.. illuminating. She'd been an odd mix of professional and approachable in her behavior, her demeanor coaxing Izuku into speaking his mind even when he wasn't under the effects of her Quirk. After a few assessments she'd let him know that he possessed symptoms suggesting he suffered from moderate to severe depression, as well as an anxiety disorder and possible post traumatic stress disorder. Having all those factors used to describe himself was.. distressing, as much as it was relieving.

He hadn't ever really thought himself above mental illness, in the sense that it was something other people had and he didn't. Izuku had just never really.. sought to clarify and label his pain. It'd always seemed an indistinct amalgam of negativity, everything he feared and everything he hated about himself conglomerated together into something untouchable. It had always seemed bigger than him, something he could never challenge.

To have each part of that pain pulled apart and given a name, to have it be made something tangible and understood-it certainly wasn't enough to relieve him of that pain, but it seemed a little less daunting. It wasn't a supernatural horror, but the thought of psychological damage still made him uncomfortable. Objectively, he knew that many pro heroes dealt with similar issues, and it was nothing to be ashamed of.

But realistically, he knew that a large part of what made heroes successful was their image. Izuku's admiration for All Might may not have faltered upon meeting the man behind the hero (it had only grown, upon his interacting with a more human side of the Number One Hero), but that didn't mean others would feel the same. Normal people needed to believe that heroes were larger than life, bigger than the problems they faced.

But Izuku was worn by his issues like a puppet. How could anyone feel safe, when their hero was scarred both inside and out? What sort of hero could be be, when he flinched at loud noises, and froze up during confrontations, and shut down in large crowds? What kind of hero could he be, with a Quirk that ruined everything it touched?

Lost in a haze of dark static, Izuku didn't even realize he'd begun to walk into the street until he was forcibly grabbed from behind and yanked back onto the sidewalk. He endured a moment of disconnect where his body moved backwards and his consciousness remained stagnant, before everything snapped painfully into place and left him staring up at a shocked looking Iida.

He tuned in partway through his friend's lecture, wilting at the sheer panic hastily folded underneath his booming voice. "-now you must understand how extremely dangerous it is to walk into the street without even looking, especially during this time of day! I implore you to please, pay more attention to your surroundings, and at least look both ways before crossing the street!"

"I-Iida, it's okay, I-I'm fine really, i-it's no big deal-" Izuku hastily erected in his defense, completely aware that it was reckless of him to walk on autopilot while paying minimal attention to what was going on around him. He balked further at the sight of Kirishima, Tokoyami, and Uraraka standing only a few feet away.

"It certainly is a 'big deal' if it leads to you walking straight into oncoming traffic, Midoriya! Your safety is very important, and the first step to ensuring personal safety is awareness!" Iida sucked in a
"Hey, hey, why don't we all just take a chill pill for a second?" Kirishima offered, stepping over with an easy grin. "I'm pretty sure Midoriya knows better than to walk in front of speeding cars, right?" Izuku started when an expectant smile was turned on him, and he nodded frantically in response. "Like I thought. So clearly, it was an accident. And he'll definitely pay more attention from now on, right?" Izuku nodded again, more relaxed once he saw Iida's internal engines shift out of turbo drive.

"..Yes, I believe you're correct. I was merely concerned is all." Iida fell out of his 'I'm going to speak at length about something very important' stance, and back into his neutral 'I'm prepared to speak at length about something very important should the need arise' posture. He offered Izuku a small smile that was slightly strained around the edges.

"I-I'm sorry for worrying you, Iida," Izuku murmured, a pinprick of guilt dripping in his chest. "I-I promise to pay more attention."

"Oh good, glad that's taken care of!" Uraraka exclaimed cheerfully, having apparently cleared the distance when Izuku wasn't paying attention. Tokoyami lingered a few steps behind her, his gaze turned on the horizon. "Now we can decide where to hang out! We were discussing stuff while you were busy with your appointment, Izuku, and we narrowed it down to a couple places. Iida suggested the park down the road, Kirishima wanted to go to a gym with an indoor pool, Tokoyami mentioned an aquarium that's like twenty minutes away, and there's a movie out that I've been wanting to see! Oh, and you can suggest something too, Izuku!"

Izu flinched as he was bombarded with possibilities, frantically trying to juggle pros and cons for each one. "O-oh! Well, u-uhm, those all sound r-really fun, I'm just.. I-I usually hang out at a beach by my apartment, b-but it's kinda.. not great. I-I'm really not sure how to choose!"

"We are shaped by the paths we take, be they through thicket and bramble or a road oft walked. It is not their destinations that make us, but the hardships faced on the journey to them. Fret not for the road where greatness lie; nay, it is a choice that only the heart may decide." Tokoyami crossed his arms and gazed off into the distant cityscape, seemingly oblivious to the quartet of astonished stares directed at him.

"W-wow... t-that was so cool, Tokoyami!" Izuku gushed, distant stars shining in his eyes. "D-did you come up with that yourself?"

Tokoyami glanced coolly at him, before coughing and clearing his throat. "It was.. from a text adventure game I played when I was younger," he muttered, glancing away pointedly at Uraraka's exclamation of 'Aww, that's so cute!'.

"Still makes a pretty great point," Kirishima uttered thoughtfully, rubbing at his chin. "As long as we have a good time, it doesn't matter much where we go. Besides, we got tons of time to hit up all kinds of cool places in the future!"

"A salient point, but it provides no solution to our predicament," Iida proclaimed. "We still need to decide where to go."

Uraraka stretched her arms over her head, voice coming out in a groan. "I don't know about you guys, but our last class with All Might kinda wore me out. The aquarium sounded pretty neat, and pretty relaxing."

"Cool with me," Kirishima shrugged, glancing over at a Tokoyami who was attempting to reorient his stoic visage. "No offense man, but I'm kinda surprised you didn't suggest we go check out a
"graveyard or somethin'."

"Graveyards are locations of aesthetic and mournful contemplation," Tokoyami intoned seriously. "Besides, there isn't much we could do at one that couldn't be done at a park."

"I suppose the aquarium is our destination of choice. I will be more than happy to provide compensation for admission, should anyone require it." Iida strode to the head of the pack, seemingly so that he could lead them in an orderly line.

"Aw c'mon, man, you can't just offer that stuff out of the blue," Kirishima laughed, shoes clapping against the pavement. "You're gonna make the rest of us look bad with that kinda manly behavior."

Izuku trailed a few paces behind his friends, lost in a world soaked through by the nearly setting sun. A warm yellow glow painted the concrete streets, buildings standing as stark silhouettes against the pale blue sky. The air was cool and still around him, which made the warmth of his scarf stand out even more. He was still for a moment, allowing the voices of his friends to echo back to him, when Uraraka turned to glance at him.

"..You alright, Izuku?" She was smiling when she asked, her eyes a shimmering brown that spoke of her fondness, and her concern. Part of Izuku was ready to cry, to be overwhelmed once more by the friendships he'd found, and how sweetly they enveloped him.

But instead he smiled, a natural growth that held steady and sincere. He was unburdened by static, his fears felt so very distant, and a tiny glowing pit of hope had budded in his chest. "Y-yeah," he murmured, voice untethered by twisting wires, "I will be."
Chapter 18

The next three days passed in a haze that Izuku could barely believe was real, a surreal normalcy consuming him wholly and utterly. Classes passed without incident, his traditional studies barely requiring attention and his Hero studies less rigorous than the first combat trial. He managed to squeak by without any use of his Quirk, which left his head clear and his consciousness in one piece.

He'd also gotten better acquainted with his classmates, conversing with nearly all of them. Tokoyami had introduced him to Shouji and Kouda, whom he found to be strangely relatable in their contemplation and silence, respectively. He'd gushed over Shouji's Quirk until it became embarrassing for both of them, and had a very pleasant (if mostly one sided) conversation with Kouda about local bird species.

Kirishima had practically thrown him at Kaminari and Ashido, who were both nice, if a little overwhelming in their loud personalities. Kaminari was incredibly lax, and made so many references in normal conversation that Izuku sometimes had trouble keeping up with them all. He'd also been the gateway to Izuku meeting Sero, who had been almost scarily easy to talk to about whatever came to mind. Ashido had zeroed in on his nails like a homing missile, badgering him about how he'd gotten them to look so neat before he was forced to admit his mom had done them for him. She'd teased him a little in that oddly friendly way he still wasn't used to, before telling him how red was definitely his color, and went on a tangent about contrasts that left Izuku totally lost.

Uraraka hadn't missed out on 'mission: trade Izuku around' either, and had led him into an easy conversation with Asui and Hagakure, who struck him almost as polar opposites. Asui had been straightforward and blunt in a refreshing manner, her lack of readability still throwing him off but their conversation about aquatic sports leaving him almost glowing. Hagakure had been an invisible wellspring of energy, and had (oddly enough) drilled him about his completely nonexistent love life until Ojiro had come to his rescue.

Izuku had also noticed a pattern emerging, considering every single day of class had begun with a different one of his friends waiting outside the train station for him. Tokoyami had met him with a comfortable silence on Tuesday, the two of them walking side by side with no need for conversation between them. Wednesday was Kirishima, who consistently flustered Izuku with his frequent physical contact and impossible-to-contain good vibes. Several times on their walk, Izuku had been almost unable to believe the sun was in the sky, instead of by his side. Uraraka met him on Thursday, so sweet and genuine that it made his eyes water and his heart flutter erratically in his chest, her obvious determination an inspiration for him to behold.

And on Thursday evening, it rained. The sky swelled with purple-black thunderheads, which opened up in a thunderous downpour an hour after school let out. Izuku stepped out of school with a slightly tattered black umbrella in hand, saddened that the plans he'd made with his friends had fallen through. The forecast that morning had only predicted a forty percent chance of rain by five in the afternoon, which had still been enough to spark his paranoia and lead him to bringing an umbrella.

The rain came down like liquid bullets, cracking into the concrete in a calamitous melody. Izuku could feel the force of them vibrate the umbrella in his grip, pulled down low so as not to be tugged from his hand by the wind. It wasn't strong enough to slant the rainfall into him, which he was thankful for, but it still assaulted him with a damp, bitter chill. He pulled his scarf up over his nose, his own breath quickly warming the thick fabric. He'd tucked the ends of the garment into the folds, to ensure no part of it was soaked by the rain.

Izuku nearly tripped on his way to the train station, a bolt of lightning turning the whole sky a
blazing white, the resulting crash of thunder reverberating all the way to the roots of Izuku's teeth. He made haste to hurry back to his apartment, the train providing only a brief respite from the chill. The sound of rain on metal itched under his skin, a crawling static that layered fuzz around the edges of his vision.

He could feel Living Nightmare writhing in his flesh, knotted between bones and organs and bloating from the energy of his discomfort. His mind snagged on a single thought, one which persisted long after he'd made it to the safety of his apartment, and helped his mother cook dinner. Maybe if he released his Quirk, it would grant him a brief reprieve.

Izuku turned restlessly in bed, the chill of the outside world seeping into his apartment even though he knew the heating was on. The rain still pounded in his ears, despite the several walls and several stories between him and the source. He sat up and checked his phone for the umpteenth time, the clock blaring an accusatory '23:38'. He knew his mother usually turned in early, but had wanted to wait a little while to both ensure she was asleep and calm his own jittery nerves.

His second task was nigh impossible to complete, but he was fairly sure his mother was sound asleep. Izuku slipped out of bed and grabbed his shoes by the heel, too paranoid to clomp around the apartment in them. He crept through the living room in just his socks, gently setting his shoes aside when he reached the apartment's front door. He dug through the coat closet, quietly shuffling through winter coats until he found a rarely worn rain slicker.

He slid on the forest green garment over his All Might themed pajamas, slipping on his shoes and cursing himself for never insisting on purchasing rain boots. His stickers would likely be ruined by the end of the night. He slowly pulled open the apartment door, wincing when the lock clunked as he turned it. He hurried the rest of the way out, shutting it tight behind him. He snagged the umbrella that had been left to dry outside the door, and strained to reach the spare key at the top of the door frame.

The scant few inches he'd gained in his last growth spurt contributed just enough for him to knock his fingers against the key, scrambling to catch it before it hit the ground. He locked the door behind him, stashing it into a pocket on his pajama pants and hauling the umbrella up on his way out of the complex.

The streets were completely empty, the late hour and roaring thunderstorm more than enough to dissuade any outdoor activity. Izuku snapped open the umbrella as he stepped under the downpour, the cold biting right through his raincoat and causing goosebumps to rise on his skin. The world was made indistinct by the countless raindrops in the air, a dark void populated only by the white smears of streetlights.

Izuku walked numbly down the sidewalk, both hands clutched around the grip of his umbrella. His vision fuzzed and swayed, Living Nightmare an exponential growth under his skin. He was so sure that the scars on his torso were burning, red hot from the power of his Quirk straining to be released. The rain had always unsettled him, had always made him feel itchy and tense, but it had never been so hard to ignore.

It had never been so impossible to ignore, Izuku amended, considering he was already only a few minutes away from his beach. It felt like a dream, walking endlessly in a dark world soaked by rain and rattled by thunder. The slick concrete reflected the glow of buzzing street lights, and empty windows kept a baleful watch. He could barely hear his own breathing above the roar of water, shoes clapping in a numb rhythm, legs carrying him like a stiff corpse.

Awareness returned in part when the pavement gave way to wet sand, sloshing and clinging to the soles of his shoes. He left deep footprints behind, the wet squelch and sucking pressure of the beach's
surface bringing him to a halt. Izuku huffed out a breath into the frigid air, reaching up to secure the hood of his rain slicker over his head. He carefully closed and set aside his umbrella, trudging to a corner of the beach that still contained piles of garbage.

The smell of wet oxidization and ocean salt stung his nostrils, rain running in rivulets down his shaking body. Izuku's breath deepened into pants, his fingers clenching and unclenching as he reached for the barbed webbing that tied together his insides. Living Nightmare rose to his call, a horrible, feverish throb under his skin that made him gasp. Dead whispers curled around his ears, breathy and broken and urging him on.

The shadows of the beach thickened into tar, a swirling miasma that bulged and bloated with purple bruises and dim red heat. The roar of the rain and the crashing of ocean waves were combated by a howling chorus, raw terror given a thousand voices with which to shriek its agony. Living Nightmare raged under cover of dark, unshackled by its fleshy constraints.

Izuku awoke face down in the wet sand, grains running into his mouth in a soupy sludge. He coughed and hacked and vomited into the surf, grains scratchy and bitter between his teeth. His awareness of burning stomach acids and the tang of salt existed on another plane; he knew of the sensations, but was removed from them. It was akin to a puzzle missing key pieces, where he could see the edges of a bigger picture but not what they contained.

Distantly, Izuku attempted to slot the missing pieces into place. Chunks of fractured consciousness slowly welded back together, senses realigning. Slowly, piece by piece, Izuku put himself back together.

Awareness came in a waterfall, battering him with whole body shivers and the sting of digestive fluids in his throat. His mouth tasted sour and bitter, a repugnant flavor that he futilely spat into the sand. Rising on shaking limbs, Izuku peeled himself out of the sand that had crusted over him. The rain had begun letting up, still streaking wet sand down his slicker in dark clumps.

Izuku staggered away from the pit of sand he'd lain motionless within, leaving piles of rust that had once been appliances behind. The dark weight in his chest had been lightened, leaving him empty and numb. Izuku retrieved his umbrella, and began the long walk home.

He didn't make it back into bed until four in the morning.

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Izuku yawned into his scarf for the fifth time in as many minutes, his jaw sore from the mere expression of his exhaustion. He'd used up whatever energy he'd managed to accrue after three hours of sleep to repeatedly assure his mother that he was perfectly fine, and had just had a bad night's sleep. He felt bad about lying to her, but managed to partially justify it to himself via (possibly skewed) rationalization. What exactly could he have told her? 'Sorry mom, I need to go out in the pouring rain, in the middle of the night, to unleash my incredibly destructive and psychologically damaging Quirk in a location where human lives won't be at risk, and then lie in the sand for hours like a dead fish'? Somehow, Izuku imagined that wouldn't go over well.

So he fought through his exhaustion, eyes twitching with the effort to stay open, his limbs more uncoordinated than usual. His scalp felt itchy and tacky, even after he'd spent twenty minutes in the shower attempting to scrub away every last speck of sand when he got home, and took a second shower after waking up at a more reasonable hour. The taste of his digested dinner combined with sea foam had been replaced by burning mint, strong enough to make his tongue tingle.

But those small physical discomforts were nothing compared to the relief he felt after unleashing Living Nightmare. After snapping back into himself he'd been free of static and the itch under his skin, left in a serene silence that allowed him to relax, even if it was only a little. He managed to
climb onto the train without losing himself in thought and forgetting to get on, and even smiled a little when he browsed his favorite hero forums and responded to a few posts.

Izuku sucked in a deep breath when the train lurched to a halt, pocketing his phone and hoisting his backpack over his shoulders. He shuffled his way past a few other morning commuters, waiting politely for a few bodies to board the train before he slipped out the doors. As expected, he could see Iida's silhouette off near the station's exit, standing so stiffly that Izuku could have mistaken him for a statue.

"G-good morning, Iida!" Izuku called, his volume less than impressive. He'd always had trouble raising his voice for anything other than brief fits of passion, which were usually few and far between. His earlier schooling taught him that being quiet made it less likely for him to be picked on, and he was having trouble unlearning that behavior. It was distressing to think about too deeply, being unable to discern if his soft spoken-ness was a result of abuse by his peers or a facet of his personality. Izuku tried not to think about it too often.

"Midoriya, good morning to you as well!" Iida responded with a volume that came from someone that had the utmost confidence in their words. He marched over to Izuku (in a disconcertingly stiff manner, Izuku had no idea how he didn't get cramped up) and raised a hand in greeting, looking as impeccable as he had every day previous. Izuku couldn't wrap his head around how Iida managed to both take the time to look like a model from a school uniform catalog and still get to class earlier than anyone else.

"S-sorry to, uhm.. keep you waiting. I-I know you like to get to school really early." Izuku tried for a sheepish smile instead of his face twisting with crippling guilt and shame, and imagined it came out halfway decent looking.

"Not to worry-It's no trouble at all to meet with you!" Iida offered a small smile, gesturing for Izuku to join him. Iida's smile fell in increments equal to the distance that shrank between them, quickly replaced by concern. "Midoriya, are you feeling alright? You look unwell."

Izuku flinched and made an aborted motion to tug up his scarf, remembering at the last second that it wouldn't do much to hide the bags under his eyes. "N-no-I m-mean-yeah, I-I mean-I'm fine, I just d-didn't sleep too well. I'm just tired, is all."

Iida slapped on a critical frown, leaning down to inspect Izuku's panicked countenance. "Are you completely sure? Perhaps you might have caught ill. Do you feel feverish, or dizzy? Any nausea? How many fingers am I holding up?"

Izuku shrank away from Iida's hastening gestures, waving his own hands in a placating manner, "N-no, really, I-I'm fine! I had a h-hard time getting to sleep, but that's it. P-promise." He erected a crudely made smile, hoping it looked believable enough for Iida to trust him.

Luckily, it seemed the utter travesty of a smile on his face fell within the range of 'sincere' that Iida was looking for. The taller boy wiped away the majority of his skepticism, raising one hand to adjust his glasses. "Well.. if you're sure. Just promise me you'll try to sleep better from now on. The brain's ability to learn and retain new information is drastically reduced when you haven't gotten proper rest, and exhaustion has a disastrous effect on both critical thinking skills and reflexes as well!"

"I-I promise," Izuku repeated with genuine honesty, smiling faintly at Iida's overblown concern. Maybe for someone else it would have been annoying to receive so many heartfelt lectures, but Izuku was fairly certain that was just Iida's way of showing he cared. It sent little currents of warmth curling through him, and put pressure on the (incredibly sensitive) trigger that made his eyes well up.
"Glad to hear it," Iida concluded, beginning to walk briskly towards the U.A. campus. Izuku hurried after him, his strides covering less distance. "Oh, I almost forgot, there was another matter I wished to speak with you about. How are you handling your duties as class representative?"

And all the warmth fled from Izuku's chest, replaced with cold dread and the dawning horror of realization. He froze in place, Iida continuing on for a few steps before he paused to turn around in confusion. "O-oh my god I completely forgot I was class rep," Izuku whispered, tone tinged with hysteria.

He barely even heard the mountainous lecture Iida piled onto him on the rest of the walk to school. --

Izuku approached the front gates of U.A. at Iida's heels, wishing he had a collapsible skeleton so he could just shrink away into nothingness. His ears still rang from the tail end of Iida's heated lecture about responsibility and academic duties, the shame in his gut burbling nauseatingly. Iida hadn't seemed.. angry, or even disappointed, but his stern reprimands forced those emotions to the forefront of Izuku's mind instead.

He was angry at himself, disappointed in his own inability to focus on the things expected of him. Maybe he hadn't wanted the position of class representative, but he hadn't done much to actually refute it in the moment. His excuse of being worried over Kacchan's letter wouldn't hold up, because he'd been so cowardly as to ignore it for two days.

The sight of Yaoyorozu standing patiently near the entrance to U.A.'s main building only cemented those feelings, her cool gaze locking onto him even from where he was half hidden behind Iida. He wilted like a flower in the desert, hugging his arms tight around his own torso. It didn't provide the reassurance he needed, but the pressure was enough to center him for the moment.

"Midorya," Yaoyorozu called out, once they were within conversational distance, "and Iida as well. Good morning. Midoriya, we need to discuss your representational duties. Specifically, the lack thereof." Her tone was curt and business-like, but contained the same strange lack of anger and disappointment that Iida's had. There was something else to fill the void, an emotion Izuku wasn't able to parse.

Izuku piped up before Iida had a chance to speak over him, his tone dripping with remorse. "I-I know, I r-really messed up. I'm really s-sorry, Yaoyorozu-

"Sorry or not," she interrupted, eyeing him intently, "I'm unable to do my job when you don't do yours. So please, don't take it personally when I say you aren't qualified for the position, and Mr. Aizawa, whom I spoke with a few minutes ago, feels the same way."

Iida looked almost comically stricken, clearly fumbling to construct a stalwart defense in his friend's name. He opened his mouth, silence hanging for a few moments, before he sighed. "..I'm afraid I must agree. I voted for you, Midoriya-" he raised his voice slightly to be heard over Izuku's exclamation of disbelief, "because you're compassionate, intelligent, and driven. However, you are also faced with your own burdens that severely outweigh the position of class representative. Personal health is more important."

"I-I mean-I-I.. y-you're both right, I guess," Izuku managed after a moment of thought. "I w-was just... I didn't want to l-let everyone down by being a bad r-representative, is all. And to be honest.. I-I always thought you'd be much better suited, Iida."

"I agree wholeheartedly. Therefore as acting class representative in lieu of Izuku Midoriya, I appoint you, Tenya Iida, the new class representative," Yaoyorozui intervened, something like relief filmed over her tone. She spoke loudly over Iida as he began tearing up with pride and revving up into a
speech about how he would honor the position given to him and be a shining example of impeccable authority. "Thank you for helping me clear that up, both of you. Now, let's get to class so we can begin attending to those duties."

Izuku breathed a sigh of relief when Yaoyorozu turned to enter the school, gently prompting Iida out of his emotional monologue. He was honestly shocked that everything had gone over well-his original plan about being class rep (before he'd forgotten completely) mostly involved panicking and calling Iida at every available opportunity to try and figure out what he was supposed to do.

And once the shock of the situation wore off, Izuku allowed himself to be overwhelmed by Iida's glowing praise of his character. A part of him (cruel and whispering and bitter) had thought that the votes for him were malicious in nature, meant to humiliate him because he was so unsuited and incapable. Izuku had quickly learned that that wasn't the case, considering no one in class 1-A seemed to particularly dislike him, but the fear had lurked regardless.

Having proof that it was unfounded unsettled the foundations of his self hatred just a little more, gave him a sliver of strength that he could use to walk with his head held high. Izuku couldn't possibly put into words the gratitude he felt for those that supported him, but his head whirled with endless thoughts of ways he could make it known regardless. Maybe he could bake a cake, or buy everyone individual gifts, or-

Izuku's train of thought crashed and burned and piled up into a roiling mass of destruction the moment he walked through the door to 1-A’s classroom. The only thing he could hear was his own breathing, hitching and unsteady and hiccuping with upset. There were four bodies in the room, counting himself, Iida, and Yaoyorozu.

The fourth was Katsuki Bakugou, sat stiffly in his assigned desk. His posture was so tense that he looked as if he might shatter from anger alone, fingers twitching against the wooden surface of the desk. He'd looked up the moment the door had opened, his molten red gaze entrenching Izuku in a pit of fire and blood. He could feel that gaze, feel it trace the scar on his face, and he swallowed a sob when their eyes met.

Kacchan's anger was almost a tangible entity, less an uncontrolled firestorm and more a mushroom cloud in a jar. His glare had long surpassed thermal overload, so hot that Izuku could nearly feel his skin burning away into ash. But the look on his face wasn't rage, wasn't hatred-it was pain, and that hurt Izuku more than the hole in his face ever had.
Izuku breathed in, and breathed out. Or at least, that had been the plan. Were his lungs not frantically pulsing in his chest and his throat not squeezing itself into a soaking lump of meat, he might have been able to practice his breathing exercises. Instead he was left to suffocate, lost in the red pits of Kacchan's eyes while they sucked all the oxygen from the room. He produced a painful sounding squeak after almost half a minute of silence, and that was apparently the catalyst.

Kacchan rose from his desk in an overly controlled motion, his anger so transparent that Izuku could almost see the fire under his skin. Each footstep was a death toll, bells screaming and clanging in sonorous upset for every inch Kacchan moved forward. His arms were shaking at his sides, fingers curling and twitching and cutting crescents into his palm. But all Izuku could see was the pain in his eyes, the open wound that made him a dying animal, lashing out wildly at anything near it.

Bakugou made it halfway across the room before Iida stood in his path, face a stone mask of disapproval and his muscled arms crossed firmly over his chest. Bakugou met his gaze for half a moment, glaring more at the sheen of Iida's glasses than anything. "Move," he hissed, voice thick and ragged and raw. To anyone that didn't know him, it might have sounded damaged from screaming. But Izuku knew better. He knew Kacchan better than anyone, and had never heard him sound like that. He managed half a step forward without realizing it before Yaoyorozu put a hand on his arm, her eyes hard and her posture tense.

"Katsuki Bakugou," Iida sounded out, as if the syllables were unpleasant to say, "if you think I'm going to stand idly by while you torment another student only moments after returning from your suspension for violent behavior, then you are sorely mistaken. You are a black mark on this school's reputation. You do not deserve to be here-

"I should'a known those glasses were for show, considering how far your head is up your own ass," Bakugou snarled, his anger hot but not yet flaring. "You must really think I'm some kinda idiot, huh? Well here's a goddamn newsflash for you-I fucking know I don't deserve to be here, asshole. Iida's cold stance faltered for a moment, and Bakugou wasted no time in striking once more. "I'm not fucking blind. I know I fucked up. I know what I did was fucked up, and I'd have to be a brain dead shithead to throw my one in a million chance away. So get out of my fucking way. I'm not gonna lay a fucking finger on him."

Izuku's heart gushed blood into the cavity of his chest, hemorrhaging upset and confusion and fear in a vile downpour. He couldn't tear his eyes away from Kacchan's face, from the snarl with no teeth and the anger with no explosion and the dark drip of pain behind his eyes.

"I think," Yaoyorozu's voice rang out, her icy tone radiating frost, "that as the victim of your cruelty, it's Midoriya's decision to talk to you, not yours. He has no obligation to speak with you after what you did, and you should very well find yourself humbled and grateful should he choose to do so."

Izuku opened his mouth before Kacchan had a chance to erupt, voice shaky and full of holes. "N-no, it-it's o-o-okay. T-thank you, b-but.. if K-Kacchan says he won't h-hurt me, I believe him." Izuku gently eased his way out of Yaoyorozu's steady grip, and made imploring eye contact with Iida. He could see the visible frustration and conflict on his friend's face, before Iida eventually stepped aside. Izuku smiled gratefully, the expression a skeleton of what it should have been, and allowed himself to be pulled in by Kacchan's eyes again.
Bakugou thundered forward, footsteps dragging against the floor with the sheer weight of his intensity. Izuku could practically taste the heat in the air. "You got the letter, right?" Bakugou's voice was tight and barely controlled, shaking violently between syllables. Izuku barely managed to nod before he spoke again. "And you read it, didn't you?" Izuku nodded again, frantic and placating.

He attempted to slip a word in edgewise, only to be rooted in place when Kacchan focused that deadly glare on him. He could feel his childhood friend's teeth gritting together, could feel the shudder in his words, the crackling sparks before an outburst. "Good. Then I want you to listen. **Very. Fucking. Carefully. Understand?**" Izuku's head twitched up and down, and Kacchan visibly took a moment to calm himself. "I meant every single word in that letter. And for anyone else, that'd be enough. But I fucking know how you are. I know I have to make things **crystal fucking clear** just so your shitty bleeding heart nonsense doesn't ruin everything. So **remember** what I fucking wrote. Fucking tattoo it on your goddamn forehead so you don't forget, if you have to. And fucking **listen. Got it, Izuku?**"

Izuku flinched, the sound of his given name on Kacchan's tongue almost **wrong**, even when it replaced the nickname that had caused him so much grief and self doubt. He hiccuped out a breath, and nodded again before attempting to speak. "Kacchan-

"**SHU-**" Bakugou snapped his mouth closed around his shout, growling low in the base of his throat. He squeezed his eyes shut, and breathed in through his nose, and out through his mouth. "Izuku. This isn't an **issue** you can fight me on. So bite your fucking tongue and save whatever stupid saccharine bullshit you're brewing for someone else, and **leave me alone.**" His eyes snapped open when the words finished rattling from between his clenched teeth, so impossibly red and containing more than the blind hatred Izuku had been subjected to before. He **wanted** to reach out, desperately so, to help. But it was too soon. The embers in the air hadn't yet settled, and Kacchan's fuse was barely contained between pinched fingers. And so all he could do was watch numbly as Kacchan stalked back to his desk, throwing himself into his seat and laying his head against his crossed arms.

The door to class 1-A opened a moment later, before Izuku even had a chance to untangle the mess of emotions stringing him up. He quietly settled into his seat as chatter rose between the other students, nearly every head turning to eye Bakugou at one point or another. None of them were foolish enough to approach him right away, but nobody made any effort to hide the fact that they were whispering about him.

Izuku was torn away from his subconscious assessment of Kacchan when Aizawa slid through the door, looking almost half dead from sleep deprivation. He stood behind his desk, gaze sweeping dully over the class until every voice had been lowered. "Good. You're learning. Today you'll all be partaking in a special lesson for your hero training. It takes place off campus at a special facility, so the rest of your classes have been postponed for the day." He winced when there was a burst of excited noise, reaching up to rub between his eyes. "No interruptions. Today you'll be doing rescue training, primarily dealing with disaster simulations. Myself, All Might, and another faculty member will be overseeing the exercise."

There was a momentary pause, as if Mr. Aizawa was daring someone to speak up, before his droning words returned. "We'll be gathering outside in a few minutes to take a bus, so all of you get changed. Wear your costumes if you want, but don't let them inhibit you in the training." Mr. Aizawa thumbed the remote that released their costumes from the wall slots, sighing under his breath when everyone rushed to gather their outfits.

Izuku winced at the thought of his own costume, which the costume department had deemed 'absolutely ruined'. It at least gave him some time to revise the design a little, and in the meantime he
didn't much mind wearing the gym uniform. He waited for the flood of students to ebb a little bit, shuffling towards the exit. He paused halfway out the door when Mr. Aizawa began speaking again.

"Bakugou," the pro hero began, his tone carefully neutral, "you won't be participating in this event. You're going to take notes on how your classmates utilize their Quirks in the training, and I'll be reviewing them after class. You're on a very short leash, so don't screw things up."

Izuku flinched when he heard Kacchan's answering growl, scurrying out the door before anything exploded.

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Izuku slumped back into his bus seat with a sigh, arms folded over his chest and knees pressed tightly together to make room for Kirishima on one side of him and Asui on the other. He very pointedly did not glance past Kirishima to stare at Kacchan whenever he could get away with it, and was entirely content to just sit and wait peacefully without overthinking every moment of his life up until that point.

"You know," Asui spoke up, snapping Izuku out of his spiraling disaster of a thought process, "I wasn't really sure how to bring it up before, but I'm still really curious. What exactly is your Quirk, Midoriya? We only really saw you use it the one time."

Izuku balked under her placid gaze, fingers clenching the fabric of his gym uniform pants. "U-uh! I, uhm-i-it's p-pretty technical, a-and hard to.. describe, y-you probably wouldn't even be interested anyway-"

"Dude, how could we not be interested?" Kaminari questioned from across the aisle, blatant curiosity clear on his face. "You totally annihilated that grip tester, Midoriya. It was kind of a major deal."

Kirishima looked his way, inquisitiveness seeping into his tone. "Now that you mention it.. we haven't really seen much of it. Is it some kinda strength augmenting Quirk?"

"S-something along those lines," Izuku squeaked out, attempting to forcibly shove down his anxiety so as to not seem suspicious. "B-but like I said, i-it's extremely t-technical, n-not the kinda thing most people w-would care about."

"I dunno about that, man; strength enhancement is pretty cool, no matter how you slice it." Kirishima raised a hand and activated his own Quirk, the flesh taking on a stony texture. "A lot more interesting than hardening, too. Got a heck of a lot more applications when you're super strong." Izuku's attention snagged on his friend's rueful grin, and he rushed to correct it.

"N-no way, your Quirk i-is so cool, Kirishima!" He gushed, attempting to pour his nervous energy into enthusiasm instead of panic. He sat up further in his seat, making focused eye contact with his classmate. "There's so many practical uses for a Quirk like yours, and it's extremely versatile and reliable! Just because a Quirk is flashy doesn't make it better; what you do with your Quirk is what's important! Someone like you-there's no way you won't be a great hero!" He paused a moment before his second half of the monologue could begin, flushing at the sight of Kirishima's grateful smile and warm, sparkling eyes.

"Thanks, Midoriya. That means a lot, comin' from you." Izuku squeaked when Kirishima threw an arm around his shoulders, pulling him into a one armed embrace. He was fairly sure at least a liter of blood had crowded under his face by that point.

"While Kirishima's Quirk is pretty sweet," Kaminari began, rubbing his chin in mock contemplation, "you're still avoiding the question. If you do have a strength augmenting Quirk, then why don't you use it more? Strong as it looked, I just don't get how that asshole Bakugou got the better of you in the
Izuku twitched at the mention of the combat training, attempting to discreetly flick his gaze towards where Kacchan was sat alone. The blond was glaring pointedly out the window, fingers digging into the skin of his jaw. "I-I just.. i-it's difficult to-control, a-and I didn't w-want to hurt him a-accidentally," Izuku murmured, trying not to notice Kacchan's tensing posture.

"That's definitely not a problem Bakugou had," Kaminari countered, seemingly oblivious to the dread creeping up Izuku's face.

"Do you really have to bring that up?" Jirou muttered from beside him, her tone one part reproachful and two parts annoyed.

"I'm just sayin' what we're all thinking," Kaminari defended, his voice flecked with accusation. "You'd have to be blind to not see how much of a prick Bakugou is, especially after he was suspended on his second day. He's kind of a lunatic-"

"D-don't talk about him l-like that," Izuku croaked, the words only half thought before they poured from his trembling lips. He was overcome with the urge to clam up and pretend he'd never said anything when Kaminari fixed him with an incredulous gaze, but Izuku forced himself past the fear. "J-just.. leave it alone. I'm n-not mad at him, s-so don't use me as an excuse to pick a fight."

"Why are you defending him?" Kaminari threw up his hands, looking more frustrated and bewildered than actually angry. "He's a total asshole, dude! He freakin' blew up your face, and you're not mad at him!?"

Izuku quivered in place, his words withering and dying in the echo of Kaminari's voice. He could see the other boy's eyes widen the moment his own vision was obscured by tears, and quickly turned to look the other way. He pressed one hand over the mark on his face, the other twisting in the fabric of his uniform.

"Dude, what the hell?" Kirishima barked, all traces of his former smile long gone. "That is absolutely uncool. Why the hell would you bring that up, man?"

"I-I wasn't trying to upset him," Kaminari blurted in his defense, a hysterical edge to his voice. "I-I'm sorry, man, you're right. That was totally uncool. Sorry, Midoriya." Izuku could see the other boy trying to catch his eye and make his remorse known, which only made it hurt more when Izuku continued to avoid his eyes.

"Hey, Kaminari," Jirou piped up, glancing sideways at his confused and contrite expression, "next time you get the urge to cram your foot in your mouth, you should consider swallowing it instead of talking."

Kaminari opened his mouth to spit out frantic words in his own defense, only to be interrupted by Mr. Aizawa's droning voice. "Alright everyone, we're here. Try not to tip the bus over on your way out," he muttered, gaze sweeping over the twenty heads he'd been saddled with. He relaxed his grip on the pole marking the separation of passenger seats from the front of the bus when it slowed to a stop, hydraulics hissing as the doors folded open.

Everyone began filing out a few moments later, some more hesitantly than others. Izuku pointedly avoided Kaminari's attempts to catch his attention non-verbally, gaze pulled to the floor by lead weights. He shrugged off Kirishima's searching look with a thin smile (stripped to the bone teeth and blood and a ragged hole) and stumbled down the stairs leading them outside.
He shuffled to the far back of his assembled classmates, itching with the urge to pull off his gloves and procure himself some kind of tactile stimulation. Izuku listened with half an ear to the Space Hero: Thirteen's opening speech, one part of his brain numbly listing through a chronological record of the rescue hero's accomplishments. He wished he could be excited to meet another pro, but—(explosive fumes and ash on his collar his mouth overflowing with teeth and the shadows that coiled around his limbs) he was just too distracted.

Izuku started at a hand on his shoulder, glancing up with wide, glassy eyes to meet Mr. Aizawa's steady gaze. "We're heading inside, Midoriya. This training is important, so don't lose focus. I know you're capable of doing this."

Izuku lost himself in eyes rimmed by exhaustion, their clarity paradoxically sharp and alert. He swallowed the steel clutter in his throat, his voice coming to him in broken pieces. "I-I'm s-s-sorry, M-Mr. Aizawa—"

"There's no reason to be sorry when you haven't made a mistake. Right now, I want you to be productive. Understand?" Mr. Aizawa stared down at him until Izuku could muster the strength to nod, before his teacher began leading him into the building. The doors clicked shut behind them, and Izuku caught the midpoint of Thirteen's prepared speech.

"-alled Black Hole. It creates a vortex that sucks in matter, and turns it into dust. It's allowed me to save many lives from countless disasters. However.. this power also has the potential to be immensely dangerous, easily fatal if used on someone else." Thirteen's voice took on a serious note, much of the class shuffling around to pay closer attention. "Despite stringent regulations and registrations, it would be impossible to prevent accidents or malicious behavior involving every dangerous Quirk out there. As a result, we have to practice restraint, so that we can always use our power to help instead of harm. Heroes exist to help those in need. While for some that involves combat, please never forget that saving others is your most important goal." Thirteen clapped their hands together, voice raising back into its previous enthusiasm. "Thank you all so much for listening!"

Izuku flinched when there was an uproar of applause, voices whispering words of admiration for the space hero. A sudden thought pushed to the forefront of his mental cacophony, and it persuaded Izuku into glancing around the USJ facility. "W..wasn't All Might supposed to be here, too?"

Mr. Aizawa straightened up from the wall he was leaning against, lips pulling into a scowl. "That's a good question. Any answers for us, Thirteen?"

"Ah, about that," Thirteen began contritely. "There was apparently an issue this morning that he had to take care of. Unfortunately, he won't be able to join us."

Mr. Aizawa pushed back a swell of disappointment just long enough to see Thirteen discreetly raise three fingers in Mr. Aizawa's line of sight. His homeroom teacher briefly inclined his head, before sighing loudly.

"I honestly don't know how that man even dresses himself in the morning," Mr. Aizawa muttered irritably, pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers. "Well, nothing we can do about it now. If we're done with introductions, let's begin—"
That darkness grew in moments, a towering rectangle of shadows that birthed dozens of misshapen, sinister forms. Bodies poured out by the dozens, marching purposefully out into the plaza. Most notable was a figure standing over eight feet tall, rippling with muscles that bulged underneath tar black skin. Its face was utterly inhuman, ending in a tapered snout bristling with triangular teeth. The top of its head was missing entirely, exposing pulsing grey matter to the open air. Its eyes stared blankly ahead, the creature silent and lumbering.

The man that stepped out alongside it looked almost diminutive in comparison, dressed in sloppy, dark clothes and covered in disembodied hands. His posture was loose and twitchy, head snapping around to gaze up at the frozen students between the fingers covering his face.

Izuku's insides had petrified, flaking lumps of stone fading into dust. There was no way, it was impossible, there couldn't possibly be-

"Villains," Mr. Aizawa intoned loudly, reaching to secure his dangling goggles over his eyes. He placed himself between the students and the staircase separating them from the flood of villains that had spilled in. "Thirteen, evacuate the students immediately! Get in contact with the main campus if you can!"

Thirteen's reply faded into static, Izuku left struggling to swallow around the organic pulp stuffing his esophagus. His breathing caught and stuttered and strangled itself into wheezing gasps, the spindly fingers of terror crawling down his throat and strangling him from the inside out. His vision flashed with static, reality seeping through rusted grates as the wires pulled around his limbs, so tight, so tight -

The tide was rising, and Izuku was going to drown.
A hand grasped for Izuku's own, interlocking with his fingers and pulling him bodily from his self destruction. He gasped around a mouthful of air, pupils swinging wildly as awareness crunched against his fracturing consciousness.

"Midoriya, this is no time for overthinking! We need to move!" Iida's shout crashed into him, fuzzy and indistinct but enough to unlock his legs, to allow him to stumble frantically after his friend. He squeezed Iida's fingers as tightly as he could, the muscles in his hand spasming erratically.

He half collided with Iida's back when his classmate suddenly ground to a halt, posture wound tight with tension. Izuku peered around him with calibrating retinas, and was met with the sight of Thirteen facing an indistinct cloud of swirling shadow, marked only by luminous yellow pits that he assumed were its eyes. Izuku risked a glance backwards, catching a glimpse of Eraserhead single-handedly holding off the group that had teleported in. Izuku frowned, the gears in his head clicking back into overdrive. They'd teleported in-

"I'm afraid you won't be going anywhere, children," the shadow spoke, his voice a deep, throbbing hum that resonated through the air. "I apologize for the short notice, but we of the League of Villains were simply so eager to meet you. How unfortunate it is that All Might couldn't be here to join us. It seems the schedule we stole was out of date—but no matter. We will simply have to make do—"

"D-DON'T GET NEAR HIM!" Izuku's hysterical scream rang out the moment Thirteen inched forward, one hand poised to unleash Black Hole. "H-He has a Warp Quirk, h-he'll teleport you i-if you get too close!" The gears in his head were spitting sparks, their teeth red hot and cracking apart. The haze of sleep deprivation and the noxious miasma of fear were burned through by the heat of his analysis, but it wouldn't last long.

"Everyone, stay back!" Thirteen's voice rang out a moment later, their opposite hand flinging back in a gesture that had the students backpedaling to create a safe distance. The shadow grew visibly irritated, losing composure as his silhouette went out of focus.

"Such a rude boy. Are those the manners befitting of a young hero? Your classmate, Katsuki Bakugou, certainly had no such issues." Izuku's fuzzing gaze snapped onto Kacchan with hyper focus, the blond staring at the villain with incomprehensible rage. "After all, he was instrumental in this attack. His student ID made it child's play to infiltrate your security undetected."

"What's he talkin' about?" Sero questioned aloud, prompting a few murmurs of suspicion.

"He's sayin' that Bakugou betrayed us," Kaminari accused loudly, turning a harsh glare rimmed with fear on a trembling Bakugou. "How else would this villain know his name? How else would they get in without anyone knowing?!

"It's a workable theory," Todoroki supplied dryly, his tone lacking any indication of what he actually felt on the matter. "Bakugou is violent and self absorbed. Suspension is both a plausible trigger and a sufficient time frame for misguided revenge."

"K-Kacchan wouldn't do that," Izuku cried, the husk of his heart hammering into his ribs so hard it was falling apart, breaking off into petrified chunks. Everything was falling apart around him, he didn't have control, it was too overwhelming he just needed more time. "H-he cares about being a hero m-more than anything! T-that villain is just trying to t-turn us against each other."
"How are we supposed to trust that?!" Kaminari yelled over him, that same hysteria leaking into his voice. "We barely know the guy, you're the only one that knows him, and you've got some kinda messed up relationship where he can treat you like shit and explode your face, and you're just okay with it-"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Bakugou's scream reached a fevered pitch, his voice breaking from the sheer force of his rage. He shook like a street sign in an earthquake, explosions thundering to life in his palms. His chest heaved with shallow breaths, loud and whistling and frantic. "I'LL KILL YOU," he roared, blasting himself into the air with twin explosions that left massive plumes of smoke and fire behind him. "I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU!" Katsuki Bakugou rocketed towards the warping villain like a screaming missile, covering the distance between them in the span of a heartbeat.

"K-Kacchan, no!" Izuku sobbed as loudly as his crumbling voice would allow, throwing himself bodily through the throng of his classmates before anyone could stop him. He was deaf to their cries of shock, to Thirteen's order to stay put, went untouched by the hands desperately reaching for him. All he could hear was screaming, a voice skewered with rage and misery accompanied by a symphony of bone shattering explosions. All he could see was Kacchan, painted nitroglycerin yellow before he was swallowed by a burgeoning squall of shadows.

Izuku's body moved on its own, carrying him, breathless, into the howling dark. He was consumed whole by the clouds of the villain's Quirk, vanished without a trace.

"How foolish," the villain mocked, expanding exponentially in a storm of wind and shadows, having managed to close enough distance during the distraction to encompass Thirteen and the remainder of class 1-A. His voice carried high above the yells of shock and activation of Quirks, a low thrum of deliberate malice. "Now you will join them in your deaths, children! BEGONE!"

--

Izuku was lost in the void between the fibers of reality, senses turned to electrical pulses and limbs turned to free floating molecules. He gasped for breath, carbon and hydrogen heavy on his tongue, his eyes bulging out of his head. He was everything and nothing, unraveled into a single string of being. He was weightless, heavy as a black hole and dark as the sun.

And then he was falling, air rushing into his lungs as his physicality was reestablished. He collided with hard ground, gasping at the impact. The shadows that constituted the villain's warp gate hung like tattered webs from his limbs and forced a chill into his bones. Izuku struggled to sit up and regain his bearings, frantically rubbing at the lingering traces of darkness and attempting to read his surroundings as quickly as possible.

He was still inside the USJ, which meant he was still in danger, but it was at least a danger he already understood instead of an unknown location. Likely that meant that the villain needed some understanding of the location he was teleporting to and from, and hadn't had a pre-prepared destination outside of the USJ. If anyone else had been caught in the warp, then they would almost certainly still be within the facility. But there was little chance the entire invasion force had appeared in one spot-it'd be easier to pick them off if the villains separated them, so they could be dealt with by smaller, prepared teams instead of having an all out brawl. But the location Izuku had been transported to didn't look like any of the disaster zones; it actually very distinctly resembled-

"YOU'RE DEAD, KID!" A sneering voice shouted out, forcing a scream from Izuku's throat when he was forced to duck away from a burly villain wielding a metal club. He glanced around frantically, eyes catching on the disabled fountain, as well as the numerous unconscious or otherwise out of commission bodies scattered around. He was right in the main plaza-
Izuku flinched violently when the villain reared back for another blow, his muscles locking up uselessly as the fear in his chest wound wire tight around his ribs- A roar of fury and a devastating explosion intervened before Izuku could have his head split open, the villain crying out in pain as Bakugou forced him away. He was shaking with uncontrollable rage, his pupils constricted within twin seas of molten heat.

"FUCKING MOVE, YOU IDIOT!" Kacchan snagged Izuku by the collar of his uniform, yanking him violently to his feet and shoving him away once he was standing. Izuku stumbled and nearly tripped over his own feet, eyes wide and tearing up. He attempted to speak, only to be forced into silence when Bakugou whirled around, slamming an explosive palm into another villain's face. "If you're not gonna do anything useful, then fucking RUN AWAY, Izuku! I don't have time to babysit your ass!"

"I-I-I-I-I-" Izuku's internal processes hissed and steamed, rapidly overheating from the mountain of data he was struggling to sort through. He wildly scanned the plaza, catching a flash of dark clothes and whipping scarves closer to the fountain, entrenched among a tide of bodies. "M-Mr. Aizawa, w-w-we have to help him!"

"That scraggly bastard can take care of himself," Kacchan snapped, gloved fingers twitching erratically, teeth bared in a malicious sneer. "I just need to kill that fucking smoky piece of shit, I'll fucking pull him apart with my bare hands!"

"B-but the majority of his m-mass is gaseous, y-your physical attacks won't be effective-" Izuku's mouth snapped shut when Kacchan turned a white hot glare on him, tongue scraping between his teeth before he worked up the willpower to open it again. "I-If.. w-w-we aren't helping Mr. Aizawa, t-then we should f-focus on regrouping a-and escaping, so we can get h-help!"

"Run away if you want, Izuku, but I'm going to fucking kill that worthless bastard. So why don't you just fuckin-" Kacchan's eyes widened from their narrowed glare, and Izuku was left with a single moment to dread what came next. A solid body slammed him to the ground in a tangle of limbs, knocking him out of the way of a villain that had just buried her massive iron knuckles into the concrete. She had half a second to look distressed when her knuckles stayed lodged in the ground, before Bakugou bellowed in wordless anger and unleashed a staccato of explosions in her face, the force ripping her free and sending her skidding away into another downed villain.

Izuku scrambled to his feet, his hands shaking so badly that his joints had begun to ache. He hiccuped around frantic inhales and exhales, and pressed a hand against his chest as if to physically push back the fear seeping through. "K-Kacchan-"

"JUST FUCK OFF ALREADY! DON'T YOU FUCKING GET IT? YOU'RE A LIABILITY! JUST LEAVE!" Bakugou's voice cracked from the sheer volume he'd forced into it, his pupils tracking over Izuku's stricken face for a moment before he wrenched his head away. He growled in frustration through his clenched teeth, his scowl becoming an indistinct mess through the sheen of Izuku's tears.

Izuku attempted to squeeze mangled words past the blockage in his throat, his vocal cords failing to produce anything other than a scratchy exhale. Kacchan was right; Izuku couldn't do anything without his Quirk, and the only thing he could do with it was cause pain and destruction. He didn't belong there, fighting alongside his classmates-they were real heroes. He'd just pretended so hard he'd started to believe it, lost in the delusion that he could be more than his fear. But he was wrong. Izuku was either dead weight or a danger to everyone around him. He didn't deserve to be a hero. "K-Kacchan-"

"Weeeell, isn't this a touching scene?" Izuku's head snapped up, his entire body protesting as he
whipped around to locate the source of the voice. He froze the moment he made eye contact with the villain covered in hands, manic eyes searching his face through gaps in gloved fingers. "Looks like your students have come to say hello, Eraserhead. It'd be rude not to give them a warm welcome, don't you think?"

Mr. Aizawa ducked under a wild blow from a thug with three arms, landing a sharp kick underneath his ribs that left the villain winded and out of commission. Izuku trembled when his teacher's hidden gaze rested on him, dark hair falling limply around his shoulders and his lips pulled into a tight scowl. "I told you to evacuate, get out of here."

That moment of distraction was all it took, a bestial roar singing out before Mr. Aizawa's cry of agony joined it. A massive, tar black palm crunched around his torso, fingers digging deep into his ribs. The grotesque mountain of muscle had cleared the distance faster than Izuku could blink, its dead eyed gaze turned straight forward.

"You really should have more confidence in your students, Eraserhead," the hand villain mocked, his voice a breathy rasp riddled with malicious glee. Izuku could only stare, the horror in his chest a howling thing that wore thin the flesh that barely contained it. He watched in blank terror as rivulets of blood trailed down the monster's massive fist, Mr. Aizawa's face locked in excruciating pain. "After all, I'm sure they're just strong enough to give me some worthwhile EXP. So you can sit tight, and keep my Noumu company for a little while."

Kacchan moved before Izuku could even remember how to breathe, his gloved palms alight with explosions and his face twisted with so many layers of hatred that Izuku could barely glimpse the fear beneath them. "YOU'RE DEAD, YOU BASTARD! YOU'RE ALL GONNA DIE HERE!"

He flung himself through the air with the sheer force of his Quirk, teeth parted like a rabid animal. He closed the distance between himself and the ring leader in moments, pivoting to circle to the far right of the villain when grasping palms reached out towards him. He leveled the grenade on his arm at the back of the villain's head, reaching to pull the pin-

...And was met with a wide eyed stare, pinprick pupils staring him down between stiff fingers. He could see the edges of the villain's smile, pulled so far up the corners of his face that Katsuki didn't understand how his mouth hadn't torn. The skin around his scarred, crumbling lips was unnaturally wrinkled, and there were dozens of spots of blood coagulating on the skin of his neck. Katsuki's grenade crumbled into flakes of dust under the villain's grip, and he blasted himself back with a startled yell before disintegrating fingers could reach his bare arm.

"K-Kacchan, d-don't let him touch you!" Izuku's voice pierced the echo of Bakugou's explosion, his eyes twitching over the villain's exposed back. He ran the man's movements through his head, his remaining gears red hot as he analysed the villain's startlingly quick reaction. "H-he leads l-left, a-and keeps his center of gravity low! K-keep your distance if you can!"

The villain froze in place, falling out of his combative stance to stand more casually. Izuku flinched and locked up when he made eye contact, the corners of his mouth barely visible. "You know, Eraserhead, you've got some pretty impressive students. I just never expected you to be the type to bother with damaged goods." A pang echoed in the hollow of Izuku's chest, and he struggled not to react, instead forcing his legs to pull him backwards in shaking increments. "Don't look so scared, brat. All I'm gonna do is take that scar off your face!"

Izuku's eyes widened into glossy disks when the villain slithered towards him, so impossibly fast, one hand reaching forward to turn him into dust. He managed half a breath, wrung out until it was broken and oozing with the odor of his fear. Living Nightmare swelled like a rupturing tumor in his chest, his silhouette snapping into focus as the darkness under his skin leaked free. He couldn't kill,
he couldn't kill, not again not again not again-

"Shi-ga-ra-kiiii." Izuku gargled, syllables pulled from a place beyond time and forced through his lips like meaty chunks, slopping against the fingers halted inches from his face. One pupil voraciously devoured the color of his iris, an insatiable well of hunger that pulled in everything around it. The other shrunk into a pinhole, a condensed mass that twitched and wobbled but never stopped staring, never stopped cementing the blood in Tomura Shigaraki's veins. "What are you afraid of, I wonder?"

Katsuki watched with numb panic in his chest as that thing wholly replaced the boy that filled him with (loathing envy hatred anger fear regret) too many tangled emotions, its mouth an open wound stuffed with curving teeth. Its voice was spotty with static, squirming in and out of focus between words. It loped up to the frozen villain, steady fingers gently reaching to remove the disembodied hand secured in place over Shigaraki's face. "Maybe you're afraid of disappointing father?" It mused, twisting and tearing off the hand mask's fingers as if they were taffy.

It dropped the ruined hand carelessly, blood trickling from the corners of its lips. "Or maybe you're afraid of disappointing someone else," it cooed, using one finger to daintily brush the hair out of the villain's face, constricted pupils locked onto it in blind fear. "It doesn't really matter-in the end, you're still a disappointment, Shigaraki. Why not lessen the blow? Gather up your little friends, and leave us, To-mu-ra Shigaraki."

That should have been the moment where Katsuki attacked, where he blew that repulsive villain's head apart like a melon with his other cannon, but-he couldn't let it see him. He couldn't handle it, couldn't fall into the vortex of black hole pupils again, couldn't be forced into weakness, into impotence, into fear. But he knew that it might not win. If that Shigaraki fuck had enough willpower, he could force his way through it, and Izuku would be weak and soft like he always was, and then-(flesh crumbling under cruel fingers, scar tissue turned to dust and wide green eyes turned to despair, despair, despair)

Katsuki threw himself forward with every ounce of will he could muster, his left arm cocked to propel him with an explosion and his right primed to unleash erupting death on the ugly hand freak. The sweat on his palm began lighting up, the spark of a flint before total annihilation-

Katsuki's eyes widened as his momentum carried him through a warp gate, his explosions aborting into puffs of odoriferous smoke when he slammed teeth first into the disabled fountain, pain exploding in the lower half of his face.

"Tomura Shigaraki," a deep, warbling voice intoned, amorphous shadows gathered at the halfway point between Shigaraki and his Noumu. "There's a matter we must deal with."

Izuku's consciousness returned in a kaleidoscope of fractured shards, gritting together unevenly. He gasped for breath and choked around a cry of fear, flinging himself away from the hand threatening to disintegrate his face at the same moment Shigaraki retreated, steps shaky and uneven. The villain's eyes were blown wide, pupils darting agitatedly and his lips twisting in immense displeasure. "Kurogiri! This fucking brat-he's a smurf, he's a smurf!" The villain accused wildly, one hand mashed against his face as the other gestured in frantic rage.

"Calm yourself, Shigaraki," Kurogiri suggested in a warning tone, his smoke settling into a more humanoid silhouette. "We have other issues to attend to. One of the children managed to escape the facility, and is likely to soon bring reinforcements."

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"Kurogiri... you idiot... I
gave you one job, and you couldn't even do it..! I should atomize you right where you stand...!"

"There is no need for such anger," Kurogiri resonated, yellow eyes locked on a dissociating Izuku Midoriya. "While our mission has been cut short, there is still a path to victory. This boy.. he is one of All Might's. His death could pave the way to killing All Might."

Shigaraki paused in his self destruction, blood crusted fingernails slowly pulling away from his bleeding throat. ". Yeah. You're right. There's no way some little min maxer is going to stop us. Let's end his run, and shatter All Might's will."

Izuku flinched backwards when Shigaraki turned towards him, the villain grinning unsettlingly around the confines of his hand. "Poor little brat. So scared you're shaking in your boots. I'll be sure to make it slow and painful, just for you-"

"I-I'm not afraid of you," Izuku nearly whimpered, his voice weak and cracking but his stance unyielding. The fumes of Living Nightmare darkened his silhouette, as if he'd been cut away from the rest of reality. "I w-won't let you kill All Might."

"How are you going to stop us, I wonder?" Shigaraki stalked forwards, slow and deliberate, one hand raised and twitching with eager malice. "Are you going to use your single target Quirk on all three of us? Do you think you can kill us with your stupid cheap trick?"

Izuku stared into the space between Shigaraki's fingers, his haunted gaze emptier than empty. It was beyond distant; as if it had been reflected infinitely between facing mirrors, until it was no longer his own. "I know I can kill you," he whispered, Living Nightmare shifting and ebbing in the air around him, dark pulses that twisted and contorted into cutting wires, "and that's what I'm really afraid of."
unveiling hands that twist wires

Chapter Summary

I've never done this before, but here's some recommended listening!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euHoHdpGOa0
(Volume warning, just in case!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Silence pressed in around Izuku like the crushing tide, a vise grip that wrung the breath out of his shriveling lungs. His heartbeat echoed behind his temples, a feeble organ gushing blood that had already frozen over in his veins. His vision was fuzzing over, filled with bursts of static that ate all the color in the world. Living Nightmare thrummed under his skin and bled from his silhouette, the antithesis of a chalk marked outline (the dark presence of a killer, death an ultimatum in motion instead of a snapshot of tragedy).

He stared blankly forward at the villains eyeing him up, Shigaraki stood in place despite his earlier enthusiasm. Hesitation shone through his obscuring palm, his posture tensed with both caution and agitation. Izuku could understand. He didn't want to move either.

"..You're bluffing, aren't you," Shigaraki hissed, scratching the sores on his neck in slow, deliberate motions. "Just trying to buy time, keep us guessing until someone shows up to save you. You know you're not strong enough to fight us. You look like the type to have constitution as your dump stat." Shigaraki tore his hand away from his throat, blood crusted deep under his fingernails.

"Unfortunately for you, we've got a carry. Noumu."

The (Izuku idly reassessed its height in comparison to himself, Shigaraki, and Kurogiri—it was at least ten feet tall, if not larger, and its body mass was absolutely ludicrous) misshapen monster snapped to attention, its eyes rolling in its head before focusing on its master. Aizawa hung limp in its meaty grasp, and Izuku couldn't be sure if he was breathing or not. His own breathing stopped the moment Shigaraki leveled a finger in his direction, the Noumu slowly turning until he was in its sights. "Kill him."

Izuku had no time to blink, had no time to breathe, had no time to consider or analyze or plan out his next move. In a fraction of a second, every fear in his chest collided in horrible frisson, a nuclear reaction that left its waste burning behind his teeth like boiling ink. He could taste copper, distantly, as if recalling a memory of having cut his tongue, or putting a penny in his mouth. He could remember his body jerking and twisting as if under another's power, limbs pulled by gouging wires. He could recall the approach of the Noumu, a freight train of bulging muscle and asphalt flesh that moved faster than any human eye could perceive. He remembered its fist, large enough to encompass his entire torso, and the shrieking noise it made as it tore through air particles too slow to move out of its way.

And he could remember meeting it with his own fist, shaped by subconscious recollections of countless hours of pro hero footage, the result of feverishly studying their movements, their forms, their techniques. His arm had been consumed by black fumes, a thunderhead condensed into an artillery shell. And in the present he could feel the spatter of hot blood coating the front of his body,
its sickening warmth soaking through his uniform and trickling down his face. The Noumu's arm was the source, being as it had been obliterated all the way up to halfway through its bicep, which had been reduced to a stump of oozing flesh giving birth to a jagged stalk of bone.

A few occurrences followed in short succession. The Noumu screeched in its horrible inhuman voice, more a vulture's cry fed through a hundred glitching voice filters than anything suggesting human intelligence. Izuku vomited everything that remained in his stomach, blood mixing with the vile, discolored remnants of his lunch as digestive acids burned the wounds in his mouth. The broken stump of the Noumu's arm began reforming, bone matter and muscle fiber sloshing forward in a river of flesh to replace the lost limb. And Izuku's dissociation was forcibly removed, by way of the Noumu swinging its undamaged arm at him and catching him in a glancing blow.

The force of it barely connecting was enough to send Izuku skipping across concrete like a stone over water, horrible aches and road rashes blossoming in red blooms across his entire body. He collided with the base of one of the trees around the outskirts of the center plaza, the breath forced out of his body in a wheeze when his spine cracked against unyielding bark.

Izuku choked and shuddered in his efforts to draw breath, hysterical panic emerging from the depths of his stomach in all its screaming glory. He could barely think around the typhoon of emotions that flooded his brain, his last few gears missing numerous teeth, barely able to click together anymore. He couldn't.. that monster, that Noumu, he couldn't kill it, couldn't kill ever again-but it was impossibly strong, strong enough to rebound from his punch in seconds and retaliate. Its brainless behavior made him severely doubt his ability to stun it with fear, which left him with very few options.

He needed All Might. All Might was the only person he knew, possibly the only person in the world strong enough to challenge that horrific creature without Living Nightmare. But the villains meant to kill him, surely with the Noumu as their weapon, and then outnumber him when he was distracted. He.. its regeneration was incredibly strong—could he even hope to disable it without killing it completely? He had so little finesse over his Quirk, and the toll it was taking on him was quickly becoming too much to bear—the copper trickling into Izuku's mouth and the shattered edges of his vision could attest to that.

But he hadn't completely dissociated yet. Hadn't lost himself into numbness, hadn't been torn from his flesh and discarded until he was strong enough to limp back into it. If he used his Quirk again, that was surely the fate that would await him. He could lose himself for countless hours, maybe even days. Or he could be lost forever, the price of Living Nightmare his eternal exile from worldly flesh. Dying sounded significantly more pleasant, when Izuku really thought about it.

The decision was inevitably made for him, the Noumu's hulking mass tearing towards him with such power in its strides that it tore up the concrete behind it with each step. Izuku had at least half a moment to reflect—his life for those of his classmates, his teachers, and anyone else the League of Villains could potentially harm. He could live with a trade like that. Or, perhaps not. Izuku's lips twitched into a smile, the last beacon of light he could hope to produce before Living Nightmare ripped him apart. All he had to do was disable the Noumu, keep it occupied long enough for help to arrive. Maybe he could hug his friends, thank them for their support and kindness. Maybe he could apologize to his mother for the countless lies he'd fed her, over and over again. Maybe Kacchan would be proud of him.

Izuku smiled as Living Nightmare ripped through his flesh, his consciousness unmade in an instant.

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Katsuki Bakugou regained consciousness at the bottom of a fountain, mired in the stink of chlorine and wetted by the sad little puddles that had gathered at the bottom of the concrete basin. He spat up
a mouthful of water, his jaw and pretty much the entire rest of his head throbbing with pain. For the moment, he was unable to tell if the moisture dripping down the side of his face was blood or water, but he wasn't particularly concerned.

He forced himself to his feet with a pained grunt, unbalanced by the weight of the explosive arm guard on his right forearm. The scraps of his left gauntlet were likely scattered across the floor somewhere, completely useless after the disintegration. The anger in his chest click-click-clicked until it flared into a bonfire, fueling him with the rage he needed to push through (his overwhelming guilt and pain and resentment the curse of eighteen accusing stares all control slipping away green eyes filled with tears dimmer every time he saw them) the pain in his head.

He vaulted over the side of the fountain, biting down on a reflexive snarl when he saw the backs of Teleport Fuck and Hideous Hand Freak, far enough away that he couldn't hear if they were speaking or not. Scraggly Shit was limp and bleeding about twenty paces away, his chest rising and falling just enough to assure Katsuki that the greasy haired asshole would probably survive.

Dek–Izuku was nowhere to be seen, which made (panicpanicpanic) annoyance the forefront of his twenty different flavors of anger. Alarmingly, the Noumu was somewhere else as well, but its location was easier to gauge. Massive cracks in the concrete (shaped like footprints, holy fuck how strong was it?) accompanied a trail of blood that was too dark to be Izuku's (he hoped) led off into one of the artificial patches of woods surrounding the fountain.

Katsuki could hardly use the word 'humble' to describe himself, and 'rational' was pretty close behind it. He knew he was strong, knew he probably could absolutely crush everyone in his class with enough effort, but he wasn't blind. That-gross, brainy monster fuck was dangerous. It wasn't a matter of lacking confidence or willpower that made him hesitant to pursue it; it would kill him without a shadow of a doubt.

But if it was after Izuku... he couldn't just let it kill the snotty little fuck. Not only because he was supposed to be training to be a hero, and a huge part of that was saving people, but because Izuku's death would mean whatever horrible thing was between them would be over. It would be over, but it wouldn't end. Katsuki would be left with the tangle of emotions that bound them, and would have no choice but to let it fester and rot and drag him down. Katsuki couldn't put it to rest alone.

He was left with a choice, and very little time to make it. He still had one full blast in his remaining arm cannon, which meant he could either test his luck in obliterating the two brains of the villains' invasion force, or he could hope it proved strong enough to disable the monster trying to kill Izuku.

Katsuki attempted to visualize the look on Hand Fucker's face after having his midsection blown open, tried to force the artificial satisfaction of turning Warpy Shithead into nothing but ashes and embers—but all he could think of was a soft, scarred face screwed up in terror, green eyes void of life, and the stench of blood and nitroglycerin.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Katsuki hissed under his breath, his limbs pulling him away from the unaware villains and towards the man made woods, something like embarrassment burning hot in his chest. Izuku would fucking owe him big time. He crept away, quieter than he'd have liked, and momentarily wondered why the villains hadn't gone after Izuku as well.

And then the whole world turned inside out. Katsuki stumbled to his knees as the patch of forest in front of him was obliterated, dozens of pine trees snapped like twigs or otherwise turned to splinters. His muscles turned to stone, useless petrified hunks that anchored him to the earth. Clouds of upset earth and sawdust settled in the wake of the devastation, revealing the hulking mass of the Noumu present at the epicenter. It was soaked in its own blood, countless hair thin gashes in its skin closing up as it shrieked in upset, eyes rolling wildly in their sockets.
What answered it was beyond the constraints of daylight. A thousand voices fused together into a tortured wail rent the air in a shock wave of cacophonous torment, resonating inside the confines of Katsuki’s skull. He could barely see through the noise polluting the air, eyes wide and unblinking as he was viciously battered by visual data.

The thing was beyond any words he knew. It was beyond inhuman, beyond terrestrial, beyond the primitive machinations of meat and bone. The closest thing he could even begin to compare it to was a giant sea urchin combined with some long extinct predator; it was composed of grisy, glistening black flesh between which ran cracks of pulsing, blood flushed muscle. It bristled with porous openings, twitching orifices that pulsed around dozens of long, dripping spines. The spines were yellowed in hue, sickly in the manner of bones left to decompose in humid conditions. Its proportions were-lean, in comparison to its overall body mass. Katsuki couldn’t say it was sleek, or streamlined; it appeared almost damaged, its internal structure malformed from whatever it might have been intended to look like, most of its weight situated on the right side with its left almost atrophied.

It possessed only a single traditional arm, a bony protrusion about as thick as a lamp post that jutted from where a right shoulder might have existed. It was a stretch of bone and muscle that twisted like a meat hook and ended in ten numerous jointed appendages. Its face (Katsuki assumed it was a face, considering its position on the front of the creature) lacked any real defining features, save for its position at the end of a stumpy neck and the gaping aperture of its mouth, as well as tiny divots set in a ridge at about forehead height. It had no lips to speak of, flesh transitioning seamlessly into the threshing blade teeth of its mesozoic maw. Its teeth lined the sides of its face until they began encroaching on its neck, far enough that opening its mouth would split its head almost completely in half.

It was roughly level height with the Noumu, though it visibly possessed more body mass, most of which bloated its deformed right half. Its lower half ended in a pair of oddly shaped limbs, similarly thin and curved as its own present arm. They folded back over themselves like the legs of an insect, ending in flat feet bearing three short, hooked protrusions on either end. Its skeletal structure kept it low to the ground, and Katsuki numbly realized it would have towered over the Noumu had it stood on its hind legs.

Katsuki had only a single blink to process the utter wrongness of the walking nightmare before he was assaulted with another wave of sound. The Noumu had moved faster than he could track, circling left to take advantage of the other monster's atrophied half, one fist raised in the air to deliver a devastating blow. And the only reason Katsuki knew that was because the Noumu was locked in place, speared through a dozen times over by the six foot long spines protruding from the nightmare’s back. A little over half still remained locked in flesh, the rest having separated and skewered the Noumu completely, wicked barbs cutting through its flesh and keeping it suspended in mid air. They remained attached to the creature by lengths of sinewy tissue fused to the base of each spine, long and thin like organic wires.

Katsuki swallowed a bile soaked knot in his throat when the Noumu was ripped apart in a spray of viscera, its limbless torso thudding into the dirt and vibrating as its arms and legs began growing back. Maybe, he considered faintly, deaf to the enraged shrieks of Shigaraki and the unsure timbre in Kurogiri's responses, he was in over his head.

All Might reached out to place a reassuring palm on young Iida's shoulder, his student's costume gleaming in the sunlight and his eyes frantic behind his glasses. The pull of One For All felt like a vacuum in his limbs, slowly siphoning what little strength he'd regained after his morning commute. "Young Iida, I thank you for your courage in this perilous situation. I promise you, I will do everything in my power to ensure everyone's safety. Please, make your way to the main campus and alert the rest of the faculty for me."
"Y-yes sir, of course! Thank you, sir!" Iida adjusted his posture until it was ramrod straight, his determination shining through brilliantly. The moment All Might removed his hand the boy was off like a bullet, kicking up a trail of dust on the path back to U.A.’s main campus.

All Might sucked in a breath a moment later, bracing himself in a sprinter's stance before he burst through the air in a single leap, wincing as even that small portion of his power drained away his remaining time. So stupid, he was so stupid—in what world was it appropriate for him to shirk his duties as an educator, just to feel good about himself by stopping petty crimes? He had to do better, had to be more vigilant; his prime was long eclipsed, and his power was only a shadow of what it once had been. Without a successor, he had to ration it carefully, use it only when it was absolutely necessary.

A successor.. his list of possible recipients was dreadfully sparse and incredibly unsure, only two faces really calling out to him. Lumillion, also known as Mirio Togata, was a prime candidate. The absolute peak of his third year peers, in possession of both a shining, heroic spirit and a Quirk that, when combined with One For All, would make him nigh invincible—but for a reason All Might himself didn't understand, it just didn't feel right.

The other face belonged to a boy who wore suffering like a second skin. Izuku Midoriya had a heart fit to bursting with compassion and selflessness, but the burden he carried seemed too heavy for All Might to so callously dump another onto him. What sort of hero would he be, if he forced the weight of the world on a child that could hardly stand under his own power?

Perhaps he was simply selfish, greedily hoarding the dying embers of One For All in the delusional hope that one day it might burn brightly once more. Perhaps the shining light of The Symbol of Peace had burned blind spots into him, left him complacent and unwilling to face the possibility of his retirement.

Perhaps the final day had already arrived, and he was simply marching to his own demise. It would be a suiting death, he supposed: going out in a blaze of glorious justice, saving the lives of others one final time. It would be a hero's death.

All Might dug a groove into the concrete when he landed outside the entrance to the USJ, the massive metal doors cracked open just enough for a teenager to slip through. The thought of young Iida's panic and desperation filled him with a cold fury, and he used it to satiate the siphon of One For All. He wrenched the doors open in a screech of metal, reinforced steel crumbling like wet clay under his grip.

The entrance was crowded with a smattering of students, whom All Might swiftly counted (Ashido, Uraraka, Sero, Shouji, Sato-still fourteen unaccounted for) before he was struck by the sight of Thirteen, presumably unconscious within their damaged suit. "I couldn't help but be suspicious when neither Thirteen nor Aizawa returned my calls," he began, voice thick with barely contained anger, "and that was confirmed when I happened upon young Iida on my way over, and he told me of the evil that was taking place."

All Might cursed himself for his stupidity, wishing he could simply undo his mistake and prevent the attack altogether—but his only choice was to ensure the safety of his students and colleagues, to let them know The Symbol of Peace had arrived. "Have no fear, students," he bellowed, his voice carrying through the facility and his teeth gritted in a scowl, "FOR I AM HERE."

The five students gathered at the top of the stairs eyed him with the same hopeful relief he had seen a thousand times before (security, safety, the belief that everything would finally be okay), but it was not all he saw in their eyes. There was trepidation as well, a caution born strong enough to weather his justice.
Shouji approached him slowly, his arms pulled tightly together. Sato and Sero exchanged a worried glance behind him, while Ashido and Uraraka stayed put at Thirteen's side. "Sir, something is very wrong, something other than the villains." He paused, as if unsure if he should continue, and All Might struggled to contort his face into a blinding grin to reassure him. His student raised a single arm, gesturing towards the main plaza of the facility. "I've been monitoring the locations of everyone, after we were separated by a warping villain. Most everyone is located in one of the disaster zones. Bakugou, Midoriya, and Mr. Aizawa are in the center. Mr. Aizawa is badly injured," Shouji nearly tripped over the words, before he forced his way through them. "Bakugou is conscious. Midoriya—the villains have a monster they mean to kill you with. It attacked him."

All Might's smile turned strained, teeth gritting and muscles shifting from his impatience to undo the damage wrought upon his students. He opened his mouth to thank young Shouji for his information, only for the boy to continue speaking. "There's... something else, down there. Something... something terrible. It appeared, and I could no longer hear Midoriya. It was so loud I couldn't keep listening." Uraraka visibly fought back further tears, leaning on Ashido for support.

All Might made deliberate eye contact with young Shouji, pumping reassurance into his grin. "Thank you for the heads up, young man. Please, watch over your friends, and leave everything to me. I've got this!" He flashed a thumbs up brimming with well practiced confidence, rocketing towards the center plaza with One For All screaming in his veins. The wind whipped past him in a man made hurricane, strong enough to stun the battered looking thugs gathered outside the plaza. He made short work of them, focused more on reading the situation than the well practiced motions of his body.

The thugs themselves looked like small fries, the sort to be found robbing convenience stores and holding up old ladies with pocket knives. It would have been insulting if it wasn't such a relief. If that was the quality of the invasion force, then his students would likely be able to best them. But the ring leaders (Shadowy villain capable of flight and high speeds, in possession of a warping Quirk, villain covered in hands, Quirk unknown, large monster with purple-black skin exposed brain and inhuman mouth, Quirk unknown—he'd have to commend young Iida later for his monumentally helpful recollection and deliverance of important information) likely proved a much larger threat, if Aizawa and Thirteen had been unable to detain them.

The thought of Bakugou and Midoriya trapped within the grasp of such dangerous villains stoked the fear behind his grin, and intensified the righteous fury in his gut. He launched himself towards the center plaza, tearing through a blur of trees and emerging in front of a large fountain. Two of the villains he'd been warned of came into his sights, so distracted by something else that they didn't even see him coming. Bakugou was on the far side of the fountain, visibly shaken by something he was watching in the tree line. Aizawa was barely visible over the lip of the fountain, lying limply in a pool of his own blood. All Might wasted no time in charging towards the villains, his arms drawn back for a devastating Carolina Smash—

All Might reared back when a swirling mass of darkness opened in front of him, a massive body soaked in blood emerging from it a moment later at an outrageous speed. He barely ducked out of the way in time, glancing back to catch sight of a limbless torso and an exposed brain before something else came from the warp gate as well. He dashed to the side, eyes widening at the sight of the beast screaming through the darkness, its maw opened in a head splitting shriek that made his entire body tremble. It blitzed past him, three limbs skidding across concrete as it launched itself towards the regenerating mass of blood soaked muscle.

The creature with the exposed brain screeched, digging its barely formed heels into the concrete to counteract its momentum, one skinless arm raising to cram itself into the other monster's mouth. Half a dozen quills dug into the creature's thick shoulder, forcibly ripping off the offending arm.
"What the hell's going on here?" All Might hissed, unable to tear his eyes away from the dismembering abomination, its wails so loud that they made it hard for him to think. Shouji had said that Midoriya went silent at the same time as something new had appeared, so loud that he was unable to hear it without hurting himself. He'd also said that Midoriya was under attack by the villains' monster before losing track of him. Electric blue eyes widened as the unthinkable occurred to him, a realization that he couldn't possibly believe-

"All Might," the villain covered in hands shrieked, his voice ragged and thin with hysterical anger. "You trash, you trash, you human fucking garbage! You call us the villains, you call US the villains with a thing like that as a student?! I'll kill you, and I'll kill him, and I'll make sure everyone knows what you really are-"

All Might stared, locked in a numb epiphany, as the wailing aberration ceased violently dismembering the struggling body underneath it. It used its single crooked hand to grab a barely formed femur, rearing back on its folded hind legs and lifting the shrieking monster clear off the ground. It flung the blood soaked body through the air, concrete crumbling like ash from the sheer force of its landing, a hundred meters away. His heart hammered in his chest when the living nightmare turned to stare at him with its eyeless face, silent and still and drenched with viscera. And then his pounding pulse skipped a beat when it erupted in a flash of roiling darkness, leaving behind the limp, injured body of Izuku Midoriya.

Chapter End Notes

Some wonderfully disturbing fanart for this chapter!
Eijirou Kirishima, not for the first time in his life, and certainly not for the last, was vividly struck with the thought that he shouldn't have bothered getting out of bed that morning. The last ringing shrieks of Midoriya's Quirk (what kind of Quirk could even do that) died in his ears, the air around him settling once it was no longer disturbed by the jagged vibration of disturbed particles. He'd been left sighing in relief when himself, Asui, and Mineta had escaped the Shipwreck Zone, and a few moments later he'd been left wishing his Quirk could harden his lungs, so he'd at least have a little breath left in them.

His earlier bravado and reassurances felt like a lifetime ago, his (stealthy)rallying cry to come to the aid of his classmates having been eviscerated by skin crawling fear. It was like his flesh had become a separate entity, desperate to yank its way off his body and escape the utterly alien grotesqueness of Izuku Midoriya ripping a giant, hideous monster apart, over and over and over again. Eijirou had wanted to run, to hide, to close his eyes until it was over and he could pretend things weren't what they were-just like he used to be, a coward too weak to live up to his own spouted ideals.

The spell of numb silence had been broken by the appearance of All Might, a beacon of hope in the cold, bleak despair that had draped around him. The Symbol of Peace was more intimidating and awe inspiring than Eijirou had ever seen before, a mountain of a man that moved faster than he could blink. The sight of a dozen thugs eating pavement in a split second gave him heart palpitations, his admiration and respect for The Number One Hero soaring with every second.

But that spirit hadn't lasted long, quelled and suppressed by the screaming, animal fear in his chest when Midoriya and the Noumu had come tumbling out of the warp gate, the stench of blood nauseating and the orchestra of ripping flesh and shattering bones overwhelming. But the moment that alien flesh melted away, leaving behind the battered body of his friend, a boy so heartrendingly kind and desperate to help others that he couldn't even help himself-

Eijirou would not run. Fear wouldn't stop him, it wouldn't hold him hostage when he could make a difference. Leaving his friend in danger-that was a regret he couldn't possibly live with. "Asui, Mineta, go help Mr. Aizawa! I've got Midoriya!" He wasted no further time in bursting from the patch of woods they'd been hidden in, his skin Hardening into stone in case of any unexpected attacks. He sprinted across the stretch of plaza, tunnel vision locked on the frail form of Midoriya, teeth gritted when he heard a screech from the Noumu.

It was regenerating extremely slowly, its arms barely more than stumps gushing blood and only one leg even close to half formed. Its eyes rolled wildly, constantly unfocusing and refocusing on Midoriya. Eijirou couldn't believe how messed up it was, after how terrifying it'd appeared before. It was definitely still unsettling, but seeing how easily it had been torn apart had dulled his fear. Either it wasn't as tough as it looked, or Midoriya was.

Eijirou dropped to his knees to slide the rest of the distance to Midoriya, listening with half an ear when All Might's voice rose in a thunderous shout. "You've been defeated, villains! Your weapon is in shambles, and your forces thoroughly routed! Give up now, while you still have the chance!" Eijirou shivered at the righteous fury in the hero's voice, silently hopeful that he'd never end up on the receiving end of that kind of intensity.

He gently turned Midoriya over onto his back, heart dropping at the sight of glassy green eyes, staring wide and unblinking at the ceiling. His chest still rose and fell with steady breaths, and Eijirou couldn't see any signs of significant wounds on him, save for the bruising on his face and the blood crusted in the corners of his mouth. The front of his gym uniform was soaked in blood, however, the
material likely stained beyond repair with dark, oozing crimson. He felt nauseous at the sight of it, but pushed on through his discomfort.

Eijirou gently slid his arms under Midoriya's knees and upper back, struck by how easy it was to lift his classmate. He hoisted the limp body, adjusting Midoriya until the dead weight settled more easily in his arms, and glanced over to where he'd seen Mr. Aizawa and Bakugou. He breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the explosive blond helping Asui carry their teacher with stiff, awkward movements. He really couldn't say he knew anything about the guy (other than his extreme temper and dislike of Midoriya), but Eijirou really didn't want to believe he was responsible for betraying them to the villains.

He'd always tried his best to see the good in others, a staunch believer in the inherent goodness present in every person. Nobody was born evil; there were always other factors at work, unfortunate circumstances turning what could have been good people into damaged, dangerous individuals. Maybe... maybe that was Bakugou's future, as things stood. If nothing changed, if he was left an outcast brimming with anger, maybe he'd become one of those individuals. As much as Eijirou knew his own anger was justified, considering his friend's scarred countenance, it wouldn't be healthy to hold onto. Midoriya's desperate defense of Bakugou was telling, either of Bakugou's character or Midoriya's mental health. Either way, the only choice he could make in good conscious was to support his friend, whether that meant tolerating Bakugou or helping to disarm their volatile relationship.

But first he had to make sure they made it out of the situation alive. He backpedaled to create distance from the villains and their monster, pausing only when All Might caught his eye. He swallowed a lump when the hero flashed him a thumbs up and a grin, swallowing down his hero worship. "Well, what's it going to be? Will you come quietly, or will I have to subdue you myself?" All Might's tone straddled the line between professional and hostile, his immense distaste for the villains seeping through. The hand guy looked visibly agitated, one hand scratching deep grooves into his throat while the other clenched at his own face, shoulders heaving with raspy breaths.

"Shigaraki," the warping villain began in a warning tone, his smoke flaring out in tiny pulses, "we've been bested. Victory will wait until another day." All Might visibly tensed at the words, legs locking to propel him forwards-

A screaming Noumu emerged from a warp gate opened directly in the hero's face, its limbs still caught in the process of regeneration. However, its massive snapping mouth was still completely capable of doing damage, and Eijirou winced when its teeth caught on All Might's shoulder before he could dodge out of the way, a gash opening in his upper arm. Another warp gate caught Eijirou's eye, alarm forcing words past his lips even as he registered the situation. "All Might, they're getting away!" His cry rang out, prompting All Might to blitz past the closing warp gate in pursuit of the villains in mid teleport. His fingertips just barely grazed a well of shadows, before they winked out of existence entirely. He whirled around just in time to see the Noumu fall through a similar portal, its limbless torso pulled through the shadows.

"Damn," All Might hissed, turning slowly from the spot the villains had once occupied. Eijirou could empathize; the anticlimax left him with a sour taste in his mouth, knowing that the villains whom had caused so much suffering managed to simply escape without anyone able to stop them. Eijirou perked up when All Might caught his gaze again, the hero's chiseled features lined with weariness. "I thank you for your bravery, young Kirishima. And young Asui and Mineta, as well. I'd like you all to regroup at the main entrance—I'll handle the injured from here."

Eijirou vaguely heard Mineta complain about Mr. Aizawa bleeding all over the place before All Might relieved him of Midoriya's slight weight, pensive thought bleeding in with the hero's
weariness. "A-are the rest of the teachers gonna be here soon?" Eijirou questioned, hands falling to his sides.

"Should only be a minute or two, now," All Might replied, shifting Mr. Aizawa's weight from Asui and Mineta to cradle the man in the crook of his arm. "Stay with your classmates, alright? The teachers will gather everyone missing and detain these criminals until the police arrive." Eijirou reflexively squeezed his eyes shut when the hero took off, the burst of wind he left in his wake making the loose fabric of his costume flap loudly. He stared long after All Might had left his sight, wondering why he didn't feel relieved.

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Izuku Midorya opened his eyes at the same moment his consciousness was rebuilt, ten thousand shards of stained glass painstakingly pieced back together into a whole image. His senses trickled into place, one by one, the sight of a speckled white ceiling and the fragrance of antiseptic mixed with lavender air freshener mingling together. Warmth crept slowly outwards from his core, fingers and toes tingling as he flexed them underneath crisp white sheets.

His left arm faintly stung when he shifted it, and Izuku managed to blearily turn his head and register the IV inserted into the inside of his elbow. Oh, he was in the nurse's office again. The lack of fog obscuring his thoughts pointed to a distinct lack of painkillers in his drip, so he assumed it must have been saline and nothing else. Electrolytes were good. Izuku appreciated them. His IV stand was tucked close to the wall, which meant he was in the far corner of the room, instead of closest to the entrance.

Izuku blinked slowly and yawned, idly licking the back of his teeth. They tasted sour and fuzzy, which brought a grimace to his face. He was so sure he'd remembered to brush that morning. He'd just brush extra hard later. He faintly registered a steady beeping sound, coming from his right. Whatever happened must have been fairly serious, if he'd been hooked up to an EKG. That was mildly alarming, but he was still unable to place the incident responsible.

Izuku yawned again, eyes reflexively shut as he wriggled around onto his other side, numb cheek pressing into the pillow case underneath him. His vision refocused from the smear of colors it had fuzzed into, coalescing into the stiff, glaring form of Katsuki Bakugou, sat on the edge of a chair just to the right of Izuku's bed. He didn't dare to blink, staring into molten red depths in quiet bewilderment. "K..Kacchan?"

Kacchan blinked once, and that was enough to break Izuku from his spellbound daze. His consciousness situated itself with a 'click' that unleashed a grimy black deluge, raw memories crashing into Izuku as a single entity. His eyes blew wide, breath catching hard in his chest as his anxiety spiked from 'minimal' all the way up to 'absolutely unable to cope'. He sucked in a rattling breath, desperate to intake oxygen before his insides collapsed and imploded, pupils constricting with blind panic-

"Hey, fucking calm down, idiot!" Kacchan hissed under his breath, his irritation back lit by a flash of alarm. "Nobody got hurt except you and Aizawa, and that grimy fuck is recovering, so fucking put a lid on the waterworks for one goddamn second!"

Izuku pressed his fingers over his mouth to stifle a miserable whine, eyes wide and glossy with tears just aching to fall. He mumbled a mostly incoherent apology, shrinking into the mattress under the weight of Kacchan's gaze. Everything. Kacchan had seen everything, hadn't he? He could hardly recall what horrors he had committed, what destruction he had wreaked, and the pain of ignorance throbbed under his skull. He slowly peeled his fingers away, spikes of white hot panic melting into despair. "Y-y-you s-saw, d-didn't you?" His words crumbled in the air, voice thin and reedy with crushing defeat. It was over. It was over.
"Of course I fucking saw, you maniac," Kacchan hissed, the heat in his voice forcing Izuku to flinch away or risk being scalded. "What the fuck is wrong with you? You are seriously the most fucked up person I've ever met. You're so goddamn stupid it makes me want to rip my own fucking head off and punt it into the sun, you shit sucking fuck stick!" Kacchan's voice battered him with painful clarity, each word gouging deeper the emptiness in Izuku's chest. But he knew it was what he deserved, knew it was inevitable, knew everything was his fault- "Why didn't you tell anyone? Why didn't you get help?"

Izuku locked up, all his internal processes frozen in disbelief as the indomitable paradigm of Kacchan and Deku was turned to powder in two sentences. "I-I... y-y-you, w-what do you mean?" Izuku's tongue tied itself into a useless, soaking knot, drooling words he hadn't even taken a single moment to think through.

And they were clearly the wrong ones, judging by the harsh slant of Kacchan's eyebrows and the bubbling heat in his gaze. "What the fuck do you think I mean, idiot? Apparently I overestimated how much of a brainy little shit you were, because that's the dumbest fucking drivel that's ever spilled outta your mouth. What kinda dipshit fucking keeps that shit a secret? Newsflash, asshole-Quirk counselling exists for a goddamn reason! But no, poor crybaby Izuku just had to play fucking masochistic martyr for ten goddamn years because he's too much of a pants-on-head drooling moron to realize that the worst possible thing to do with a destructive Quirk is not fucking tell anyone about it!"

Distantly, Izuku admired Kacchan's ability to keep his voice low enough to not disturb the quiet of the nurse's office (especially because it was after dark, judging by the lack of light peering through the closed blinds) whilst still infusing each word with enough force to feel like hammer blows. He swallowed a mouthful of confusion, half wishing he could sink into the mattress completely and disappear. "W-why-I-I know it's stupid, t-t-that's not what I m-mean to a-ask. I...

A long moment of silence passed, seconds oozing in grimy trails where all Izuku could hear was his own unstable breathing. It went on so long that he peeked open one eye, unsure of why Kacchan hadn't-screamed, or blown his head up, or something. Instead of murderous, he looked... unsure. Izuku considered him in a dazed stupor, unsure if he had ever seen Kacchan left speechless by something so mundane as a question.

"...It's not like I want you dead, you fucker. Sure, you piss me off so much I can hardly breathe sometimes, but that-I didn't mean to-" Kacchan cut himself off with a snarl, teeth gritting together in frustration. "You read the fucking letter. You know how I feel about what happened. It was a mistake. I-" Kacchan snapped his mouth closed, annoyance shining clear through his expression. He visibly started, however, at the sound of a muffled sob leaving Izuku's lips. "The fuck are you crying about now?"

Izuku sniffled and hiccuped, tears streaming uncontested down his cheeks. He pulled his lips into as wide a smile as he could, the right side of his mouth a little stiffer than the left. "I-I'm j-j-just so h-happy you don't hate me, Kacchan," he half-sobbed, unable to wipe away the elation in his grin even as Kacchan grew increasingly alarmed looking. "A-and-and I'm s-sorry I used m-my Quirk on you, y-you didn't deserve it. I wa-was just so sure you h-hated me, but.. b-but-" Izuku choked out a sob, his chest singing and heaving and hemorrhaging as it swelled with an unending swirl of emotion that he was unable to contain.

"Shut the fuck up you blubbering idiot," Kacchan muttered, the heat in his voice died down to a tepid simmer. "I swear to god if you keep acting sappy I'll push your ass out the damn window."
Izuku laughed without restraint, squeaky and embarrassing and absolutely necessary. He flushed up to his ears and slapped a hand over his mouth when Kacchan skewered him with a glare, mumbling an apology into his fingers. He wiped away the trail of tears that had slowed to a trickle, sniffling to clear his airways. "U-uhm.. so what happened? After I.. l-lost coherence, I mean."

"All Might showed up after you started tearing that Noumu thing apart," Kacchan began dispassionately, not looking directly at Izuku. "Your Quirk deactivated and you passed out like a wuss while All Might tried to force the villains to surrender. Red Hair Fuck, Frog Freak, and Disgusting Grape showed up to help me drag Aizawa and your dumb ass out of danger. The villains managed to get away, but their monster's shit was so wrecked it couldn't regenerate. All the other teachers showed up, they stuck Greasy Fucknut in the hospital and dumped you here, where you've been out cold for three goddamn days you lazy fuck-

"W-wait, what?!" Izuku yelped, jerking up to sit ramrod straight in bed. "T-Three days?! O-oh my god I w-was out for th-three days-I was in a coma?! Oh god my m-mom's probably lost her mind no wonder I'm on the EKG and IV without having sustained serious injuries oh gosh I c-can't believe-"

"Holy shit, would you fucking shut up for like two seconds?!
 SOCIAL MEDIA IS NOT MUTE!" Kacchan barked, voice raised just on the cusp of 'louder than conversational'. "Stop freaking out, you shitty nerd, I swear you lose your damn mind like thirty fucking times a day. Your mom's been here practically twenty four seven, so you already missed the freak out. She left like an hour ago to pick up clothes and shit for you. Also your dumb ass friends are sleeping in the waiting room, so keep your damn voice down, it's like eleven at night you inconsiderate fuck."

"S-sorry," Izuku squeaked, head bowed under the weight of Kacchan's reprimands. Oddly enough they didn't feel hostile, the way all their interactions had been for years and years. The anger in Kacchan's voice was still present (the only times Kacchan didn't sound angry were when he sounded boastful), but it was.. different. It wasn't directed towards him in ire and disgust. Izuku's heart fluttered hopefully, and he cleared his throat before speaking more calmly. "I.. y-you said my friends are in the lobby-who's all here?"

"All of 'em, obviously," Kacchan sneered, crossing one leg over the other. "Round Face, Stupid Glasses, Bird Guy, and Red Hair Idiot. Recovery Girl wouldn't let them drag a couch back here, so they're in the lobby; your fucking menagerie of morons."

"O-oh." Izuku smiled so hard it hurt at the knowledge that his friends had been so willing to wait for him, his vision a little misty. "U-uhm.. why are you back here, Kacchan? I-instead of in the lobby, I mean."

"Because I can't stand those idiots?" Izuku received a roll of red eyes that let him know exactly how stupid Kacchan found his question. "All of 'em, obviously," Kacchan sneered, crossing one leg over the other. "Round Face, Stupid Glasses, Bird Guy, and Red Hair Idiot. Recovery Girl wouldn't let them drag a couch back here, so they're in the lobby; your fucking menagerie of morons."

"O-oh." Izuku smiled so hard it hurt at the knowledge that his friends had been so willing to wait for him, his vision a little misty. "U-uhm.. why are you back here, Kacchan? I-instead of in the lobby, I mean."

"Because I can't stand those idiots?" Izuku received a roll of red eyes that let him know exactly how stupid Kacchan found his question. "S-so.. you waited in here w-with me instead?" Izuku's voice cracked halfway through his sentence, his eyes wide and glistening.

"Fuck you, I know exactly what you're getting at, shithed," Kacchan growled, expression twisting into a scowl of legitimate annoyance. "Don't fucking get a big head-we're not friends, got it? So quit fucking pushing your luck. Pisses me off." He tore his gaze away the moment Izuku's expression fell.

"S-sorry, I.. I didn't m-mean to..." Izuku trailed off into an indistinct whisper, sinking a little further into the pillow propping him up. He would have chastised himself for overstepping his boundaries, but the tiny scraps of courage he clung to persuaded him to take a different approach. "D..do you t-think we ever could be?" He forced himself not to flinch when molten red eyes turned to scrutinize
him. "F..friends, I mean."

Silence dragged on between them for what felt like eons, Izuku trembling but determined to hold Kacchan's gaze until he earned an answer. Maybe something was wrong with him; most people didn't make a habit of admiring and forgiving their bullies after years of torment, and then asking to be friends. Maybe Izuku was just lonely and obsessive, desperate to reach out to anyone, even his aggressor—but he had to know, had to be sure he wasn't just wasting his time being hopeful.

Kacchan's eyebrows furrowed together in thought, his lips turned down in a frown containing only traces of his normal aggression. His eyes sharpened for a moment when Izuku stared unabashedly at him, and he sighed when green eyes didn't even move. "Fuck if I know. So much bullshit's gone on that at this point anything's possible. Just don't get fucking sappy on me. Got it, Izuku?"

Izuku's insides lit up like a fireworks display, multicolored flashes of positive brilliance that left him tingling in his extremities. He flashed a wide grin, something like bliss surfacing from the stew of his tangled feelings. "Got it." He paused for a moment before something occurred to him, a thought that supercharged his smile into a beacon of light. "Th-thank you for not calling me Deku, b-by the way!"

Kacchan twitched, shock quickly covered by a mask of sneering anger. "What the fuck ever, it's only because my shitty therapist is in cahoots with that fucking greasy haired bastard." His eye twitched erratically when Izuku's smile didn't falter, lips pulling back in a snarl. "Stop fucking smiling at me, asshole, I just told you not to get sappy! I swear I'll fucking cram you headfirst into the wall you crybaby fuckhead-"

Izuku stifled giddy giggles behind a hand, glowing as he was showered with insults that felt like praise. If even Kacchan had forgiven him for what happened, for the person he was and the Quirk he possessed.. then maybe things would work out.
Izuku managed a few reluctant hours of sleep after his... (breakthrough? reconciliation?) conversation with Kacchan, settling down once the other boy had practically shoved his head into his pillow. He'd initially planned on taking the eight hours between rest and wakefulness to try and think objectively about his situation and organize his thoughts, but apparently being comatose had done little to dislodge his sleep schedule. His dreams remained far out of his reach, as indistinct as the splotches of color behind his closed eyelids.

Izuku groaned into his pillow the moment his ability to slip back into unconsciousness left his reach, feeling groggy and half aware. It reminded him of long weekends where he'd sleep until mid afternoon and barely be able to drag himself out of bed before sunset, weighed down by the over abundance of unconsciousness. He shifted his legs under the sheets, half wishing to prolong the moment he had to actually wake up and face the day.

Unfortunately the day had no desire to wait until he was ready, forcing him to face it in the form of a foot slamming into the side of his bed, rattling the metal frame and Izuku's skull as a result. "Wake up, asshole! How much damn sleep do you need? Your mom's here so stop fucking luxuriating already!"

Izuku shot up in bed, clutching at his ringing head as a whine slipped past his lips. "S-sorry, sorry, I-I'm up," he babbled frantically, partially trying to remember where he was and what was going on and also why Kacchan was right next to him when he was sleeping that was kind of alarming and embarrassing-

"Izuku, honey? Are you awake?" Izuku jumped in shock, peering around a sneering Kacchan to spy his mother's worried expression peering through the curtain separating him from the rest of the nurse's office. He had half a moment to meet her gaze and allow guilt to well up in his chest before she'd closed the distance, capturing most of his upper torso in a crushing hug. When she spoke again her voice was hitching with oncoming tears, a sound that left Izuku feeling like all his insides had been scooped out. "Oh sweetie, I'm so glad you're awake! I was so worried, I didn't know if..

Izuku stifled a full body eruption at the warmth of tears on his shoulder, frantically cramming down his endless tide of remorse and slapping on what was meant to be a reassuring smile. "M-mom, it's okay, I-I'm fine now really please don't w-worry-"

His mother eventually pulled away amidst his sea of desperate reassurances, her eyes wet but her smile full of relief. "I'm alright, sweetheart, don't worry. I just needed to air some things out." She pressed a kiss to the crown of his head, and Izuku flushed a violent red when he remembered Bakugou was still in the room. "The specialist said you were unconscious from an overuse of your Quirk. Please promise to be more careful, sweetie."

All the color in Izuku's face drained away, his smile falling in great heaving chunks until it was left looking postmortem. His mother's tone had been reproachful and loving, but the same quiet melancholy he'd seen more and more evidence of had peered through the cracks. He swallowed a lump of scorching lead, voice shuddering out of him in a pile of barely living syllables. "Y...y-you knew, didn't you?"

His mother's smile was softened by the weathering of time, a thing older and sadder than he had any context to understand. "I've known for a long time, Izuku. I didn't know what your Quirk was, but it was impossible not to see how much it was hurting you."
"I'm sorry," Izuku croaked, his throat tight and his eyes burning with hot, bitter tears. "I'm sorry, I sh-shouldn't have lied to you, I'm sorry I'm sorry." His voice broke off into jagged shards, red hot shrapnel that left behind blackened gouges. He pressed his face into his mother's shoulder, shoulders shaking with the monumental effort of keeping him whole. He wasn't even standing but it felt like his legs would give out, every piece of him unhinged and barely kept from springing apart by sheer willpower.

"I'm sorry you ever felt like you needed to lie to me, sweetie," his mother murmured, somehow still composed. "It's true that you shouldn't have lied, Izuku. But I made a mistake in not pushing you to open up more." He could feel the regret twined around her words, a pain that resonated from her until its echo lived within him.

"I-I'm sorry," he repeated ad infinitum, feeling rote and useless but unsure of what else he could possibly say to make up for what he'd done. "I-I won't lie to you again. I promise. I-I love you, mom," he whispered, his throat clogged with emotion. Despite having lied to her for years about his Quirk, Izuku had never been able to hide how he felt around his mother.

"I love you too, sweetheart," she said more into his hair than the open air, squeezing him around the shoulders before ending the embrace. He was immediately struck by the retreat of his mother's warmth, struck with the yearning to chase after its threads. "Just be more careful for me, okay?"

"I-I will. Promise." Izuku sighed out a soft breath, his shoulders losing tension as some of the weight rested on them was relieved. He'd managed to complete two of his last desires (perhaps one and a half, he amended at the thought of Kacchan's strange not-quite-hostility) and the prospect of tackling the third left him trembling with bashful nerves. He certainly hadn't been closed off with his friends (if his numerous mortifying emotional crises were anything to go by), but being absolutely frank with them about how much he appreciated their support and initiating physical contact sounded.. intimidating. Maybe he could just quietly bake them pastries and make cards, or something-

"We're going to be heading home soon, sweetie," his mother interrupted his thoughts, her demeanor much brighter than it had been a few moments ago. "The police just need a statement from you about what happened, and All Might wanted to speak with you. But before that, I think you have some visitors that wanted to see you!" His mother's face lit up with an elation he'd only caught glimpses of, whenever he talked offhandedly about his friends.

Izuku had roughly four seconds to mentally and emotionally prepare himself for his third sure-to-be extremely emotional conversation since waking up from a three day coma after a near death experience at the hands of murderous villains. Maybe he could take a ten year sabbatical from his education and visit a tropical island, or something. Izuku emerged from a slightly bittersweet fantasy about sleeping on a Caribbean beach when the curtain parted, allowing Kirishima, Uraraka, Iida, and Tokoyami to file through.

Izuku was immediately struck by how disheveled his friends looked. Kirishima's hair was a flat mop on his head, bright red spikes hanging in messy strands from a lack of product. Uraraka looked like she'd fallen out of a moving vehicle, her clothing uneven and her hair sticking up on one side where she'd clearly failed to brush it. Iida's shirt was vaguely wrinkled, which Izuku had realized was the equivalent of his friend spending three months stranded on a deserted island, and Tokoyami.. actually looked fine. He was about as well kempt and impassive as he usually was, but maybe Izuku just didn't understand the nuances of proper feather hygiene.

"H-hey guys-" Izuku managed to eek out, before the breath was forcibly expelled from him by the force of Uraraka's hug crushing his ribs. The rest of his planned greeting was flattened into a wheeze, and he had to settle with awkwardly patting Uraraka's back with his fingertips.
"I'm so glad you're okay, Izuku!" She cried, bringing his rapid thought processes to a screeching halt when she peered at him with wide, shimmering eyes. She'd looked unkempt just walking in, but the concern and remorse mingling on her face made her a wreck. "When Shouji said that villain monster was going after you, I-" Her voice hitched, and Izuku's head immediately blared with alarms.

"I-I'm really sorry for worrying you, b-but I'm fine, its okay-" he clamped his mouth shut when Uraraka's gaze hardened with ferocity, tears budding in the corners of her eyes.

"Don't be sorry, Izuku! Stop apologizing for things that aren't your fault! I'm upset because you almost got hurt, not because you did something wrong!" Uraraka's lips trembled, but didn't break the coherence of her determined expression. She squeezed him again, gently enough that he could at least breathe, but firm enough to drive her point home.

"I-I'm o-okay," Izuku mumbled, unsure of what exactly he could say when he was disallowed from apologizing. He returned Uraraka's embrace a little more confidently, flushing up to his ears when she pulled away with a beaming smile. "H-how long have you guys b-been here?" If anyone noticed his voice crack during his desperate attempt to change the subject, they at least didn't mention it.

"Since like, Saturday afternoon," Kirishima replied, his smile slightly droopy but no less bright. "We all got permission from our parents to hang out here over night, in case you woke up. My folks were pretty reluctant at first, but All Might helped wear 'em down. So yeah, basically since then. All Might came in a few times, and your mom was in and out a lot. Tsuyu came by yesterday, too. I think Iida has a card from her-oh, and Bakugou was here like, since Friday I think. He just kinda disappeared after the police cleared all the 'traitor' stuff up so I guess he came here-"

"Shut the fuck up, Shitty Hair!" Bakugou snarled, the mention of his name enough to pull him away from the window he'd been brooding loudly at. His eyes narrowed at the exact same rate Izuku's widened, a trembling grin and budding tears met with a ferocious twist of his lips. "STOP LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT, ASSHOLE!"

"He was a lot quieter when you were asleep," Kirishima spoke over him brightly, Tokoyami muttering in annoyance at Bakugou's volume. "He only yelled like five times I think."

"W-wow," Izuku gushed, disbelief twining with the amazement in his tone, "Kacchan is always yelling. That sounds like he's making progress!" He glossed over Kacchan's shout of 'DON'T TALK ABOUT ME LIKE I'M NOT HERE YOU FUCK' in favor of allowing pride to swell in his chest. "S-so he wasn't.. mean to you guys, w-was he?"

"While I certainly couldn't describe Bakugou as 'pleasant and polite company', his behavior was much more welcoming than in recent days," Iida spoke, calm words cutting right through Bakugou's indistinct yell of rage. "We all spoke at length with him about.. moving forward, I suppose, and offered our apologizes as well, for doubting his loyalty."

"I made sure to let him know that if he ever laid a hand on you again I'd make him float into the upper reaches of the stratosphere," Uraraka chimed in pleasantly, her cheerful tone making a shiver crawl down Izuku's spine. He laughed nervously, eyes darting between her blissful grin and Kacchan's broiling fury.

"FUCK YOU, YOU ROUND FACED BITCH I'LL KICK YOUR ASS RIGHT NOW-"

"Anyway," Kirishima interrupted loudly, plopping himself down on Izuku's bed and forcing a squeak of shock out of him because wow they were sitting really close all of a sudden- "We cleared stuff up with him, and we're pretty much cool now. I can't speak for the rest of the class, but
everyone at least knows he wasn't responsible for the whole 'villain attack' thing. Other than that.."
Kirishima paused, clearly mulling over whatever words were meant to have come next. "Am I
forgetting anything?"

"I believe you were fairly accurate in your recounting, Kirishima," Iida praised, digging through his
pocket to retrieve a pale green card, which Izuku gladly accepted from his friend's stiff grip. "Though
perhaps you could have stayed on topic instead of straying into tangents. After all, delivering
information in a clear and concise manner is paramount to hero work, both on and off the field!"

Izuku listened with half an ear to Iida's advice, covering his mouth to stifle a squeal when he realized
the card was decorated with tiny cartoon frogs. He resisted the urge to look inside right away, stifling
a smile when the words 'Don't let life bog you down!' peered up at him from his lap.

He gazed up halfway through Iida's heartfelt speech about the importance of eliminating sentence
fragments, struggling to find his voice. "H..h, uhm, K-Kirishima?" He bit his lip when blood
orange eyes turned his way, bright and warm even when they were marred by clear signs of poor
sleep. "I.. Ka-ran told me you s-saved me, after I passed out. I w-wanted to-uhm-I j-just.." Izuku
fumbled through his words, struggling with them for a long moment before he forced his way past
the barrier. He leaned forward without hesitation, throwing his arms around a patient Kirishima in an
embrace that he hoped could express even a fraction of his gratitude. He could feel the moment of
hesitation, Kirishima's arms hovering at his sides before one looped around him in turn. "Th-thank
you," he mumbled, his voice run through with a spiderweb of cracks. "T-thank you so much, a-all of
you, f-for not h-hating me, an-and, being nice to m-me, a-a-and-"

"Hey, hey, calm down, man," Kirishima soothed, one arm firm and warm around Izuku's shoulders.
It was only then that he even realized he'd begun crying again, his tumultuous simmer of emotions
boiling over in hot trails of tears. "Of course I helped you out, Midoriya. Of course we don't hate
you! We're you're friends, which means we support you, okay?"

"Izukuuu," Uraraka practically wailed, throwing herself onto the bed to fling her arms around his
midsection. "How could you think we would hate you? You didn't do anything wrong, okay?
Nothing that happened was your fault!"

"She's right." Iida stiffly placed a hand on Izuku's shoulder, his posture awkward but his expression
softened from its usual sternness. "As friends, we're here to support you not because we have to, but
because we want to. We're here to help, whenever you need it."

Izuku swallowed an embarrassing sob, failing to stem the flow of tears. He felt almost consumed by
light, something that burned so much brighter than he could have ever managed on his own. His
breath hitched when he attempted to speak, to say something that meant so much more than 'thank
you'-

"Midoriya," Tokoyami uttered, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. His gaze was sharp and
focused, his voice a low, steady hum. "I've done a disservice to you. I made a promise to you that I
would aid you in facing the darkness, but I was callous. I did not see to which the depths dark
trenches ran, though I needed only to look a little harder. That folly was my own, wholly and utterly.
I apologize, for not taking the time to understand how deeply you have been burdened by your
plight. It is not a mistake I will make again." Tokoyami bowed in a smooth motion, his remorse a
solid presence that bolstered his words instead of dismantling them.

"Y-you don't h-have to be sorry," Izuku croaked, his head spinning and spinning because his only
truths were run through with hair thin cracks (fear and misery a distant displeasure instead of the
blood in his veins and the marrow in his bones) and he was unable to process it, everything was too
much but it didn't hurt, there was only a sweet ache he'd never known, couldn't put a name to-
"Your forgiveness is both humbling and appreciated, but it will not undo my inaction," Tokoyami countered, straightening his posture and staring deep into Izuku's eyes. "You deserve better than paltry half-efforts. What worth does a promise have, if I don't keep it? So while I thank you for your kindness, it does not absolve me. Redemption lies in action, and so further action I shall take to assist you in carrying your burden. You are not alone."

And that was enough. Izuku's first sob ripped free of his chest, so relieved that it burned every inch of him with warmth, something more than the frigid hollowness he'd grown so used to. He spilled words in an endless mantra, born not of fear and disconnect, but of gratitude so deep that Izuku wasn't sure he could ever make it known. "Thank you thank you thank you thank you-"
Chapter 24

Holy wow, apparently Tumblr is a thing, and apparently I have one at https://introspectiveinquisitor.tumblr.com ! Feel free to hit me up if you want to chat/have questions about the story!

Also, I wanted to include a compilation of all the fanart I've received so far, and thank all the artists again for their wonderful work!

http://howshowbreadcruisedmylife.tumblr.com/post/163127786963/living-nightmare
https://www.instagram.com/p/BWjYSLCF_5c/
http://ttfn-moulting.tumblr.com/post/162746359093/the-bnha-fanfic/daymare-has-eaten-my-heart-and
http://befuddledbun.tumblr.com/post/162501102454/hey-guys-you-should-read-daymare-by
https://twitter.com/diechrollo/status/880730650181079041
https://www.instagram.com/p/BV3q9riAOcO/
https://flammenwerfer.tumblr.com/post/163231723547/this-keeps-reblogging-to-the-wrong-blog-anyways
http://oldseablues.tumblr.com/post/163238310078/concept-art-for-this-neatol-fanfic-that-ive-been
Thank you again to everyone that's made fanart for this story, you're all wonderful and I can't thank you enough!

After nearly ten minutes of trying to calm himself down from his umpteeenth emotional breakdown, Izuku reluctantly parted ways with his friends as he was discharged from Recovery Girl's care. He changed into a set of clothes his mother had brought him when everyone had left, a pair of well worn track pants and a hoodie that'd gone through the wash so many times that its bright green hue had long dimmed, along with an All Might shirt that swamped him in fabric. Apparently his mother had picked up on what his comfort clothes looked like. He bid a small goodbye to Recovery Girl on the way out, feeling bad that he'd dumped so much work on her in such a short amount of time.

Izuku stepped out of the nurse's office half a step behind his mother, overcome with the strangeness of being on campus during school hours, but not attending classes. "Y-you said the police wanted a statement, right? I-Is Mr. All Might gonna meet us after, o-or will he be there?"

"He asked to meet up with us outside the teacher's lounge once you were discharged. I'm sure it won't take too long, sweetie." Izuku's mother turned to walk them in the direction of the lounge, prompting Izuku to assume she knew where she was going.
"I-I don't mind if it takes a while. I k-know how important it is. I just want to help, i-if I can," Izuku trailed off into a mumble, rubbing the hem of a sleeve between finger and thumb. He honestly was nervous about talking to the police, an illogically hysterical part of him afraid that they'd want to arrest him. Although if they had somehow found out about him killing that slime villain then even if he wouldn't be charged with murder it'd probably still leave a mark on his record that would ruin his chances of being a hero and he'd have to live a life of shame and get left behind by all his friends and settle down in a one bedroom apartment with house plants as his only companions-

"Ah, the Midoriyas! Glad to see you both!" All Might's booming voice filled the hallway, snapping Izuku out of a downward spiral into a world full of wilting plants. He glanced up to smile awkwardly at his teacher, the hero looking as statuesque as his merchandise. He squeaked a little when All Might closed the remaining few feet between them, first shaking his slightly starry eyed mother's hand, and then his own and wow he hadn't realized before but All Might's hands were crazy huge-"I'm relieved to see you recovered, young man! You gave us all quite a scare."

"S-sorry," Izuku blurted reflexively, before he could even attempt to think of a response. He silently reprimanded himself, guilt welling up at the thought of not following Uraraka's advice. Logically, he knew he couldn't just expect all his mannerisms and idiosyncrasies born from a decade of deteriorating mental health to just clear up all at once, but he couldn't help expecting better of himself. Which was probably also an idiosyncrasy born of said mental illness when he really thought about it- "U-uhm-the police w-wanted to speak with me, sir?"

"Indeed! They need a statement from you before the investigation can officially begin. And I'm afraid I have to ask you to stay outside, Mrs. Midoriya. It's nothing personal, but the details of the attack are sensitive information at the moment. I hope you understand." Izuku vaguely wondered how All Might managed to make his grin look apologetic without his face even moving.

His mother's answering smile was a little bit strained, but she nodded her assent. "I understand. Thank you so much for looking out for my son, All Might. He's very lucky to have such a wonderful hero as you for a teacher. He's admitted you ever since he was little, running around in an All Might onesie and coming up with hero names-" Inko's nostalgic smile was a death sentence in Izuku's eyes, a sure sign that she'd mortify him endlessly with tales of him as a small child.

"HAHA A-ANYWAY w-wow really g-gotta talk to those n-nice officers love you mom I-I'll try not to take too long hahahaha-" Izuku's nervous laughter left him like the squawks of a bird caught in an oscillating fan, one arm wrapped around his face with the vague desire to pull his own head off and the other scrabbling to simultaneously open the door to the teacher's lounge and frantically signal for the Symbol of Peace to walk through it.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the door finally clicked shut behind him, shoulders sagging as the weight of impending mombarrassment was lifted. The teacher's lounge looked exactly the same as when he'd been in it before (save an extra coffee stain or two, maybe), except for the addition of someone Izuku assumed to be part of the police force.

The officer was extremely plain looking, average almost to the point of absurdity; it'd be nearly impossible for Izuku to pick him out of a crowd. However, his expression radiated polite friendliness, which was enough to set Izuku at ease, at least a little. "Ah, hey All Might. I presume this is Izuku Midoriya?"

"Indeed he is! Young Midoriya here is one of my brightest students; I'm sure he'll be a big help in jump starting the investigation!" Izuku flushed so hard that he felt dizzy at the sound of his hero's praise, nearly stumbling off balance when All Might clapped a hand on his shoulder. All Might's tone hadn't even sounded boastful in the way he'd heard some of his previous teachers talk about
exemplary students, as if they were the ones that had made incredible accomplishments. That could only mean All Might was being sincere, which was an emotional revelation that he really couldn't deal with on the same day as like five other emotional revelations-

"I'm sure he will. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Midoriya. I'm detective Tsukauchi, and I just have a few questions for you regarding the incident at the USJ." The detective offered him a hand, and Izuku shook it lightly, attempting to figure out exactly how he was supposed to talk to a police officer.

"I-It's nice to meet y-you too, sir," he uttered meekly, settling stiffly on one of the empty couches when the detective motioned for him to sit. Izuku started when another weight dropped onto the couch beside him, a moment of confusion flitting through him because the detective was across from him and All Might was the only other person in the room, and the displacement was wildly disproportionate to how much his teacher's size and stature-

Izuku squawked in panic when he glanced over at All Might, the hero bone thin and weathered by exhaustion. "A-All Might-t-the detective-he-"

"Hey, don't freak out on me kid, it's fine. Tsukauchi and I go way back, he already knows." Izuku glanced frantically between the detective's patient smile and All Might's unconcerned (if slightly sunken) expression, his heart slowly dislodging itself from his throat.

"S-sorry, I.. uhm. W-what did you want to ask me, sir?" Izuku addressed the detective, whose demeanor dropped from open friendliness to something a little more professional.

"Just a few questions about the incident, as well as the perpetrators. Three of the villains involved in the attack are unaccounted for; one Tomura Shigaraki, Kurogiri, and a creature known only as Noumu. Do you recognize any of those names?"

"S-Shigaraki was the ringleader," Izuku uttered, attempting to navigate his memories without tripping over anything that would send him spiraling into an episode. "Kurogiri served as their transportation, w-with his Warp Quirk. Noumu was.. a-a monster, I think. They meant to kill All Might with it."

Detective Tsukauchi nodded, his handsy busy with official-looking forms and a ballpoint pen. "You were relocated by Kurogiri's Quirk into the central plaza during the attack, alongside your classmate Kasuki Bakugou, correct?" Izuku nodded faintly. "Can you recount the events that took place for me, as well as anything you remember about the villains themselves?"

"O-other than being there to kill All Might, uhm.. S-Shigaraki was-unstable. He spent a lot of time taunting Mr. Aizawa-ah, E-Eraserhead, and t-trying to goad Bakugou and I into a fight. W-when I used my Quirk on him in self defense, he was-outraged. H-he said something along the lines of me being a 'cheater', and Kurogiri had to persuade him to c-calm down. T-the basis of their plan was to have the Noumu fight All Might, a-and the rest of the villains would outnumber him while he was distracted. B-but.." Izuku swallowed a shaking breath, attempting to push all emotion from his voice and give an unbiased, logical recounting. "W-when All Might didn't show up r-right away, he-sent the Noumu after me. It was.. mindless, incapable of doing anything other than following orders. I u-used my Quirk in self defense, a-and.. um, then I woke up in the nurse's office."

Tsukauchi nodded, eyes flicking down to the paper he was writing on every few moments. A minute of quiet passed before he looked up again, looking thoughtful. "Speaking of your Quirk, Mr. Midoriya, your file has it listed as 'Living Nightmare', but there were no records of it in the official registry. Were you aware of this?"

"Ah, about that," All Might interrupted in a sheepish tone of voice, before Izuku had time to properly explode with anxiety, "There's been some issues with Midoriya's forms for a little while now, but
we're gonna get it all sorted out this week. We're performing a professional Quirk assessment on Friday, so we'll get everything filed and sorted in the registry by then."

"Glad to hear it," the detective replied amicably, the cue Izuku needed to start breathing again. "We've been working with principal Nedzu to comb the school's files for anything else that might be missing, and I thought Midoriya's file might be one of them. Good to see that isn't the case."

Tsukauchi shuffled through his papers for a moment before he handed one to Izuku, along with his pen. "I just need you to fill out this form for me, and then you can go. Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Midoriya."

"Y-yeah, it's no p-problem sir. I-I'm glad I could help." Izuku's smile turned out a little crooked, but he was feeling more and more at ease in the detective's presence. He'd certainly always had respect for police officers, but his love of heroes had mostly overshadowed it. But if detective Tsukauchi was someone that All Might could call a close friend, then he must have been a huge help to the Symbol of Peace. Izuku filled out his form with a bit more fervor, determined to help the detective in his investigation however he could. Unfortunately he couldn't work up the nerve to ask for an addendum to the form that he could use to write down his theories on the League of Villains motives, so he merely handed back the form while barely making eye contact.

"Thank you again." The detective rose from his seat, organizing his papers into a slim briefcase. He offered Izuku a polite nod, and smiled genially at All Might. "I wish we could catch up a little, but I've gotta be on my way. I'll see you later, All Might."

"See ya, Tsukauchi. Take care of yourself out there." All Might raised a hand to wave off the detective, but made no move to actually stand from the couch. Izuku's stomach twisted with nerves as the door clicked shut, leaving him alone with his teacher. The moment they were alone All Might sighed out a heavy breath, lifting himself from the couch in slow, painful looking movements. "Sorry to keep you longer, kid, I just wanted to have a word with you real quick. Do you want any tea?"

"N-no thank you, sir," Izuku mumbled, hoping he didn't sound impolite. He truly didn't mind speaking with All Might a little longer, but he was also still exhausted even after three days in a hospital bed, and he was sure his mother was antsy to get him back home. "U-uhm, what did you want to speak with me about?"

All Might spent a few moments busying himself by digging through a cabinet, presumably looking for tea. Eventually he gave up on it altogether, turning back meet Izuku's gaze with deeply set eyes, his expression lined with regret? "I wanted to apologize to you. Seems I've been doing a lot of that lately, huh?" The hero's frown twisted into a bitter smirk, and he continued speaking before Izuku could frantically try to reassure him that he didn't need to apologize. "I took your feelings too lightly, on the day with the slime villain, and again on the first day of class. I just thought you were a troubled kid in need of guidance, you know? There's tons of kids out there that are afraid of their Quirks because they never learned, never got the direction they needed. I spent too much time assuming, and not enough time listening. I should have realized it went deeper, should have gotten you assessed weeks ago. Your power.. I understand why you're afraid of it.

"But know this, young Midoriya," All Might continued, his tone thicker, run through with determination like rebar reinforcements. "Your power belongs to you. You don't belong to it. A villain with a power like yours could kill thousands of people, topple cities and throw society into chaos. But you aren't a villain, and your power is yours to command. I may have only known you for a few weeks, but I know you've got the spirit of a true hero. You are kind, and compassionate, and selfless to a fault. You have the potential to be an incredible hero one day."

Izuku sat, stunned into silence, barely able to feel his own tears over the hot flush that had consumed
his face and filled his chest. All Might's every word resonated in his heart, blood hot and pulsing in
his ears. "S-s-sir-"

"I'm not finished yet, young Midoriya." All Might stepped away from the counter, his eyes bright
with heroic light and his presence magnified even outside of his hero form. "You know of my
power's weakening—my time limit, my injury. But there's more to it than that. My power is one passed
down through the generations, from one great hero to another. Born of a Quirk that stockpiles power,
and one that passes itself to others... my power is called One For All." Izuku's breath lodged in his
throat, pupils blown wide and head racing with a thousand different trains of thought. He couldn't
tear his gaze away from All Might, thin and haggard but glowing with heroism like the sun on earth,
his eyes alight with intensity.

"This power was passed to me many years ago, and gave me the strength to change the world. One
For All gave me the chance to save those in need, to fight back those who would see our world
under their thumb! And now.. it's time for it to be given to another: someone brave, someone kind,
someone driven!" The scope of the universe narrowed down to a pinprick, populated only by a
trembling Izuku Midoriya and his idol, All Might standing tall and leaking wisps of steam, his eyes
burning electric blue and his fist clenched in front of him. "I offer my power to you, Izuku Midoriya!
Should you accept it, you will become the next Symbol of Peace; a shining beacon for those lost in
the dark, the bastion of all that is just and kind in this world!" All Might extended his hand, fingers
splayed out and reaching, offering. "The burden you carry is great indeed, young Midoriya, and what
I offer you will be no easy task to complete. But I believe you have the strength to overcome, to go
beyond, to rise up and make these powers your own!"

Izuku's heart thundered in his ears, his breath a whistling echo of hyperventilation that filled his chest
with twinkling starlight. The universe lived within All Might's palm, a tapestry of infinite galaxies,
infinite possibilities, finally within his grasp. He could taste the light of heroism, could feel its
whispered caress yearning to exhume the terror under his skin and within his bones. Time stopped as
his idol's voice rang out one final time, each word shaking the confines of reality around him.

"Izuku Midoriya... will you be my successor?"

And then the hands on the clock resumed ticking, starlight fading into buzzing fluorescent lights and
the drab paint of the lounge walls closing in around him. The shackles of reality pierced his bones,
iron chains that kept him tethered to his fears. With One For All, he could break those chains, snap
them apart and chase the light until it was finally his. But the manacles would lock around him, their
weight eternal even if it was no longer crippling. Even if he gnawed through the bars of his cage,
he'd still be an animal tagged by terror, running for the rest of his life. He could be the strongest man
in the world, an idol to those in need, could give them a shining smile to quell their fears and use his
strength to protect others. But he wouldn't be free. He wouldn't be himself.

He didn't need broken chains; Izuku's only choice was to find the key. "A-All Mi-Might," he choked
out, face hot with tears and marked with shame. "I-I'm so-s-sorry, I can't b-be your successor,"
Izuku's voice cracked into slivers and shards, barely whole enough to speak at all. He wrenched his
gaze away from All Might's face, burying his own in shaking hands. "I-I can't, I c-can't, I c-can't I'm
sorry-"

Izuku's breath hitched when a pair of warm hands rested on his shoulders, daring to pull away his
fingers and face the disappointment he was sure to find. All Might had shared his greatest secret, had
made himself vulnerable all because he believed in Izuku, and he'd thrown it all back in his hero's
face like it was worthless- "It's alright, Midoriya, don't cry. I understand." Izuku's self deprecation
stuttered and halted, and he frantically blinked through his tears. All Might was smiling, something
softer and more personal than the blinding grin he showed the world. "It was foolish of me to try and
place this burden on you. While I do think you would be a wonderful successor.." Electric blue eyes found Izuku's own, warmer than the light of heroism. "I know you'll be an incredible hero, no matter what."

Izuku threw himself forward, arms locking tight around his idol's chest as the dam of tears burst into loud, stuttering sobs. He shook and heaved with his relief, with his gratitude, with his admiration. A small part of him noted that he'd done a poor job of avoiding another emotional breakdown, but Izuku didn't find himself minding too much. After all, if All Might believed in him, then everything must be okay.
Wednesday morning arrived so brightly that it made Izuku's eyes water, the sky a cloudless stretch of gradient blues and the sun shining hot enough to make his neck bead with sweat under his scarf. The breeze helped a little in cooling him down, but the changing of seasons was obvious. He was loathe to meet the day when wearing his scarf would be too impractical, considering how much of himself lived in its vibrant threads.

Hopefully by that time his new costume would be ready, and he wouldn't need it anymore. His day off to recover had given him ample time to revise his design and figure out exactly what kind of image he wanted to portray through his costume. All Might had said it himself, 'a hero's costume is a symbol of their justice'. Izuku had to embody that with every ounce of himself, to be the hero he wanted to be, so desperately that it hurt. Most heroes he knew of wore costumes defined by their Quirks, but he couldn't really see that working out for him. Living Nightmare wasn't exactly a Quirk that inspired relief in others.

He scrolled idly through his phone while his morning train rattled underneath him, flipping between multiple tabs to simultaneously respond to forum posts and save pictures reflective of the image he hoped to craft for himself. It was an oddly soothing pastime, almost like putting together an abstract puzzle; every image that resonated with him was another piece, and all Izuku had to do was fit them together.

It was also a decent distraction from his internal turmoil over One For All. He'd been so emotional in the moment that he wondered if he should have thought it through more, been absolutely sure about his refusal to almost literally have all his dreams handed to him. But after a few hours of freaking out and several minutes of actual, rational thought, Izuku had to accept the fact that virtually every decision he made was emotional in some way due to his Quirk and he'd just have to live with it. The best thing he could take from the situation was that he at least hadn't made his decision out of fear. One For All would have been a decent cop-out; Izuku could have fabricated some kind of lie about Living Nightmare (and sworn his friends to secrecy) and then just used One For All while suppressing the monster under his skin.

But that fear hadn't been strong enough. Izuku might've been assaulted by intrusive thoughts of his own cowardice, but All Might had called him brave—a hero that had fought countless villains, saved countless lives, faced countless disasters thought he was brave. Maybe it wasn't giving up, to turn down the chance of being his hero's successor. Maybe he'd been brave in doing so. Izuku really couldn't say for sure. He just hoped that he hadn't made a terrible mistake.

Izuku hoisted himself up from his secluded corner when the train hissed to a halt, gathering his things and idly plucking important sounding thoughts from a dozen different streams of consciousness. He still needed to thank Asui for her adorable get-well card (which had very nicely reminded him to smile instead of frown) and thank Todoroki for his list of ointments (some of which Izuku was pretty sure had actually helped, but that might have just been wishful thinking) and try to figure out how he was supposed to talk to Kacchan in the future (assuming Bakugou didn't fall back into old habits out of stubborn anger, which Izuku knew he was capable of but would rather think him above) and he probably had to prepare himself for a substitute homeroom teacher since Mr. Aizawa was likely still recovering-

"Hey Midoriya!" Izuku was ripped from his thoughts when a firm arm was thrown around his shoulders, a shock of red hair and a blinding grin thrust slightly too close to his face. "Glad to see you back in form, man! But uh, 'fraid I gotta arrest you; noise pollution is a serious crime."
Kirishima's teasing grin took a moment to click in Izuku's head, the realization that he'd been thinking aloud pooling embarrassment under his cheeks. "U-uh-sorry a-about that! I-I've been trying not to d-do it as much, so sorry if I a-annoyed you-"

"Hey, hey, roll it back a few notches! You're not annoying me, man. Promise." Kirishima pulled away only to muss his fingers through Izuku's carefully brushed hair, prompting a startled yelp. "Maybe some people are put off by that kinda thing, but I say screw 'em. Far as I'm concerned, s' just another part of you." Kirishima's gaze suddenly softened from the almost mischievous glint it had possessed, blood orange smoothed over in a gentle wave.

"I-I... okay. U-uhm, thank you?" Izuku replied in faint confusion, struck with the feeling that they had suddenly begun having a completely different conversation. Fumbling to move things back in a direction he understood, Izuku blurted the first thought that came into his head. "D-did I miss anything in class, yesterday?"

"Uhh.. other than Mineta not showin', not really," Kirishima began in a lax tone, returning the comforting weight of his arm around Izuku's shoulders as if it had never left. "We were practically just there for show; kinda felt like a cheat day almost. Aizawa's still healin' up last I heard, so we had principal Nedzu sit in on homeroom, and like no offense to the guy but he could probably talk forever if he felt like it-"

Izuku quietly leaned into his friend's steady weight, allowing Kirishima's voice to run over him like water over silt. He bit his lip preemptively to avoid muttering his thoughts out loud, running over the beginning of their conversation with a fine toothed comb. For all his ability to read people by their inflection, expression, and body language, he wasn't great on picking up on 'doublespeak', the idea of saying things that meant something else just not clicking well with him. The idea of it coming from Kirishima of all people was equally difficult to digest, considering how open and straightforward his friend usually was.

Surely Kirishima wouldn't have given him such a look of (extremely flustering) tender understanding if he was just talking about Izuku's habit of thinking aloud. Or maybe he would and Izuku had read their relationship completely wrong, but that didn't seem too likely (he hoped). The only probable thing his friend could be referring to would be.. Living Nightmare. Kirishima had seen him, Izuku realized with vague acknowledgement, the thought almost completely drowned under a tide of screaming alarm. Kirishima hadn't just pulled Izuku's useless body away from danger, he'd been around to see what came before. Izuku could still only remember brief glimpses and impressions, but the stink of blood, blood, blood and the endless howling and tearing of flesh and ligaments- and Kirishima accepted it? Kirishima accepted him?

Kirishima's soothing voice abruptly cut out when Izuku leaned nearly all his weight into the red head, green curls pressing against the side of Kirishima's head and hot tears seeping into the shoulder of his uniform. Izuku could feel his friend stiffen, alarm ringing in his voice when it rose again. "Hey, hey, you okay, man? Was it something I said?"

"N-no, no-" Izuku stuttered around hiccuping breaths, before immediately contradicting himself. "I-I mean, y-yes, it-it's-th-thank you. Thank you s-so much, I-I-" A moment of self awareness punctured Izuku's torrent of emotions, and he sheepishly removed himself from Kirishima's person, shame burning hot on his face. "S-sorry if I made you u-uncomfortable, I-

"Bro, seriously. I'll write this on my forehead if you need it, but it's okay." Kirishima's smile radiated a warmth that left Izuku feeling flushed and slightly queasy, unable to quantify and compile the intent behind it. "If you need a hug or whatever, I'm cool with it. Honest. If you need to stand close, hell, if you wanna hold my hand or something," Kirishima's unflappable affection colored with
embarrassment for half a moment, "then I'm down for it. I'll let you know if I'm uncomfortable, okay? Promise."

"Y..yeah. O-okay. Sorry, I-I'm just-" Izuku paused and caught himself, a trembling smile easing onto his face. "I'm just bad about a-apologizing, I guess."

"I think there's plenty worse things out there to be bad about, so don't sweat it." Kirishima's answering smile was a gleaming bastion of light, a flash of razor edged teeth shining like a beacon meant to lead Izuku through the dark. Judging by the palpitations of his heart and the wetness lingering at the corners of his eyes, he was right where he needed to be.

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The first thing Izuku noticed upon walking into the 1-A classroom that morning was the presence of someone he didn't already know. An unfamiliar body slouched in one of the desks, slumped over with a shock (almost literally, considering how strangely it defied gravity) of pale purple hair rested against the wooden surface. He was wearing a student's uniform, so he clearly wasn't supposed to be there, but..

Izuku's only working theory was that the stranger was from 1-B, and had been so exhausted he'd wandered into the wrong classroom. An easy enough situation to resolve, he told himself, while in the same moment sliding halfway back out the door and desperately wishing Kirishima hadn't left to go to the bathroom. It'd be rude of him not to let the other student know of his error, though, and that weighed heavy enough on his conscious to tug him fully into the room.

"H-hello?" Izuku's voice rang off the walls even when he made a conscious effort to lower it, pitched high by frayed nerves. He winced when the dozing boy twitched, mumbling into one of his crossed arms. "U-uhm.. e-excuse me, I-I'm sorry but I-I think you might be in the wrong classroom and I'm really sorry to wake you up but I don't want you to be late-"

"Do you ever stop talking," the boy mumbled, his head lifting in a slow arc. His words were slurred with sleep, but contained more than enough bite to force a flinch out of Izuku. The other boy's features were-severe, and that was only exacerbated by the annoyed twist of his lips and the dark, bruise colored bags under his eyes. "I'm trying to sleep here, in case you haven't noticed."

Izuku raised his hands and flapped them back and forth defensively, his voice pitching even higher. "I-I know and I'm r-really really sorry b-but class is going to start in fifteen minutes and I d-don't want you to get in trouble-"

The other student fixed him with a glare so wild eyed that Izuku nearly bit his tongue in his haste to stop talking. A moment of tense silence thrummed between them, before Izuku managed to work up (stupidity) bravery to speak again. "U-uhm.. w-what's your name? A-Are you from class 1-B?"

"...You don't know who I am?" The other boy questioned suspiciously, his lips turned into a frown and his glare transitioned into an accusing stare. His frown tugged even more harshly at his face when Izuku meekly shook his head, eyes wide and unsure. "Somehow, I don't believe you."

"I-I feel like maybe w-we've gotten off on the wrong foot," Izuku barely avoided stuttering, a smile so crooked it was nearly sideways quivering on his face. "I-I'm Izuku Midoriya, f-from class 1-A. I-I guess that part was o-obvious, huh? I just-I think you might be in the wrong class-" He flinched when purple eyes darkened, frantic to continue spitting words to dig himself out of his own grave, "I m-mean just y-you might have come here in-instead of 1-B because you were tired and I didn't want you to get in trouble for falling aleep in here!"

"What makes you think I'm from class 1-B, exactly?" Izuku shrugged his shoulders helplessly, a
small part of him marveling in slight envy at how deep the other boy's voice was and why couldn't his have deepened like that? "Hm. Well, your concern is misplaced. I'm Hitoshi Shinsou, also of class 1-A as of about right now. One of your classmates dropped out, which left a spot open for someone from one of the other courses to join in. Naturally, I had to claw my way out of the general studies cesspool as quickly as possible. Eraserhead himself nominated me for the Hero Course, so it wasn't exactly an opportunity I could pass up."

Izuku took a second to switch gears from 'intimidated friendliness' to 'gushing uncontrollably', but when the change did happen his whole body lit up with energy. His eyes shined with distant stars, a lopsided smile pulling hard at his cheeks. "W-wow, that's so cool! C-congratulations, Shinsou, Mr. Aizawa is such a hard guy to impress you must be r-really talented! U-uhm, welcome to c-class 1-A, I can't wait to w-work togeth." He paused as every gear ground to a halt, the first part of Shinsou's words registering in his head. "D-dropped out? Wait, w-what, who left?!" His head whipped around, as if he could identify the missing person by their empty desk. But when he thought about it, the desk Shinsou was sitting in-

"Some guy named Mineta," Shinsou yawned, looking distinctly un-enthused in having to recount further information. "Apparently the USJ thing was enough to scare him off. He 'came here to look cool and meet hot girls, not be an extra in a horror movie', whatever the hell that means. Good riddance; if he doesn't have the guts to handle villains, he shouldn't be a hero at all." Shinsou's lips curled with annoyance, his attention drifting long enough for Izuku to formulate a response.

Honestly, he was almost relieved to know Mineta had been the one to leave. He was wracked with guilt at the thought, because Mineta hadn't ever been rude to him or anything, but he just-didn't know the boy enough to have formed a connection. Despite that, hearing his paraphrased parting words made Izuku's chest ache, struck by the whiplash of cruel insensitivity. "O-oh.. w-well, uhm i-it's still nice to meet you, Shinsou. S-sorry for waking you up."

"You apologize too much," Shinsou responded flatly, as if he were making a statement of fact instead of trying to be insulting. Izuku flushed in embarrassment, but wasn't particularly stung by the observation. He did apologize too much, after all. "I'll be getting back to my nap, if you don't mind."

"R-right, yeah, s-sorry for disturbing you-o-oh god I did it again-" Izuku slapped both hands over his mouth when Shinsou's glare began cutting through him, and rushed to sit at his desk and make no noise whatsoever. His cheeks were hot against his fingers, his spine locked wire tight by the feeling of the glare on the back of his head. Izuku slumped over in relief when the pressure of Shinsou's gaze stopped boring through his skull, eyes slipping shut. He rubbed the hem of his jacket between two fingers, attempting to focus on the texture over his discomfort at having an unfamiliar body in the same room with him.

Luckily (unluckily? Izuku couldn't tell anymore) Shinsou was sincere in his desire to resume his slumber, his silence leaving Izuku nothing but quiet anxiety to reflect on. His new classmate certainly seemed... intense, but not immediately hostile. He hadn't said anything insulting, or even insinuated anything negative, which let Izuku view his blunt confrontation in a neutral light, at the very least. He did look exhausted, so Izuku could understand his irritation at being woken up for basically no reason. Maybe he could apologize again later when he wasn't in danger of waking Shinsou up, and he could give himself a (slim) chance at befriending his new classmate.

Izuku was fortunately headed off from his chance to descend into darker thoughts by the arrival of more of his classmates, loud enough to drown out his own thoughts, if only for the moment. He sank quietly into his seat and pulled out one of his notebooks (Hero Analysis For The Future 19, with little stars doodled on the front) to begin mindlessly sketching, the familiar motions a sufficient anchor in the few tumultuous moments before class.
He managed to pay enough attention to greet his friends when they walked by, a moment of indecision leaving him in half a wave when Kacchan stomped through the classroom. The blond barely made eye contact, but he didn't sneer or glare or throw his desk across the room, so Izuku decided to take it positively.

He perked up a little when Asui plodded beside him, leaning up to offer a friendly smile and hopefully catch her attention. His smile was less an expression of welcoming and more just his lips moving and his teeth inexplicably being present, but it was enough to catch her eye. "H-Hey, Asui. Um.. I-I wanted to thank you, f-for the card. It was really n-nice of you. It.. m-means a lot."

"No problem, Midoriya," she croaked, her expression placid but her eyes openly scanning his face. "Your Quirk might be unquestionably terrifying, but that doesn't make you a bad person, or anything." She settled into the desk behind him, leaving him no time to recover from his state of shock and respond in wordless splutters.

He was barely even given a moment of time to think about it either, considering all his attention had been grabbed by the sight of Mr. Aizawa stiffly forcing his way into the room through the inconvenience of a back brace, his posture stiff and pained looking. He halfheartedly glared up at the sound of a shocked outcry, voices piling on top of each other in concern. "Save your concern for someone that needs it, I'm fine. You have more important things to worry about." He trailed off on his way to his desk, outcry dwindling into murmurs of unease.

Mr. Aizawa stood stiffly behind his desk, looking for all the world as if he wanted to just crawl underneath it. "Minoru Mineta has transferred out of class 1-A. Hitoshi Shinsou was bumped to his spot on referral. I'll emphasize that he's your classmate, not a class pet, so don't bombard him with questions. Other than that," Mr. Aizawa continued on, unconcerned when nearly every eye turned to scrutinize a defensively hunched Shinsou, "the annual Sport's Festival is coming up in a few weeks. The U.A. administration, in their infinite wisdom, have decided to go ahead with the festival despite the attack, to.. show solidarity in the face of adversity, or something. Security will be significantly tightened, so there's nothing to worry about. I'm sure you all understand how important the Sport's Festival is: it'll be your first public debut, where pro heroes can scout you based on your talents. You get one chance a year, and three in a lifetime."

Mr. Aizawa's eyes narrowed with intensity, his words falling like dominoes. "Be sure not to screw it up."

Friday rolled over Izuku in a landslide of dread, every moment a steadily surmounting monument of anxiety that'd be sure to crush him into paste when it toppled over. The stress of the looming Sport's Festival did him no favors, but the immediate threat of his Assessment made even that irrelevant. He hadn't been allowed to participate directly in any of his Hero Course classes, All Might's apologetic grin snuffed by cold shame as he hunched over notebooks on the sidelines.

He would have used the opportunity to think more objectively about his classmate's abilities and how they could work most effectively with one another (as well as how to pair together less compatible Quirks) but his brain decided to instead assault him with countless entirely realistic and unbelievably terrifying scenarios that awaited him, when the Assessment began.

He was pulled from a particularly gruesome imagining of the faceless Quirk Specialist being pulped like a peach thrown into lawnmower blades by the sight of Mr. Aizawa standing in his path, preventing him from trudging listlessly towards All Might's class. "Midoriya. It's time to begin your assessment." His teacher's face was unreadable, a blank mask of neutrality that, oddly enough, put Izuku a little more at ease. Mr. Aizawa was always more expressive when he was agitated, or something was wrong, so a virtual lack of facial expression was a good sign.
"O-okay. Is it.. o-on campus, sir?" Izuku hastily fell in step behind his teacher, fingers pulling and rubbing at the hem of his jacket (a behavior Ms. Atsuko had told him was called 'stimming', during his last appointment) to try and ground himself with tactile sensation.

"Yes, we have a training room meant for particularly destructive Quirks set up for you, and Dr. Kageyama of the Institute of Quirk Categorization will be performing the assessment." Mr. Aizawa didn't break stride, his steps still hard for Izuku to keep up with at a normal walking pace despite his injuries. "I want you to be absolutely honest with Dr. Kageyama, understand? This is a professional assessment, one that should have been performed the moment you set foot on school grounds. I was foolish enough to underestimate the severity of the situation. It won't happen again."

Izuku flinched from the force behind Mr. Aizawa's quiet intensity, vision blurry when he stared down at the tips of his sticker defaced shoes. "I-I understand, sir. I-I'm sorry for causing you s-so much trouble."

"Save the apologies for when you need them, Midoriya. I already told you not to do it when you haven't done anything wrong. The fault lies with myself and All Might, whom I'm sure has already given you some heartfelt apology." Mr. Aizawa's tone wasn't quite disdainful, but there was a negative note in his words that Izuku couldn't place. "In addition to that, he's given me a full overview of what he's observed of your Quirk. I'll be sure to pass it on to Dr. Kageyama, since your awareness is impaired during use."

"R-right." Izuku desperately attempted to narrow his thoughts with laser focus, and drown out the hiss of static creeping into the edges of his awareness. "Y-you, uhm- i-it causes interference with e-electronics too. I-I don't want to accidentally d-damage school property again-"

"Don't worry about it, that's already been taken care of. Dr. Kageyama will be observing you in person, and I'll be on standby to nullify your Quirk should the need arise. And before you start worrying about hurting someone accidentally, we won't be in the same room. We'll use a two way mirror to prevent any chance of incidents. If you stop worrying and focus on being cooperative, it won't take long." Mr. Aizawa stalled to a halt in front of a large set of metal double doors, motioning towards them with one hand. "Step inside. This shouldn't take too long. And relax, okay? This is to help you, not torment you. So wipe that look off your face."

Izuku resisted the urge to flinch when Mr. Aizawa met his gaze with dark eyes, conveying intensity without any of the harshness his blunt words suggested. Izuku slapped on a partially composed smile, and it was enough for Mr. Aizawa to stop burning lasers into his brain. He slowly pushed his way through the double doors, stepping out into a completely bare training hall that vaguely resembled his middle school gymnasium. It was much cleaner looking at least, the floor tiles gleaming white and the walls not marred by peeling paint.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when the loudspeakers crackled to life, glancing around the room before his eye caught on a reflective pane of glass on the far wall. ["Good afternoon, Mr. Midoriya. My name is Dr. Kageyama, I'm a Quirk Specialist from the Institute of Quirk Categorization. The assessment will begin in a few moments, but before that I'd like to ask a few questions. Can you describe your Quirk.. Living Nightmare, in basic terms for me?"]

"U-uhm.. okay." Izuku's voice echoed in the room around him, and he had to assume there was some sort of microphone system set up to pick up on it. "L-Living Nightmare is a Quirk that t-transfers intent into destructive energy. I-it's fueled by.. negative emotion, a-and induces an i-irrational fear response in the user and target. I-it... the side e-effects of over use involve d-dissociation, moderate to s-severe nausea, and in extreme cases the user is r-rendered comatose."

A moment of silence passed, Izuku forced to stand around and fretfully scratch the back of his hand.
while he waited for a response. ["That all seems to fit your file. Now, Mr. Midoriya, can you describe how your Quirk manifests for me? Take as much time as you need."]

Izuku swallowed a knot of barbed wire, crossing his arms and locking his fingers around his elbows. "U-uhm.. it-it's based off of intent, s-so.. W-when used with the intent t-to not do physical harm, it-paralyzes the t-target with fear. The e-effect can be b-broken by outside interference, or if the target is s-strong willed. When the i-intent is to enhance physical ability, it manifests as p-pure destructive force with lessened side effects. W-when-" Izuku cut himself off to take a few deep breaths, hoping to quell the tendrils of Living Nightmare that tugged at his ribs. "...When used with i-intent to harm, the user transforms i-into an inhuman form a-and loses all awareness until the i-intended actions are carried out. W-when... the c-complexity of the intended actions directly a-affect the complexity of the form Living Nightmare takes."

Izuku waited numbly as the static haunted him in distant pulses, every limb trembling uncontrollably. The silence stretched long enough to be distinctly unsettling, before the loudspeakers crackled back on. ["Now, I'm going to need you to activate your Quirk for me, Mr. Midoriya. Do not focus on any sort of intent just yet."]

Izuku froze like a statue, his shaking limbs locked into stone. He'd known that he couldn't get through a Quirk assessment without actually using his Quirk, but no amount of knowing could have adequately prepared him. He forced his legs into motion, echoes of his squeaking shoes bouncing off the bare walls. He positioned himself in the vague center of the room, to minimize the possibility of collateral damage. His heart pulsed and quivered, constricted by countless wires. He forced his eye closed, breathing loud and shaky in his own ears. It was just like the beach, he just-all he had to do was let go, let go, let go-

Izuku's world was consumed by the howling fumes that poured from his chest in furious plumes, scars burning red hot under his uniform. He had half a moment to hear the tortured wail of the PA system before all awareness was ripped away, his consciousness removed from his flesh.

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Izuku slammed back into his own body so abruptly that his immediate reaction was to vomit, hot bile spilling past his lips before he had even regained the sensation in his face. He coughed and hacked into a vile puddle, shaking limbs struggling to hoist him up and away from it. His sensation returned so quickly that he was left with whiplash, the sensory overload pulling a strained whimper from his throat.

He was still in the training hall, which looked fairly undamaged. The floor under his feet was cracked and dulled, as if it had been left without proper maintenance for decades, and his heart caught in his throat at the thought of how expensive it'd be to replace. He guiltily stepped around his puddle of stomach contents, his stomach still roiling but his head oddly clear. The PA system was silent, so he trudged on shaky legs towards the double doors leading out to the hall.

He was halted in his tracks by the sudden sound of raised voices coming through the door, only brief snatches of sentences carrying through. "-oy is a ---ace, --u ca-- --ve him on ---ool grounds!"

It sounded vaguely like Dr. Kageyama, and Izuku shuffled uncertainly in place. He-it'd be wrong of him to eavesdrop, he needed to just wait for further instructions instead of getting himself in trouble. He quickly moved out of earshot, running his fingers down the fabric of his poorly knotted tie (Iida had attempted to teach him, but Izuku just didn't have a lot of dexterity to work with) to calm his racing heart.

His efforts were for naught when the doors flew open, one of them banging against the wall behind it. All the color drained from Izuku's face when Mr. Aizawa stalked inside, his lips pressed into a thin
line and his eyes dark with rage. His hair was more disheveled than usual and his scarf was hanging off one shoulder, and Izuku was struck with the realization that Mr. Aizawa had used Erasure on him. His panic heightened into a shrill whine, his voice breaking the moment he began to speak. "S-s-sir I'm so-sorry I d-didn't mean t-t-to damage th-the floor I'm s-sorry, I'm sorry-

"Put a lid on it, Midoriya," Mr. Aizawa barely refrained from snapping, his voice tight with tension. He visibly took a moment to calm himself, one hand sweeping loose strands of hair out of his face. "Don't worry about the floor, it's irrelevant. The assessment is over. Head home, enjoy your weekend, and don't slack off on training for the Sport's Festival. Understood?"

A pulse of confusion cut through Izuku's meltdown, affording him a brief moment of stability. "O-over? What-but w-what about Dr. Kageyama?"

"Don't worry about it." Mr. Aizawa cowed him into a shaking mess with a long stare, his eyes red and irritated from the use of his Quirk. "We're getting everything squared away, so head home. I won't repeat myself a third time."

Sensing the absolute finality in Mr. Aizawa's voice, Izuku hesitantly scurried towards the door, brushing past his teacher as endless thoughts buzzed through his head. Something had to have gone wrong, but for whatever reason Mr. Aizawa wouldn't tell him what it was. There was no way he'd caused any injury with Living Nightmare through the wall, especially because Mr. Aizawa's anger didn't seem to be directed at Izuku himself. Which meant something had happened between him and Dr. Kageyama. But why would he-

"Stop mumbling and go." Mr. Aizawa's voice cracked across Izuku's back like a whip, and he hurried off down the hall with hunched shoulders. He could feel his teacher's gaze burn into his back until he left line of sight, a shiver wracking down his spine. Maybe.. if Mr. Aizawa was so insistent on not telling him, then.. maybe it was better he didn't know. Izuku told himself that lie the entire walk home, unwilling to ponder the alternative.
The moment Izuku was (mostly) free of his concern over his Quirk assessment (by way of Mr. Aizawa fixing him with a stare so desolate that it felt like his Quirk along with half his body had been erased when he brought it up), the mounting dread of the steadily approaching Sport's Festival quickly took its place. A few weeks was hardly enough time for him to make up for his deficit of physical strength, so he was left with doubling down on training himself almost exclusively through memorizing Quirks, strategies, grappling techniques (at least, ones where he could displace his opponent's weight instead of relying on his own) and hesitantly practicing with his Quirk, instead of simply using it to relieve himself of its side effects.

He'd also taken up running in the mornings, setting his alarm to wake him before the sun had even risen and jogging around his neighborhood until his legs were stiff and burning the next day. Izuku pushed himself through the pain and discomfort, desperate to build up at least a little bit of endurance so he didn't have to solely rely on outsmarting opponents and using his extremely dangerous and hard to control Quirk.

The mountains of trash that remained on his beach slowly dwindled, his focus on amplified strength training turning chunks of refuse into dust and powdering the coarse sand of the beach until it was fine as flour. Every night after dinner he forced himself out of bed to practice under cover of night, carving gouges in rusted metal from forty feet away and turning car sized hunks of trash to shrapnel and detritus with direct punches. The number of hits he could manage before he was overcome with the urge to vomit had increased steadily, from a measly three up to a respectable eight by the end of the first week.

The consequence of his training was that by the end of the week Izuku was so exhausted he was unable to tell if he'd killed himself accidentally or not, the world a blur of color whenever he wasn't focusing his attention on something. He'd still been able to hold conversations before the weekend, at the very least, but without school to distract him from his training, he'd swiftly deteriorated until every waking moment felt like a fever dream, and the few snatches of sleep he allowed himself felt like slightly extended blinks.

Tokoyami had taken one look at his inside-out shirt, mismatched socks, and glassy eyed stare before practically carrying him to school to be chewed out by the rest of his friends. Too exhausted to even articulate a defensive explanation for his actions, Izuku had simply ripped the page detailing his training regimen from his notebook and handed it over. He'd fallen asleep to the sound of Iida's incredibly loud lecturing and the soothing sensation of Uraraka jostling his entire body back and forth with concern.

For the remaining days before the festival, Izuku's friends wormed their way into his training regimen in much the same way they had the rest of his life; without him having any real decision in the matter, as well as without him minding very much at all. Every morning on his runs, Iida would meet him with an impeccable smile and a pre prepared breakfast, lecturing Izuku between bites of food on proper nutrition and hydration. His ability to speak uninterrupted about cardio workout methods and tips for building stamina and endurance while also easily outpacing a sweaty, wheezing Izuku was almost as breathtaking as the workout itself.

Uraraka and Kirishima had apparently appointed themselves to 'fun duty', consistently dragging Izuku away from his studies whenever they felt he needed a break, as well as helping him put his researched techniques into practice. Kirishima was.. significantly more difficult for Izuku to grapple with than Uraraka (and not just because his hands would get uncomfortably sweaty from prolonged
physical contact), so he mostly offered incredibly loud and bombastic encouragement from the sidelines, while Uraraka mostly flipped Izuku into the dirt. He imagined it would have gone a little more smoothly if Uraraka's competitive streak hadn't made her so frightening to spar with, but the rush of exhilaration and thrill of achievement when he managed to pin her to the ground was more than worth it.

At night, Tokoyami would shadow his Quirk training, equipped with an LED lamp, flashlights, and water bottles to re-hydrate with after he reached his nausea limit. Sometimes he would merely observe the dark fumes that curled around Izuku's fists and turned steel into dust, offering critiques of his form and proverbs that, when boiled down, gave him sound tactical advice. On clear nights Tokoyami would unleash Dark Shadow, the shadow being turned bold and mischievous in the dark, even with the shining moon and the lamp taming its wild impulses. Dark Shadow would help Izuku practice evasion, using his Quirk to launch himself out of the way of massive, shadowy claws. After the third time he accidentally propelled himself into the ocean, Tokoyami began bringing towels as well.

There were also some nights where Tokoyami would look him over and decline his desire to train, instead coaxing Izuku into sitting beside him and contemplating the distant stars and crashing waves. At first Izuku would itch under his skin, fidgeting with the need to improve, improve, improve. But then the swell of cool ocean breezes and the frigid, twinkling beacons in the sky would enrapture him, thoughts peacefully leveling out. He'd stumble home with Tokoyami firmly grasping his hand, the lantern held before him as if he were a messenger of the night. Izuku's slumber was always more restful, after nights like those.

The time leading up to the Sport's Festival vanished in what felt the blink of an eye, Izuku's original sure-to-be-miserable training regimen turned into something infinitely better with the aid of his friends. Not for the first time, he wondered how he'd ever managed to be so lucky after years of almost permanent misfortune. The fact that he'd have to compete against his friends put a slight damper on things, but overall he was almost excited for the Sport's Festival. He felt capable for the first time ever, like he could actually hold his own, at least a little, without having to destroy everything around him just to manage it. Perhaps Izuku wasn't confident, wasn't sure of himself or his chances, but he was ready.

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Izuku stared at a particularly uninteresting part of the waiting room's wall, different parts of his brain struggling to focus on a single objective. He was seated at a fold-out table with Uraraka and Asui, who were lightly conversing about topics unrelated to the festival. Uraraka had turned her seat sideways and casually thrown her legs over Izuku's lap, a point of contact that was simultaneously grounding and panic-inducing. He'd gotten slightly better with initiating physical contact outside of emotional bouts, but having it so casual and prolonged and in front of the entire class was a bit much to handle all at once.

He listened with half an ear to Ojirou and Ashido's discussion of the absolute injustice of them not being allowed to wear costumes, which Izuku was torn on. He wouldn't have been able to wear his costume regardless, considering it was still unfinished, but he felt practically naked without any of his typical adornments. His hair was infinitely more wild and untameable without clips to hold it down, and he found himself consistently brushing it out of his eyes. Maybe a ponytail really was the way to go, if his hair was going to get any longer.

There was also the underlying panic of having to compete not only with all his classmates, but the rest of the first year students as well, while using his Quirk, and with it all being televised to the entire country as well as probably all over the world besides—it was more than he could handle all at once. He attempted to draw his attention to something more calming, and failed spectacularly when his gaze landed on a brooding Kacchan, sat far and away from everyone else. The rest of the class..
hadn't exactly warmed up to him, despite his (impressively) reduced outbursts and the confirmation that he hadn't betrayed them at the USJ. He'd made his impression, and it was unlikely that he could break it without serious effort. He and Kaminari had a lot of unresolved tension between them, and Kirishima and Uraraka were the only ones that even attempted to make conversation with him.

That fact alone had guilt bubbling in Izuku's gut, because he truly did want to make things better between them, but his uncertainty crippled his efforts with indecision. But the longer he waited and wondered, the larger the rift between them would grow. With a fragile shard of bravery in his grasp and only a few minutes remaining on the clock, Izuku gently slid out from under Uraraka's legs and approached his classmate. "H..hey, Kacchan?"

Bakugou glanced up in a jerky motion, the tendons in his arms visibly tense and his teeth clenched together. Izuku went very still when twin molten pits locked him in place, and prided himself for not flinching. "U-uhm.. I just wanted to.. w-wish you good luck, i-in the competition!"

Dread seeped through the cracks in Izuku's encouraging smile when Kacchan's eyes narrowed with anger, the blond rising from his chair with enough force to send it clattering to the floor. A few heads turned in concern, Uraraka in particular sporting a scowl that promised an imminent upper atmospheric occupant. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Izuku? Is this some kind of fucking joke to you?"

Izuku fell back half a step, his arms shaking when he held them up defensively. "N-no, I j-just, I-I hope you do well i-is all-"

"Don't fucking interrupt me," Bakugou hissed, his voice on the cusp of rising into a shout. "This really is a joke to you, isn't it? You 'hope I do well'? FUCK OFF!" Kacchan advanced a single step, and a chorus of screeching chair legs rang out as several other members of the class rose from their seats. "Stay out of this, you fucking background props!" Bakugou barked, his teeth bared in a snarl but his arms forcibly held at his sides. "This is between me and Izuku. And in case you fucking pea brained dipshits haven't figured it out yet, I'm not gonna harm a fucking hair on his stupid green head." His gaze whipped back around, his eyes burning like the mouths of erupting volcanoes. "Listen up, Izuku, cuz' I'm not gonna repeat myself. This is a fucking competition, you dumbass. Which means you don't fucking play nice with your opponents! THE WHOLE POINT IS TO WIN, YOU SHITTY NERD! So don't fucking come over here and wish me luck, and hope I do well, because that means you aren't taking it SERIOUSLY!"

Izuku's eyes widened in confusion, the fear draining out of him to be replaced by bewildered awe. Kacchan visibly relaxed, flexing his fingers and unclenching his jaw at the sight of Izuku's understanding, but the intensity of his gaze didn't falter. "So don't waste your damn breath on platitudes and well wishes. Focus on doing something for yourself, for fucking once in your pathetic life. I swear to god if you don't go out there and put every single fucking molecule of yourself into winning, I'm gonna fucking catapult you into a dumpster. Understand?"

"Y..yeah, I do. I-I promise I'll try to win," Izuku uttered breathlessly, his eyes blown wide and unable to tear themselves away from the thrumming determination in Kacchan's expression. For the first time in his life, Kacchan's heat wasn't something that burned him, or something he was forced to admire from afar. Instead he could taste it, the fire under his tongue and the drive throbbing under his skin and the will to grasp victory spreading his lips in a beaming smile.

"Izuku Midoriya." The utterance of his name in a scratchy, deadpan voice broke Izuku from the moment, but didn't wrest from him the embers he'd been gifted. He turned to meet a gaze split into two colors, and smiled crookedly at an expectantly neutral Todoroki.

"U-uh, hey, Todoroki! D-did you need something-oh uhm! T-thank you for, t-the ointments, by the
way. I-I think they really helped w-with, um.." Izuku trailed off when the frost in Todoroki's gaze wound its way around his limbs, his smile freezing on his face.

Todoroki's face didn't even move, as if he hadn't heard Izuku speak at all. "I think it's safe to say that, objectively, you possess the most power of anyone in this class." His tone was absolutely flat, leaving Izuku with no ability to figure out if his statement was meant to be a compliment or not. "And please don't waste time by acting modest. Perhaps I didn't see the incident at the USJ in full, but I saw the aftermath. The broken limbs scattered across the central plaza. Dozens of them."

Izuku's blood turned to ice, his heartbeat a frantic pounding against his constricted ribs. He desperately parted numbing lips to work a word in edgewise, but Todoroki steamrolled on without pause. "Despite that strength, you're weak. You have no idea how to use that power to your advantage, and have no confidence in yourself. So in spite of your power, I am going to beat you."

He blinked once, his gaze lacking either hostility or determination, but instead colored with dull assurance, the unquestionable knowledge that he was correct.

"Hey, hey, lay off the guy, will ya?" Kirishima interrupted, crossing the room in a few quick strides to place a supportive hand on Izuku's shoulder. "What's your problem, Todoroki? Midoriya tries to thank you, and you insult him right to his face? Uncool, man."

"In case you haven't yet realized, this isn't a meet and greet. We aren't here to make friends, and if you think this festival is the only time we're supposed to compete against one another, then you need to start paying more attention."

Izuku's gaze desperately swept over Todoroki's face, searching for a glimpse of the boy that had helped him, even if he'd been awkward and abrupt in doing so-but Todoroki's expression was simply cold.

Todoroki abruptly turned to walk away, apparently satisfied in having said his piece. Izuku stared numbly at his back, struggling to formulate some sort of response, anything he could possibly say-

"That's some real big talk comin' from a half assed piece of shit like you," Bakugou's voice rang out, hot with anger and steeped in viscous mocking. Todoroki stopped mid step, turning his head just enough to catch a glimpse of Bakugou's sneer. "Yeah, you fuckin' heard me. If you really think you even have a chance of winning with your fucking shitty attitude, you've got another thing comin'. Izuku may be a crybaby dumbass, but at least he's not a fucking slacker. So you'll either try your damned hardest, or I'll personally stomp your ass into the fucking dust, you half-and-half bastard."

Todoroki's expression barely wavered, a stark white eyebrow twitching before he turned to continue walking, brusquely pushing his way through the metal door of the waiting room directly past a confused looking Iida. There was a long moment of awkward silence, before an amused snort broke the quiet.

"Woooow," Shinsou drawled, his tone amused and one side of his mouth curled into a smirk. "I don't think I've ever seen someone with their head so far up their own ass before. He certainly doesn't half-ass being a pompous dick."

Bakugou scoffed aloud, his gaze briefly flashing over the smirking Shinsou. "That's probably the only rational thing anyone in this fucking class has ever said." He sounded... vaguely impressed, when Izuku managed to peer through the layers of anger (likely directed at the fact that he was impressed) that typically layered his tone.

"Ahem!" Iida cleared his throat loudly (Izuku was absolutely impressed by how loud he managed to do it) to catch everyone's attention, quickly slipping from confusion to his normal overbearing class representative demeanor. "Attention class 1-A! The festival is about to begin! We're on in two minutes, so please ready yourselves!"
The unspoken tension in the room eased up as groups dissolved and conversations dispersed, Izuku swaying slightly at the sudden shift in atmosphere. Kirishima's hand lightly squeezed his shoulder through his uniform, and Izuku turned to meet his reassuring gaze. "Hey, don't let what Todoroki said get to you, alright? You're crazy strong, and I know you're gonna kick some serious ass."

Kirishima gifted him a dazzling smile that was all razor sharp teeth, bared with electric excitement and softened edges of affection.

Izuku's eyes widened, trails of stardust sparkling in his gaze as the fire in his veins burst back to life, a rush of enthusiasm that revived his own lopsided grin. "Y-yeah.. yeah, I w-will! And, you do your best too, Kirishima!"

A soft chime echoed from the speakers set up above the door, and Iida immediately snapped to attention, standing so straight that Izuku worried it might be a health hazard. "That's our cue! Everyone, let's go out there and show the world that class 1-A has what it takes, to go beyond Plus Ultra!" Iida thrust a fist into the air, visibly crushing down a giddy grin when he actually received an enthusiastic response.

Everyone filed out into the hallway, Izuku herding himself behind Kirishima so he didn't inadvertently end up shuffled to the back of the pack. He was jittery with a nervous blend of anxiety and anticipation, Kacchan's fire boiling to the surface and allowing his smile to stay firmly rooted in place.

Iida led them out through a door that would provide access to the main stadium, the distant roar of the crowd immediately ramping up in volume. Present Mic's voice howled enthusiastically over the cheers, his hyping up of class 1-A making Izuku's legs shake with anticipation. The glare of sunlight at the end of the concrete tunnel made his eyes water, and he blinked rapidly in an effort to adjust his vision.

The first transitional steps from echoing concrete to solid earth baking under the sun took Izuku's breath away, his pupils constricting as he was assaulted on all sides by an explosion of cheers, the stands stretching so high he half expected them to be engulfed by clouds. Every row was packed to the gills, an ocean of bodies looking down on him. Every row was packed to the gills, an ocean of bodies looking down on him. All his bravado and excitement was snuffed in an instant, the reality of how many people were watching, would see him forcing him to practically step on Kirishima's heels to hide himself, his smile decomposing with every second that passed.

He struggled to turn his focus inwards, forcing himself to take slow, even breaths and attempt to block out the crowd around him. It was okay, it was okay, it was okay, they weren't staring at him or judging him, he was fine, he could do it, he was strong enough, all he had to do was focus on his goal of doing his best. He repeated those self-affirming thoughts as if they were holy mantras, mumbling them under his breath until his syllables were recognizable as actual language again.

He tuned back into reality just in time to realize that Ms. Midnight was the master of ceremonies for the tournament, and she had just called up Kacchan for the school pledge. Izuku's stomach split apart and piled into his feet, breath hitching at the sight of his explosive classmate loping up to the mic, his hands shoved in his pockets.

He glanced at the mic as if it had personally insulted him, taking another step forward to speak into it. "This is for everyone in the crowd... keep your traps shut when I'm winning, I don't need you distracting me." Izuku winced so hard his face hurt, a long moment of awkward silence hanging in the arena before a smattering of jeers erupted from the stands. "HEY, SCREW YOU," Bakugou bellowed into the mic, "WHY DON'T YOU COME DOWN HERE AND BOO IN MY FACE YOU SONUVA-"

Midnight hastily snatched the microphone off its stand, practically kicking Bakugou off the stage.
Her normally devious grin looked slightly strained, and she cleared her throat before speaking. "Well, without further ado, let's take a look at our first event!" The blank screen behind her suddenly lit up like a slot machine, a single box of text blurring rapidly between illegible letters before suddenly stopping on- "Oooh, looks like we've got ourselves an Obstacle Race! All our contestants will be vying for the top in this four kilometer run around the outside of the stadium. As long as you don't stray off course, anything goes! Contestants, head to the starting gate!"

Izuku's heart thundered in his chest, the wiry grasp of Living Nightmare squeezing it until he was sure it would burst. The starting gate tunnel was a bottleneck, and the sheer number of people around him were sure to be crammed inside like sardines in their rush to make it outside. An obstacle right from the starting line; surely he wouldn't be the only one to pick up on it. But there wasn't much he could use to his advantage, considering he couldn't use Living Nightmare in close quarters. He'd either have to force his way through with brute strength, or take advantage of any openings he found. His gaze drifted to the back of Kirishima's spiky red hair, his plan formulating the moment the buzzer sounded.

He was almost instantly shoved and jostled, feet desperately pounding the dirt as Present Mic's voice rang out over the commotion. ["Looks like we've got ourselves an EXPLOSIVE start to the race, ladies and gentlemen!"] Izuku tuned out the rest of his commentary, every ounce of his focus poured into not loosing sight of Kirishima. His friend moved like a mining drill, his bulk and the added solidity of his Quirk allowing him to easily force his way through the squirming sea of bodies. Izuku shadowed every step he took, already gasping for deep, measured breaths in his effort to keep up.

Stray elbows and shoulders knocked into him from all sides, jostling him back and forth. His chest felt tight from the claustrophobic discomfort, but he pushed on, chasing his shining red beacon with fire igniting in his blood as the light at the end of the tunnel grew nearer, sunlight glaring in Izuku's eyes-

And then his fire was snuffed by a blast of cold, the floor freezing under his feet and ice crystals forming on the soles of his shoes. His yelp of shock was swallowed by similar outcries, and Izuku frantically shifted his feet to avoid them being locked in place. He slid forward as a result, knocking hard into the back of another student and scrambling to keep his balance.

"Sorry about that," Todoroki's mild tone rang out from ahead, the heterochromatic boy skating effortlessly on the icy path left behind by his right foot and leaving everyone else in the dust. Something unfamiliar burned in Izuku's chest, a heat that forced him to slide across the ice in slow, measured steps, his arms held out to maintain balance.

A sudden rush of heat and force sent him toppling over, the sight of Kacchan blazing forward with a staccato of explosions burning into his vision. "YOU'RE NOT GETTING OFF THAT EASY, YOU MOTHER FUCKER!" His scream of fury acted as a sounding call, Kirishima's voice joining in a wordless yell as he flung himself to the front of the pack, Hardened footsteps shattering the ice underneath him. Yayorozu and Aoyama both jetted after him, propelled by a length of steel piping and a brilliantly shining laser respectively.

Izuku stared after them in wordless wonder before snapping back into action, lines burning across his chest when he forced himself to his feet. Every step was infuriatingly slow, students around him quickly recovering from the surprise freeze and blitzing past him. The stretch of hard packed earth that hadn't been frozen over was quickly filled with scrambling bodies, and the air above it filling with more mobile students. Tokoyami soared like a bird of prey with Dark Shadow's claws propelling him forward, Ojirou nimbly leaping only a half second behind him.

Izuku's heart lodged in his throat, partially from pride in his friends and classmates and partially from
the dread of not being able to make it through. He shoved himself forward with wild abandon, slipping on a patch of ice that painfully deposited him on hard earth. He had no time to ache, heels kicking up dust as he sprinted low to the ground, short trees and stone dividers blurring at the edges of his vision. He'd almost caught up to the leaders of the pack, the narrow path suddenly widening into-

"[Heeeey, what's that I see? Oh oh oh, it looks like the robot apocalypse came a little earlier than predicted!]" As if on cue, a gaggle of the Entrance Exam robots circled the bottleneck, their eyes red and glassy and their weapons primed. Izuku skidded to a halt along with everyone else as a dust storm rose in the distance, occasionally revealing snatches of the massive zero pointers responsible for it. ["I hope you're all ready to crunch some numbers, because if you're not, they won't hesitate to crunch you!"]

There was a short moment of hesitation where Izuku's neck craned up, up, up to see the very tops of the pack of zero pointers, their bodies a solid obstacle to prevent anyone from getting through. Izuku was halfway through simultaneously staving off a panic attack and formulating a plan of action when a swathe of the robots were consumed by a howling blizzard, massive chunks of ice crystals climbing up their chassis until they looked like ice sculptures.

Izuku could see the blur of red and white that must have been Todoroki skating between frozen legs, looking for all the world as if he hadn't expended any effort at all. Izuku's chest clenched, and he dug as deep as he could to find that fire, to boil his veins until he could push through his fear-and then the zero pointers toppled over in a deafening groan of metal, sending massive plumes of dust in the air as their collisions shook the earth underfoot.

"[There goes Shouto Todoroki from class 1-A, taking an early lead after a stunning display of raw power and technique! Now that's someone to keep an eye on, folks!]" Izuku's eyes watered from the sudden assault of dust, eyelids reflexively squeezing shut until he was sure it had passed. He hesitantly cracked his eyes open when the wind stopped battering his face, blood running cold at the sight of the still formidable legion of mechanical enemies present on the battlefield. He scanned his surroundings carefully, looking for some sort of opening-when his throat closed up, the absence of spiky red hair ripping a hole in his chest. Kirishima's name rose on his tongue in a desperate shout-

The downed zero pointer in front of him suddenly burst open, Kirishima clawing his way out of the metal as if it were made of rice paper. "Holy shit, where do they even get the cash for these things?!
"

His incredulous voice rang out, prompting Izuku into motion. He barely had time to take a single step forward before the air rang with the crackle of explosives, Bakugou rocketing through the air as his palms lit up in rhythmic bursts. He shot himself clear over the head of the zero pointer in his way, his aerial dexterity leaving Izuku dizzy and dry mouthed.

His heartbeat pulsed in his ears as more and more of his classmates boldly made their way forward, static closing in on the edges of his vision. There was no way he could win, no way no way no way, not without his Quirk, he had to use it, had to make his training worth something, couldn't let down his friends, couldn't let all their help be for nothing, couldn't disappoint Kacchan, couldn't let Kirishima down-

Izuku's body twisted into a sprinter's stance, his shoulders held low and his fingertips pressed to the dirt, with one leg sliding further behind him. He reached for the wires that held him taut, his chest scorching hot, and he pulled. Izuku pushed himself forward with one foot, earth crumbling underneath him as he screamed through the air in a cloud of twisting black fumes, a foot deep crater left behind by his takeoff. The whistling air cut at him like razors, his face stinging but his teeth gritted in a smile, static ringing in his ears but not loud enough, not enough to pull him apart. The ground was a blur of color beneath him, the entire world melting away as he soared, streaking like a
comet over the blur of robots and a stretch of earth carved apart into precarious pillars and connecting ropes.

["LADIES AND GENTLEMAN IZUKU MIDORIYA OF CLASS 1-A HAS JUST BLASTED HIMSELF INTO AN INCREDIBLE LEAD! HE CLEARED THE FIRST TWO OBSTACLES LIKE IT WAS NOTHING! IT'S AMAZING, IT'S ASTOUNDING, IT'S UNBELIEVABLE!"]

Izuku struggled to breathe around the air forced into his face, forcibly welding together the beginnings of fissures in his consciousness. His stomach lurch and roiled uncomfortably, but he bit back his nausea with a mouthful of fire. He could win, he could do it, he could prove himself, prove he had what it took to be a hero, could prove himself wrong about how useless he'd always felt. His momentum began slowing, pitching him in a dramatically curving arc towards the hard packed earth below. From what he could tell, there was only one obstacle left, and then he'd win the first round. Tears budded in his eyes as he plummeted, the heat of determination swelling in his chest-

And then Izuku's eyes widened as he realized he hadn't thought of a plan for how to land, and it was too late to use Living Nightmare as a backup. Overcome with a riptide of emotions and struggling to fight through the beginnings of dissociation, Izuku was forced to sum up his predicament quickly and plainly. "Oh, shit," he muttered faintly, and then his world erupted into starbursts of agony as he slammed into the dirt.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Earth and skin tore in equal measure as Izuku carved a groove into the dirt with his disastrous landing, a choked cry pulled from his chest when his right arm twisted underneath him, something under his skin igniting in a firestorm of pain. He could just barely manage to pinpoint the white hot core of the injury in his upper arm, sobbing for breath and barely holding back a surge of nausea. Spots of blood were already seeping through his sleeve, a massive strip of skin along his forearm had been rubbed raw, and his wrist throbbed with debilitating sparks when he twitched his fingers. The moment he tried to move his arm out from under him, his vision swam out of focus and his ears rang like church bells.

The miserable shadow that hung over Izuku urged him to stay face down in the dirt, to forget his chance of victory and cease his delusions of exceeding his own expectations. He'd barely even begun and he'd already failed, a single use of his Quirk ending in catastrophe. What kind of hero couldn't even use his own power without breaking himself apart?

He endured an eternity of despair locked in a handful of breathless seconds, overwhelmed by his likely broken arm and dislocated wrist, and the aches and scrapes covering the rest of his body. It was so much, it was so much pain, heavy and constricting and crushing him into uselessness, but he couldn't afford to give up. Izuku grit his teeth until his jaw ached, bracing himself before he turned over to relieve the pressure on his arm. His nerves screamed in protest at even that slight movement, but he couldn't stop, he had to keep going. He still had one arm, and he still had his legs, and he still had Kacchan's fire singing in his veins.

Izuku forced himself to his feet in a single motion, his right arm limp and throbbing at his side but his left fist clenched with determination. He furiously blinked away the tears staining his vision, and risked a glance over his shoulder. The rest of the competitors had already begun the second obstacle, Todoroki narrowly leading in a spray of frost and finesse with Bakugou hot on his tail, a screaming fireball of rage and power. They were a terrifying sight, both of them determined and capable and entirely in control of their Quirks.

But it wasn't hopeless yet. Izuku's arm throbbed and burned horribly, but it was-bearable, when he wasn't lying on top of it. The right side of his head ached and his legs were shaky from his enhanced jump and the urge to cry hummed at the back of his head, but he still had a chance. He held fast to the fire in his veins, forcing his legs to move him forward, desperate energy revving him up into a dead run. He cleared the short strip of dirt ahead of him, his footsteps echoed on the stone transition between the end of the second obstacle and the beginning of the third. His ears rang with the distant noise of dozens of Quirks activating, an audible timer counting down his chance of winning.

He barely listened to Present Mic's commentary, catching the word 'minefield' and immediately pushing himself onward. The mines were buried shallow enough for him to see under the dirt, arranged in a randomized pattern that'd make it difficult for him to simply memorize and bypass. He picked his way through open ground with as much fervor as he dared, footsteps measured and calculated to grant him as much distance as possible. It was clearly the intended design of the obstacle, to slow down those in the lead so that stragglers had a chance to catch up. From an objective standpoint it was both fair in design and likely to provide quite a bit of excitement for spectators, but all Izuku could really think about was the lurch in his stomach whenever he nearly brushed the edge of a mine, and the quickly approaching cacophony of Kacchan's explosions.
He'd made it nearly halfway through when the name 'Todoroki' rang out through slightly tinny speakers, Izuku's heart stuttering between its frantic beats, his breath coming in pained pants tinged with hysteria. He wasn't fast enough to outpace anyone that caught up to him, wasn't versatile enough to fend off any attacks that came his way, which only left him with one choice. Izuku twisted around on one foot the moment he ceased his forward momentum, eyes locking on Todoroki's thin lipped expression for half a moment before he struck from forty feet away. Living Nightmare gushed from his left hand in noxious clouds, his fingers twitching into crescents and his arm jerking upwards as if he were wrenching something from the soil. His vision turned to spots of static for a few seconds, his temporary blindness forcing him to stay still. The earth rumbled beneath his feet, but he couldn't hear if he'd accomplished his objective or not.

The moment his white noise receded Izuku flung himself forward, glancing over his shoulder for half a second to catch a glimpse of the entrance to the mindfield erupting with colorful explosions, the gouges he'd carved into the earth enough to detonate the mines around them. He didn't have time to look for Todoroki amidst the vibrant smoke, instead shifting his focus to making sure he didn't blow himself up. Every inch that shrank between himself and the finish line served to further tighten the knot in his chest, his eyes burning but not spilling over. He was so close, so close-

"YOU HAVEN'T WON YET, IZUKU!" Kacchan's voice roared over the sloshing blood in Izuku's ears, his thunderous explosions ringing out like death knells. He couldn't afford to turn around and confirm the distance between them, panic devouring all thought as his left arm swung out in a wild, cleaving arc, consumed by inky fumes like black phosphorous. He screamed to drown out the static, his arm turning numb and his legs stiffening like lead, but he could still barely see, could still avoid the mines, the exit was only a few feet away and the earth shook behind him in a symphony of detonations as if it was urging him on, nipping at his heels and pushing him to go beyond. Izuku had to chase the light, he had to chase it even if it burned him alive, because anything was better than the howling abyss of despair he'd only just begun to crawl from.

He sobbed aloud when he cleared the end of the minefield, his chest heaving with breaths he struggled to keep deep and even, barely hovering at the edge of hysterical hyperventilation. The concrete tunnel ahead swam in his vision, the taste of sour copper rising in the back of his throat with each labored lungful of air. Izuku poured every remaining ounce of effort into pushing himself as fast as he could, horribly aware of the presence of Bakugou and Todoroki at his back. He had a chance, he had a chance and he couldn't let it slip away, no matter what.

"I KNOW YOU CAN GO FASTER THAN THAT, YOU FUCK! FUCKING PROVE IT, IZUKU! PROVE YOU WANT TO FUCKING WIN! DO IT, DO IT!" Kacchan's booming yells, overflowing with furious passion, flooded his ignited veins with fuel. Wisps of dark smoke bled from Izuku as if from an overheating engine, his legs burning and his lungs screaming for oxygen as he cleared his first step into the tunnel. Every sound turned warped and echoing, the walls ringing with his desperate panting and the thundering footsteps behind him. The air turned frigid at his back, footsteps clacking against ice and catching up, catching up, catching up-

The world turned still and silent, time crawling to a halt and the dim concrete walls closing in with suffocating darkness. Dimly, Izuku was aware of the presence of Shouto Todoroki at his side, his determination and level-headedness frozen in his veins. Heterochromatic eyes twitched once in their sockets, pupils dilated with fear. Eyes like toxic green oceans stared back, glinting with a sickly light that eased the breath from his lungs until they were shriveled and dead. A whisper infused with static twisted through the air, a thing that pierced and burrowed and lived beyond the echo of sound.

"Fall."

In a fraction of an instant, Todoroki went from pumping limbs and sure footed speed to a crumpling
heap on the floor, wheezing for the breath that had been stolen from him. Bakugou's breathless curse ricocheted off the walls as he stumbled over the prone form, and Izuku cleared the final stretch with glazed over eyes and blood dribbling from the corners of his lips. The roar of the crowd was a distant buzz in his ears when he emerged into blinding sunlight, his legs faltering andg sending him collapsing into the dirt. He panted and heaved for air, eyes wide and glassy as he stared, uncomprehendingly, at his own face on the massive screens set up around the stadium.

"I... d-did I win? It-I r-really won?" Izuku's chest tightened with a surge of emotion, pride and elation and relief and disbelief sitting like molten weights. "I-it's not a joke, r-right?" His voice crumbled and cracked, barely audible to his own ears through the sobs bubbling in the back of his throat. But it was still his face on the screen, he was still the first one to make it back, it was real. "I-I really...?" Izuku trembled on his knees in the dirt, his right arm throbbing from broken bones and broken skin, his mouth oozing blood and his limbs burning from overexertion, and he was sure he'd never felt more complete in his entire life. The first sob ripped out of him like a peal of laughter, something so much brighter than the inky sludge of his misery. He was happy. He was happy.

"Midoriya! Midoriya!" Izuku glanced over his shoulder at the sound of his name, wrapped in an exhilarated yell. His heart thudded at the sight of Kirishima, cheeks flushed from exertion and lips pulled into a beaming grin. "Holy shit man, you killed it out there! That was awesome!" A fuzzy part of Izuku's brain concluded that he must have been delusional from overusing his Quirk, because there was no other explanation for the adoration and exuberance that poured from Kirishima's toothy grin and sparkling eyes like waves of golden sunshine.

Izuku desperately fought the urge to blink, unable to tear his gaze away even if he'd wanted to. But the blur of tears and sweat forced his eyes shut, and he rubbed at them with a trembling hand to clear his vision. "Kirishima," he croaked, so choked up with his erupting geyser of emotions that he couldn't possibly form further words. He smiled as hard as he could, until the spots dancing behind his eyelids turned white and his left cheek began to ache with exertion.

When he opened his eyes again Kirishima's face had fallen into abject concern, eyes wide and locked on Izuku's right arm. "Oh man, Midoriya, your arm-you kept going with that? We need to get you to Recovery Girl-"

"I-It's okay it's o-okay," Izuku babbled, his awareness slipping further with every passing moment. "S'fine, I c-can-I can d-do it with one a-arm it's okay-" He tipped forwards when a warm hand landed on his left shoulder, fingers gripping firmly enough to keep him kneeling upright. He stared into blood orange tides with dazed pupils, starbursts of color blooming in his vision even when he wasn't blinking. The hand pulled gently at his arm and he whined in protest, shaking his head until his stomach lurched. "No, n-no, I'm gonna miss t-the next event," he protested weakly, dragging his feet in the dirt less out of denial and more from an inability to do otherwise when he was lifted from his knees.

"I promise you're not gonna get cut from the tournament because of an injury," Kirishima's voice washed over him in a soothing wave, and Izuku clung to the sound of it as his eyes started slipping shut without his permission. "And if they don't wait for you, then I will." Izuku stirred as his arm was thrown over Kirishima's shoulders, idly acknowledging the role reversal.

"Y-you can't," Izuku mumbled, unable to muster the energy to sound panicky. "I-if you drop out, n-nobody'll get to see how cool y-you are." The numb burn of his arm and the drain of Living Nightmare loosened his tongue, but Izuku wasn't in the right state of mind to worry about it. He couldn't let Kirishima sacrifice his chance to compete for no reason.

"Hey, don't sweat it, Midoriya. I'd still have two more chances, right? Just hang tight, we'll get you
fixed up in no time." His friend's tone of voice was friendly and reassuring enough to mostly convince him, Izuku only humming in response as he blinked languidly at the ground disappearing under his limp legs. "Hey Uraraka! Could I get a hand over here?"

Izuku's world faded away into muddied impressions of color and distant, muffled sounds. He poured the final drops of his consciousness into chasing the sturdy warmth at his side, infinitely grounding, even when it felt like his whole body had been released from the tethers of gravity. He'd won, and he'd been hurt, but it was alright. He knew Kirishima would take care of him.

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The first thing that occurred to Izuku Midoriya upon reaching a state of wakefulness where he could actually form coherent thoughts and recognize them as his own was that it was absolutely baffling he was awake at all, because he was unbelievably exhausted. Weariness sank into the cracks of his bones, turning his marrow to cement and forcing him to straddle the line between slumber and full consciousness. He groaned in displeasure, struggling to sit up on the thin, stiff mattress he was lying on.

"Hey, hey, take it easy, Midoriya. You gotta save that energy for the next event, man." Izuku frantically blinked open his leaden eyelids, alarm stirring the heavy clumps of ashes in his chest. The sight of Kirishima's smiling visage would normally have been enough to help quell his heightening emotions, but considering the situation at hand it only exacerbated them.

"K-Kirishima! Y-you-p-please tell me you d-didn't miss the next event-" Izuku forced himself into a sitting position with one arm, gaze flickering to take in his surroundings. They were both sitting in a large canvas tent that reminded Izuku of military movies, sunlight bleeding faintly through the drab green cover to illuminate the rows of patient beds and plethora of medical equipment set up inside. He couldn't be sure what time of day it was without a clock, but it didn't feel like too much time had passed.

"Don't worry about it, man, they're givin' us some time to recharge between events. We still got half an hour before we gotta meet up again." Kirishima leaned over the side of the fold out chair he was seated on, retrieving something that was out of Izuku's line of sight. He shot back up a moment later with a triumphant smile, holding out a cardboard box that reeked of mouthwatering festival food, along with a pair of cheap plastic chopsticks. "I brought lunch! Figured you could use some energy after Recovery Girl patched you up."

"O-oh! Um, thank you, b-but you didn't have to-I can pay you back i-if you want-" Despite his verbal hesitance, Izuku's growling stomach urged him to reach out and accept the offered food. He'd been so nervous before the festival that he'd barely even touched his breakfast, and while running on an empty stomach had kept him from throwing up, it was starting to cramp from hunger.

"No need to pay me back. Just think of it as a 'congrats' for getting first in the race, if you want." Kirishima's grin softened a little at the edges, a transition that forced a flush on Izuku's cheeks and made it difficult for him to maintain eye contact. "You really did do amazing out there, man. I honestly wasn't super sure at first; not 'cause I doubted your ability to win or anything, I just didn't know you could be so competitive. It's nice to see you really get into the spirit of things."

Izuku did a poor job of pretending to be distracted by his food, blood darkening the tips of his ears as he fumbled with opening the box and snapping apart his chopsticks. "T-t-thanks," he mumbled, eyes locked on his first few bites of food, "b-but I was really j-just lucky everything worked out s-so well. I-it wasn't some.. p-plan, or anything; I j-just kinda freaked out most of the time, a-and I totally busted up my arm-"

"C'mon, don't sell yourself short, Midoriya! Sure, you might've totally broken your arm, but you kept
goin' anyway, right? I'm pretty sure you can't say luck helped you with that." Kirishima scooted his chair over far enough for him to rest a hand on Izuku's shoulder, making him stiffen up. "You shouldn't think about what could'a gone wrong and chalk your victory up to luck. From where I'm standin', all I see is that you kicked some major ass and won all on your own."

"...I-it's just h-hard for me to believe," Izuku admitted softly, voice cracking with emotion. He stared down at his immobile hands through a sheen of tears, breaths hitching on each exhale. "I-I was-f-for so long, I th-thought I couldn't d-do anything right, t-that I'd always be n-nothing but a s-screw up. A-and even when I made it into U.A., I w-was just waiting for s-someone to r-realize how w-worthless I was-" Izuku choked on his own words, a distant part of him furious at his inability to not break down. It wasn't as if he'd never spoken about his feelings of inadequacy before; Ms. Atsuko had talked him through episodes of crippling self-doubt more than once. But revealing it to someone like Kirishima, who looked at him like he was someone incredible-

Izuku weakly obliged Kirishima's one armed embrace, turning to press his face into a firm shoulder rather than fail to make eye contact. He hiccuped and shuddered around barely contained sobs, stomping them down to avoid exhausting himself further with another bout of emotional turmoil. 

"..I'm really not super great with emotional stuff," Kirishima began, his voice low and gentle and containing only faint traces of his normal bombast, "but if it helps at all, I think you're pretty amazing, Midoriya. And I'd think that even if you hadn't come in first place. You could'a come in last, and I'd still think you're amazing."

"Y-you're just saying that," Izuku uttered bleakly, his voice thankfully muffled by Kirshima's shoulder.

"I'm serious, man! You work so hard at everything you do, you never give up, even when you're afraid-you're.. kind of inspiring." Izuku stilled in shock, his heartbeat deafening in his own ears. 

"And I know I can't just change your mind right away, or anything. I.." Kirishima's tone fell a few notches, empathy overflowing from his words, "I get that it doesn't work like that. I just hope that one day you don't have to feel like you're not good enough."

"K-Kirishima.." A thousand trains of thought collided in Izuku's head, the beginnings of hundreds of sentences building on the tip of his tongue, but none of them could possibly convey the weight of his feelings. He sniffled and gently eased himself from Kirishima's embrace, face wet with tears but his eyes shining underneath them. "T-thank you," he mumbled awkwardly, unsatisfied with his inability to articulate properly.

"It's no problem," Kirishima replied, brightness seeping back into his voice. "C'mon, we should get outta here before we miss the event. And before Recovery Girl gets a chance to chew you out for messin' up your arm." The redhead offered a hand to help him up, and Izuku shyly took it. Kirishima's fingers squeezing around his own when the other boy helped him up brought color flooding back into his face, his heart clenching with an echo of the sensation. Izuku's right arm was still stiff and aching, and his wrist still twinged with every movement, but it was better than a shattered humerus and dislocated wrist joints. Maybe the second event wouldn't be so bad.

Ten minutes later, Izuku had been frozen into a husk of quivering terror by the yawning shadow of his peers, the astronomical weight of ten million points painting a literal target on his forehead. Maybe, he thought faintly, he should have just dropped out instead.

Chapter End Notes
Some wonderful fanart for this chapter!

Be sure to check out the artist!
Izuku's pillars of confidence crumbled into ash, like the petals of a flower thrown into the sun. He understood that, logically, placing first in the very beginning probably hadn't been the best idea from a long-term point of view. If he'd put a little more thought into the competition he could have hung back in the race just far enough to not grab attention but close enough to not be cut from the second event, and then he'd have been in a comfortable position come the Cavalry Battle. It was absolutely pragmatic and reasonable, and Izuku almost felt ashamed of how easily he'd been blinded by the light of winning.

But that was all assuming his end goal was to give himself the best chances of winning the entire competition, or at least doing well enough to leave a lasting impression. He certainly didn't want to not win, but the point of the Sport's Festival as a whole was to be noticed by talent scouts to get a decent first foothold into a professional career. Perhaps when Izuku was younger (and more hopeful) he'd fancied delusions of being the world's greatest hero, to save people like All Might did: with strength and charisma and a beaming smile. But if he'd ever even had a chance in the first place, he'd finally killed it off upon refusing One For All.

All he wanted was to help people, to turn the horrible thing under his skin into a force of good instead of unerring destruction and torment. Winning the obstacle race had been his first ever taste of it, the first fingers of heroic light that meant he could rise above his mental illness, he could go beyond the bleak certainty of Living Nightmare. As much as it put him in a less than desirable position in the Cavalry Battle, he wouldn't ever pretend to regret it. He'd have run forty kilometers with two broken arms if it meant he could prove himself to be more than his anguish and insecurity, more than the shaking, anxious boy that cried at the drop of a hat and had no chance of accomplishing anything in life. He had to be more than that.

Of course, that was all easier said than done, especially when he had forty some-odd opponents that all had a lifetime of practice and understanding of their Quirks to fall back on, when he'd only begun making progress in the last month after ten years of violently hating himself. Izuku spent the entirety of Midnight's explanation of the event standing as still and hunched as possible, which did very little to ward off the heavy, judging stares he'd been inundated with. He wasn't exactly a stranger to negative attention, but having it so focused and overwhelming and palpable that he could practically taste it in the air made him feel queasy and frail, like he was still a cowering middle schooler dully expectant of ridicule and sneering disdain.

Izuku was barely strong enough to twitch when the timer began for team assembly, the weight of challenging stares falling away, but the chains of uncertainty holding fast. His position in the lead was an extreme deterrent to anyone who might've been willing to partner with him, which meant he had to think very carefully about what few choices he actually had-

"Heeey, Midoriya! You ready to win this thing or what?" Izuku choked out a yelp as his train of thought was physically derailed, solid arms scooping him off his feet and settling him on broad shoulders as if he weighed next to nothing. He shrieked a tinny note and glanced down at an eyeful of spiky red hair, practically blinded by only a glimpse of Kirishima's shark toothed grin and bright eyes. "Jeez man, you need to eat more; I think I could pick you up with one hand."

Every iota of Izuku's thought processes buzzed with an overload of electricity in a single moment, fried to a crisp by a thousand different sensory sources (passionate fervor blinding grins the warmth
of body heat arms that could snap him in half) and left him sputtering out half finished sentences. "Y-you- Kirishima, y-you can't-s-shouldn't you find a t-team-the m-match didn't even s-start why are y-you-

"Whoa, whoa, take it easy, man. As nice as it is to hear you pumped up, I can't understand a word you're sayin'." Kirishima nonchalantly adjusted Izuku's weight to sit more comfortably across his shoulders, oblivious to the twitching hands that hovered in the air above his head, unable to decide whether they should grab on for more stability or not. "Who else you want for the team, Midoriya? I'm sure you already got a killer game plan in mind."

Izuku pulled his hands close against his chest and anxiously rubbed the stiffness from his right fingers. "Y-you don't have to feel obligated to p-partner up with me just b-because we're friends, Kirishima. I-it's alright, r-really. I'd.. p-probably just slow you down-

"It's not like that, man, really! I mean it kinda is-not the obligation part, but the friend part." Kirishima locked a hand around Izuku's thigh when he turned to start moving, and if he noticed Izuku stiffening up he didn't mention it. "But other than that, we've got pretty good synergy, considering I'm one of like, six people that actually understands how your Quirk works. My Hardening should be enough to block any debris from you tearin' shit up, and since you don't have much defense I can take any blows comin' your way. And because you're such a string bean," Kirishima continued in a teasing tone, forcing heat to the tips of Izuku's ears, "I'll have an easier time maneuvering us out of danger."

"I-I.. th-those are all totally salient points and pretty m-much exactly what I need from the f-front of the horse since m-my strategy basically involves defense and evasion above attack power since I have the t-ten million points and we won't need a-any other headbands if we can keep ours which s-should be feasible if I can u-use my Quirk to dissuade anyone from getting too close and you can defend against anyone that slips by all we'll need is someone with high mobility like Iida and a lot of utility like U-Uraraka, or Tokoyami-" Izuku blinked, his flow of words grinding to a halt without outside intervention for the first time in.. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd started rambling in earshot of someone else and not been interrupted partway.

"Sounds like a solid plan to me," Kirishima tacked on agreeably, the warmth of his fingers through the leg of Izuku's uniform incredibly obvious once his hyper focus had dissolved. "Can you see Iida from up there?"

Izuku shook himself, blinking twice before he began scanning the sea of heads around him. "Y-yeah, he's over to the left-. t-talking with T-Todoroki." His heart sank at the sight of red and white hair, a surge of retroactive guilt searing his insides. He'd been so absorbed in winning that he'd almost forgotten the final few seconds, had almost forgotten the fear he'd forced into cool eyes, the breath he'd stolen so callously. The cognitive dissonance of wanting to win with all his strength while also not wanting to ever use his Quirk on someone else sent a surge of remorse and discomfort through him, somehow worse than the absolute certainty of dread. At least he knew what dread meant, at least he knew how to regret something. He flinched when a mismatched gaze rose to meet his own, hard enough to nearly fall off Kirishima's shoulders.

"Whoa, what's up, man? You alright?" Kirishima's concern rose up from below him, sturdy fingers squeezing his leg to keep him from falling over. "Is it about Iida?"

"N-no, it's-u-uhm.. j-just.. i-it's nothing," Izuku mumbled, thankful that Kirishima couldn't see the clear guilt in his expression. "W-we-Iida looks busy, w-we should find Uraraka and Tokoyami. I-I can amend my plan a little with both of them in it." Izuku held his breath when Kirishima hesitated for a long moment, before uttering a few words of acquiescence. He fought the impulse to glance
over his shoulder, too weak to face the frosty bite of Todoroki's gaze. He spent a few moments half revising his strategy to accommodate Tokoyami in place of Iida, and half trying to quantify how much winning actually meant to him.

Izuku secured the velcro point band around his forehead with trembling fingers, mildly appreciative of its ability to keep at least a little bit of fringe out of his field of vision. He'd situated himself above Kirishima, Uraraka and Tokoyami after compartmentalizing his embarrassment for later review, focused intently on the security provided by the closeness of his friends instead of the ticking countdown timer.

It would be fine, he desperately attempted to convince himself. Tokoyami and Dark Shadow would be an incredible left defense, capable of warding off Todoroki's ice if the need arose. Uraraka could watch their more vulnerable right, and relieve them of the weight of gravity whenever they required a quick escape. And Kirishima was an unbreakable wall of defense that could (hopefully) endure any backlash from emergency uses of Living Nightmare. It wasn't foolproof, but it was the best he could hope for. All he could do was make sure he didn't let anyone down.

"Five."

"You guys ready to kick some ass?" Kirishima's razor sharp grin was practically audible, his ferocious enthusiasm forcing a shiver down Izuku's spine.

"Four."

"Ha, you know it!" Uraraka's bubbly cheer had taken on a steely edge, her competitive streak having lit a fire under her.

"Three!"

"This victory shall not escape our grasp." Tokoyami spoke with a calming surety, resolute in the face of adversity.

"Two!"

"I-I won't let you guys down," Izuku whispered, blinking hard and raising a single trembling hand into position. He could already see at least four other teams (Bakugou, Tetsutetsu, Hagakure, Todoroki) prepared to engage them, which left him no choice but to dissuade them from doing so. He only hoped his voice didn't break too embarrassingly.

"ONE!"] Present Mic's enthusiastic countdown rang out alongside the buzz of the starting sound, every team immediately bursting into motion as the cavalry battle began.

Izuku waited half a breath, eyes wide and unblinking as four teams rushed towards them. He waited until he could feel Uraraka graze a finger against his leg, the constraints of gravity melting away. Izuku met heterochromatic eyes from sixty feet away, and sliced his arm horizontally through the air in a noxious burst of black fumes. His vision darkened into patches of static in the same moment that he tore a jagged crescent through the earth, sending up a shower of dust and debris to create a barrier between the other teams and his own.

The moment Kirishima tapped his leg he threw his voice as loud as it would go, fighting around the building nausea in his stomach as he focused on maintaining the fumes billowing from his half cocked arm. "I-IF YOU WANT THIS H-HEADBAND SO BAD," he yelled at the top of his lungs, desperately injecting as much Kacchan brand intimidation into his tone as possible, "THEN C-COME AND TAKE IT, I-IF YOU'RE BRAVE ENOUGH!" Tokoyami's Dark Shadow emerged
on cue, manipulated to look as large and imposing as possible, in addition to providing living cover from any long ranged Quirks.

Three fingers pressed against the back of his leg a few beats later, which was more than he'd expected. His last minute revised plan relied heavily on defense and evasion, since they didn't have much speed without Iida. And since the best defense was a good offense, Izuku had decided to use Living Nightmare as a tool of intimidation. As long as most of the teams were hesitant to get close, then the few that did attack would be easier to deal with. He'd apparently done well enough that three of the teams had hesitated, and he was certain even without vision that the fourth was Kacchan, as he'd expected.

"K-Kirishima, now!" Izuku hissed, his vision bleeding back in spots of color. He braced himself as his 'horse' began charging to the left, directly towards Bakugou's approaching team (composed of Sero, Bakugou, Ashido, and a girl with pink hair and strange goggles that he didn't recognize). Izuku raised his still smoking arm in challenge, vision clear enough to meet the focused molten pits set in Kacchan's head. He forced his face into an uncharacteristically aggressive grin, baring his teeth and hooking his fingers into claws. He stared, unblinking, and read a trace of the hesitance he was hoping to see on Kacchan's face.

He couldn't waste a moment of his advantage, he had to press harder with Kacchan caught off guard. Izuku dropped his arm in a vicious cleave, sending up a geyser of shattered dirt only a few feet away from Sero's leading gait. "W-WHAT'S THE MATTER, KACCHAN? A-ARE YOU SCARED?" Izuku chose his words carefully, knowing that if he pushed the wrong button, Kacchan would explode with rage and pursue him with zealous malice. He focused as hard as he could on controlling his tone around the urge to vomit, his fuming arm numbed and tingling all the way up to his shoulder. "Y-YOU TOLD ME TO TRY MY BEST, S-SO THAT'S WHAT I'M G-GONNA DO! I J-JUST HOPE YOU CAN HANDLE IT!"

"Todoroki's coming right!" Uraraka warned him at the same moment he saw Kacchan erupt, molten eyes burning like thermite. Izuku's heart dropped like a carcass in his chest, he'd made a mistake he'd never should have goaded Kacchan like that, they should have created some distance instead-

"K-Kirishima, b-brace!" Izuku flung his right arm out in a wide arc, his palm flat and fingers stiff. He waited a single beat, static curling in his ears and drowning out most of the noise around him. His sixth attack of the day-he only hoped it would be enough. "NOW!" The moment Kirishima flung the entire horse sideways with the aid of a Hardened jump and Zero Gravity, Izuku's arm stiffened and jerked backwards with a massive burst of recoil that sent him and his team blustering over open ground, Uraraka kicking up a cloud of dust when she failed to keep both feet off the ground the entire time. The empty air he'd been aiming at rippled and boiled like melting glass, but with nothing to destroy his attack had provided enough kickback to be used for a burst of mobility.

Izuku panted for air, his arm flopping to rest, boneless, at his side as the final curls of fumes drifted into the air and the tug of gravity returned. "I-I'm out," he wheezed, grasping at Kirishima's shoulder with his left hand to try and maintain some semblance of balance. He watched with a half realized surge of astonishment as Iida's speedy assault resulted in a hasty course correction that left Todoroki's whole team tumbling to the ground, their horse dismantled by their effort to not run out of bounds.

"Leave the rest to us," Tokoyami intoned from his left, Dark Shadow rearing up to screech a piercing note at Bakugou's team, all of which looked less than confident about approaching save Kacchan himself. "Todoroki will think twice before approaching again, and Bakugou should prove easy enough to ward off. You've done well, Midoriya."
"Feel free to take a nap or something if you need to, Izuku!" Uraraka chimed cheerfully, a note of vicious delight present in her voice. "I'm sure we can persuade Bakugou to keep the noise down."

"You did awesome, man," Kirishima's voice drifted up to him, less piercing the haze of exhaustion around him and more gently worming its way through. "So be sure to save some of that juice for later. You've got another event comin' up, after all."

Izuku blinked rapidly to clear the moisture from his eyes, twitching his right fingers experimentally. He could barely feel them, and the movement itself was fairly sluggish, but he could likely dredge up one last blow in an emergency. "T-thanks, you guys," he mumbled, his own voice slightly muted by his buzzing senses. "J-just pinch me i-if you need me." He slid his eyes shut for a long moment, the tug of exhaustion at the base of his neck making his head droop. "W-watch out f-for environmental h-hazards from Ashido, K-Kacchan might try to... to p-pin us in. An' Iida's r-really fast.. n' cool, s-so.. don't let him..." Izuku trailed off as he found himself unable to focus on what he was talking about. He was silent for a long moment, eyes closed as he endured the evasive motions of his teammates underneath him and the distant sound of Kacchan screaming obscenities. That was probably nothing to worry about. His friends would be fine without him. Izuku just.. needed a moment to rest his eyes.

--

Shouto Todoroki idly glanced at the scrape along the side of his left hand, a result of his transition from sitting to crashing into the ground. He carefully surveyed the teams nearest to his own, Hakagure's headband secured around his throat above two others and the smell of ozone still pungent from the recent use of Kaminari's Quirk to dissuade an attack by a team from class 1-B. But those teams didn't matter at the moment. He'd already chosen his target, and wouldn't be swayed from victory by lesser distractions.

He refocused his gaze on team Midoriya, watching critically as Tokoyami's Dark Shadow fended off aerial attacks from Bakugou (who was equipped with accessories that kept him in the air longer, presumably from the support class girl on his team) and Kirishima sliced through the lengths of tape Sero shot at him with his own two hands. Midoriya himself wasn't participating very much at all; he looked pale and washed out, even under the light of the afternoon sun. He was unable to keep his eyes open for more than a few seconds at a time, flinching at the sound of explosions but doing nothing to prevent them.

It was fairly obvious that Shouto had underestimated Midoriya's ability to wield the devastating power of his Quirk, Living Nightmare. How something so blatantly menacing and ominous had been attached to a boy as timid and inoffensive as Izuku Midoriya, he'd never understand. What he knew was that Midoriya was more capable than he appeared, more intelligent and versatile than the one-trick Shouto had assumed of him.

He was kind to a clear and obvious fault, but hadn't let it impede his ability to compete with his friends and classmates. He was innovative and quick thinking, using the synergy of those around him to his advantage even under duress. Shouto had made a grave mistake in his assumptions. He hadn't challenged Midoriya from a place of pride, or envy; he'd recognized a threat (though he'd miscalculated the severity of it) and made his stance known. He would beat Midoriya. The damnable eye of his father was on him, and being bested by a boy that could hardly speak complete sentences without stuttering, and cried more in a single conversation than Shouto had in ten years..<br>

Shouto had nothing against him personally, but self preservation had to come first. "Iida," he spoke aloud, mindful of the dwindling minutes on the clock, "you're friends with Midoriya and the rest of his team. Are there any avenues of attack you'd recommend we pursue?" He'd very pointedly not used the words 'weakness' or 'exploit', for despite them being able to get his point across easier, he knew the negative stigma attached to them. Navigating conversations was frequently taxing and
more complicated than it needed to be, but he couldn't risk prompting Iida into having second thoughts.

"Ah, well.." Shouto read the hesitation in Iida's voice, patient enough to wait and see if he would come around. "...Whenever Midoriya uses his Quirk, it debilitates his senses, a symptom that compounds with each further use. He's already used it three times in this event, so he's likely feeling the effects. He's also unwilling to use it directly on someone else. If we can close the distance quickly and overwhelm Dark Shadow, we'll be too close for Midoriya to ward us off, and if we cut off any escape routes with your ice.. we'll be in an ideal position to take the headband."

"Sounds like an alright plan," Shouto commented, keeping a careful eye on a furiously tenacious Bakugou's explosive efforts to break through Dark Shadow's defense.

"Bakugou is our biggest issue in enacting it," Yaoyorozu spoke up, an echo of Shouto's own thoughts on the matter. "If we can get between his team and Midoriya's before walling them off, that would be ideal; we'd be able to focus entirely on the offensive, without worrying about exposing our backs."

"Bakugou won't give up unless something else makes him angry. Thankfully, it looks like luck is on our side." Shouto tracked the movement of one of the class 1-B teams, headed straight for the tunnel visioning Bakugou. It would be a scarce time frame to secure a successful attack-they couldn't afford a single misstep. "Yaoyorozu."

"I'm on it," she replied, exposed skin bleeding light as she focused on assembling molecules. Shouto leveled a heavy stare on his target, gazing past unkempt curls and clammy skin and half a set of dusted freckles (a gnarled scar that twisted something vital in his chest when he saw it), recalling instead acidic green eyes that tore the breath from his chest and pierced him through with unbridled terror. He'd underestimated Izuku Midoriya once before, and paid the price. It wouldn't happen again.

--

Izuku was snapped from his haze of half-conscious exhaustion by several extremely alarming events that all took place in a very short amount of time. A pair of fingers pinched his leg hard enough to hurt, snapping him into awareness at the same moment Kirishima shouted his name. His eyes flew open, glazed and blurry as he forced them to quickly refocus and analyze the situation.

Dark Shadow was curled in front of them at a fraction of its original size, shadowy eyes budding with orbs of darkness that vaguely resembled tears. The stench of nitroglycerin burned the inside of his nose and made his eyes water, a testament to the sheer fury of Bakugou's assault. His team had been backed into a border, skirting the very edge of the playing field in an effort to create distance from Bakugou's team.

Kacchan himself wasn't even facing them, revealing only the half profile of his screaming rage as a competitor Izuku didn't recognize twirled a point headband around his finger, his smug grin surely sending Kacchan into hellish levels of loathing. He would have felt relieved at the sight of Kacchan turning his attention towards someone else, if not for the walls of thick ice crystals that sprouted from the ground between them.

He jerked his head to the side to find Todoroki only moments away from bearing down on them, some sort of thin sheet thrown over himself, Yaoyorozu, and Iida. He connected the dots half a second too late, screaming a warning just as Kaminari lit up in a surge of electrical discharge. "T-TOKOYAMI!"

He threw his arms up to cover his face for all the good it would do against being shocked by thousands of volts of electricity, his eyes squeezed shut for half a second before he realized Dark
Shadow had absorbed the blow, screeching in distress before it retreated back into Tokoyami's core. "Midoriya, look out-" Kirishima's warning came moments too late, Izuku's eyes blowing wide as he was assaulted by a blur of color, fingers raking through his hair and snatching his headband faster than he could blink.

"Thanks for keeping it warm for me," Todoroki stated mildly, securing the band around his neck as the countdown timer reached the final digits. Despair howled inside of Izuku's chest, clawing at the inside of his rib cage and scraping his bones with ragged notches. Blood thundered in his ears in a searing hot torrent, spitting flames and reminding him that he had to win, had to win, had to win--

["Ten!"]

"Kirisshima, brace! Uraraka, now!" Izuku felt himself slip from gravity's hold, desperately hooking his left arm around in a wild curve that tore ice and soil apart in a devastating eruption, shards of frost zipping through the air like shrapnel to cut off Todoroki's escape. He could see the smoke leaking from Iida's engines, they had to be overheated, or at least close enough that they couldn't get away in time- "GO!" Izuku fired blindly behind them with his right arm, launching them forward like the shell from an artillery cannon. His arms billowed with black fumes like smokestacks, hot and aching and completely invisible to him.

["Five!"]

Izuku reached out blindly with one numb, trembling arm, roughly estimating the position of Todoroki's neck by comparing his location prior to Izuku losing his vision to the speed and trajectory he'd been moving at. He clenched his fingers at the barest hint of sensation, gripping them in as tight of a fist as he could manage. He heard snatches of sound through blaring static, but was unable to make sense of them until--

["OOOOONE! THAT'S IT FOLKS, THIS BATTLE IS OOOEEEEER!"] A loud buzzer sounded off the end of the event, and Izuku was dimly aware of the moment his friends ceased to move underneath him. He started at the feeling of a palm slotting against his own, blindly curling his fingers until he found purchase. He only realized that Zero Gravity had worn off when he was helped down off his position as the rider, blinking frequently to try and disperse the static that blinded him.

"D-did we..?" Izuku rubbed together the fingers of his right hand, and crumbled wholly and absolutely when he realized it was completely empty. The fire in his blood turned to frigid sludge, a bitter surge of defeat rising in the back of his throat on the fumes of his knotted stomach. His breathing hitched and snagged on every inhale, shortening into shallow, rattling gasps for air. "I-I, I d-didn't I d-didn't g-get th-the--"

"Izuku, it's okay, it's okay! It's alright, I promise!" Slender arms wrapped around his torso, a gentle pressure desperate to imbibe him with reassurance. He leched onto Uraraka's warmth like a parasite, trembling hands grasping futilely at the back of her uniform. "It's alright, Izuku, please just take a deep breath-"

"I-It's n-n-not alright," he croaked, desperation and despair gushing through the cracks in his voice. "I-I'm t-the reason w-we, w-we-"

["-and in fourth place, team Midoriya! These four teams are moving up to the final round!"] The calamity raging inside of Izuku's chest stilled and dispersed into nothingness, shock resonating through him like a bell struck by a hammer. He dared to crack his eyes open when Uraraka pulled away, the blinding grin on her lips making him tremble.
"Hey, Midoriya!" Kirishima's elation shook every molecule of Izuku Midoriya's physical makeup until he was sure he would fly apart, gaze welded to fiery red hair that blazed in the sun, blood orange eyes that were squinted nearly shut from the force of a grin that shone with ethereal light, and the pair of headbands that dangled from Kirishima's fist. "Sorry I couldn't get the ten million points back, it was kinda short notice. Warn a guy next time you wanna pull a totally manly move like that, okay?"

Izuku's eyes burned with buds of nectar sweet tears, his heart fluttering in his chest as his blood sang with a surge of emotion he could only tentatively label 'adoration'. He sobbed around his own smile, face aching from the gratitude he could never hope to properly express. He opened his mouth to try and put even a fraction of it into words, but instead of tearful thanks, his long ignored nausea decided that the first thing out of his mouth would be the entire contents of his stomach. He was fairly sure Kirishima got the message, either way. And, Izuku reflected with an air of optimism, it at least gave them the excuse to eat lunch together.

Chapter End Notes

Wonderfully wholesome fanart for this chapter!
Be sure to check out the artist!
Chapter 29

Izuku Midoriya stood stock still, half masked by the shadow of the doorway he'd been led into. He could faintly hear the rest of his classmates and fellow competitors headed to lunch, a thought that made his own stomach coil and knot with discomfort. He was starving after the unfortunate loss of his previous meal, and his mouth was dry and tacky from thirst. But it would have to wait. Kirishima, who had eyed him with concern and doubt when he excused himself with half a smile, would have to wait.

Because the heavy, narrowed gaze of Shouto Todoroki rooted him to the cement, as if phantoms of glimmering ice were creeping up his legs and chilling him down to the marrow of his bones. Todoroki wasn't intimidating in the way Kacchan was, wasn't an eruption of noise and violence that never ceased exploding. He wasn't intimidating in the way Mr. Aizawa was, clouded in devouring silence and turning muscle to stone with a single glance.

Todoroki was intimidating because Izuku had zero insight into what he was thinking, or feeling, or planning. One of Izuku's few strengths was his ability to read faces, and voices, and bodies as if they were written in clear lettering. He didn't always know what to make of the information he analyzed, but having it available was enough to ease off the edge of his lack of social knowledge. But he couldn't read anything from Todoroki. He was completely opaque and uniform, and Izuku couldn't even be sure if it was a result of his parchment being blank, or because he'd completely doused himself in ink.

The tense silence between them dragged on long enough for Izuku's discomfort to reach its first break point, his hands trembling minutely and his gaze flickering between Todoroki's silent visage and the space between the tips of his shoes. He dredged up an iota of initiative, deciding that if Todoroki wasn't going to say anything, then he'd at least use the chance to make his own thoughts known.

"I-I'm sorry," Izuku blurted, his gaze affixed to a spot on the bridge of Todoroki's nose because he knew maintaining eye contact would siphon the strength that allowed him to speak. "I-in the../ the obstacle r-race. I'm s-sorry I used my Q-Quirk on you, i-in the tunnel. It-I w-wanted to win so badly, b-but that doesn't excuse it. I k-know it feels awful, s-so.. I-I'm really s-sorry." Izuku's heart thudded painfully against his ribs as the echo of his words faded and died.

The silence had just long enough to slink back in and settle between them, before Todoroki shattered it. "I don't understand why you're apologizing." He didn't wait long enough for Izuku to sputter and cobble together some sort of explanation, and instead continued speaking. "You used your Quirk to give yourself the best chance of winning, just like everyone else. It wasn't pleasant to experience, but Quirks rarely are. Don't be sorry for competing."

Izuku's entire thought process derailed into nothing as Todoroki completely subverted his expectations, leaving him floundering to think of what to say. He made an embarrassing sound that might have been an attempt at words, wilting under Todoroki's silent gaze and the space between the tips of his shoes. He dredged up an iota of initiative, deciding that if Todoroki wasn't going to say anything, then he'd at least use the chance to make his own thoughts known.

"I intended to apologize to you, and somehow you managed to beat me in that as well." Izuku's heart simultaneously skipped a beat and tugged itself in multiple directions, disbelief pulling him in one direction as remorse pulled him the other. He barely managed to open his mouth to apologize before he was stonewalled by a flash of something in Todoroki's gaze. "Sorry, that was.. in poor taste. I do
feel as though I owe you an explanation, for what I said before the festival began."

Izuku attempted to follow the thread of emotion in Todoroki's words, struggling to place exactly what it was. His *choice* of words sounded remorseful, but his ability to mask what he was feeling still left Izuku feeling lopsided and out of his element. "Y-you... i-it's okay, I-I understand... why you said it. Y-you weren't wrong," he mumbled, volume falling in equal measure with his mood.

"I can understand why you'd think that, but I *was* wrong. I underestimated you, and thought you less capable than you actually are. As a result, I paid the price by coming third in the obstacle race, and second in the cavalry battle. Normally, that'd be the end of it; I underestimated you, and I lost to you. That's all it really needs to be." Izuku went very still when Todoroki made direct eye contact, quivering from the intensity of his gaze. "But from what I've observed of you, that isn't enough. I don't want to presume too much, but I imagine that what I said is something you'll take to heart, despite proving me wrong, and it'll inhibit your growth as a hero, which isn't what I intended."

Izuku gaped around a severe loss of words, his insides a chaotic mess of emotions that only managed to burst to life for a scarce few moments before fizzling out. His expectations had been so impossibly far off the mark, to the point where he had absolutely no idea what he was supposed to do, to say, to *think*. He'd misjudged Todoroki so badly that he felt guilty, even if he'd never made his assumptions known. "I-I-"

"Before you assure me that everything is fine and nothing is my fault," Todoroki interrupted, his tone containing something dry that made Izuku's face flare with embarrassment, "I should explain why I challenged you at all... You know who my father is-there's no question. Endeavor." Todoroki expelled the name as though it were something unpleasant, perhaps detritus caught between his teeth. "He's a man obsessed with power, and image. As the number two hero, he does whatever he can to maintain his power, and his image. He's spent a long time in the shadow of All Might, unable to best the Symbol of Peace." Todoroki closed his eyes for a moment, drawing in a steady breath. It was the closest to 'agitated' that Izuku had seen of him.

"You.. have you heard of... Quirk marriages?" Izuku's heart turned cold in his chest, dread nestling between his ribs. "They're an archaic practice, popularized when Quirks first manifested. Those with outstanding power would seek out others with similarly strong Quirks, and... procreate, to combine their power in the ideal offspring." Todoroki's tone was tight, laced with an anger he refused to let resonate.

"Like most men with wealth, power, and inferiority complexes, my father turned out to be a morally barren monster obsessed with being the best. After it became clear to him that he couldn't best All Might..." Todoroki's gaze was affixed on a far point beside Izuku's head, hard enough that he was sure the concrete would shatter. "He trapped my mother into marrying him, because of her powerful Quirk. His goal was to create a protege powerful enough to usurp All Might." Todoroki's right hand clenched into a fist at his side, cold radiating from it in wisps of frost.

"That disgusting bastard.. I refuse to be used by him for his infantile grudges. I won't give him what he wants, I won't use his damnable fire," Todoroki spat, and Izuku flinched at the venom infused in his tone. "In every memory I have of her, my mother was always crying, because of *him*. Every time she saw my left side, all she could see was that monster. It was too much for her to bear, and eventually she reached her breaking point." Todoroki grazed a finger around the edge of his scar, his hand shaking, and horror dawned on Izuku like a tidal wave. "She burned me with boiling water, because looking at me caused her so much pain. The reason I challenged you.. I know how that bastard thinks. If I were to be beaten by someone as timid, as nonthreatening as you-"

Todoroki leveled a dead stare that made Izuku's chest ache, just from glimpsing an echo of his pain.
"I have no ill will towards you, but I can't let you beat me. I'm sure you understand." Every muscle in Todoroki's body went tense when Izuku embraced him with uncharacteristic boldness, heaving with barely contained upset. He craned his head to gaze into heterochromatic eyes, blown wide with shock.

"I'm sorry," Izuku choked out, forcing his voice through a thick knot of tears. "You don't deserve any of that. I know you probably know that, already, but... sometimes it helps to hear it. Y-you..." Izuku held fast to the shards of bravery he'd pulled from the muck, desperate to help, in any way he could. "Have you told anyone else about any of this? A relative, or teacher?"

"I-no," Todoroki responded faintly, as if that were the last thing he'd expected Izuku to say, before his voice regained its hardened edge. "There wouldn't be any point in doing so. He might not be the number one hero, but Endeavor is still one of the most powerful and influential men in Japan. He's a heinous monster, which means he has experience in covering up scandals that would damage his image."

Izuku almost backed down, almost uttered a meek apology for pushing too hard, but the thought of his own pain, locked away like a demon in a casket that he had to hold closed with all his strength, never faltering else it might break free- "I-I know it's hard, t-to reach out. W-when you're in pain, when you... h-have a secret, you think 'it's better that nobody knows'. You convince yourself you're in control, and you're... p-preventing a worst case scenario. You build it up so big in your head that j-just thinking about it hurts, l-let alone talking about it. B-but... keeping it inside is just going to hurt you more," Izuku whispered, forcing himself not to squeeze his eyes shut from the pressure in his chest. "But... keeping it inside is just going to hurt you more. I'm not saying you have to tell someone, e-even though I think you s-should. B-but... if it's e-er too much to carry, y-y-you can talk to me. I promise I'll always listen."

"It's a shame that you're so nice," Todoroki interrupted, his tone laden with something tinged in regret. "It makes it difficult to want to fight you." The corner of his lips twitched, barely moving at all before they settled back into casual ambivalence. "Sorry for taking up so much of your time. You should go eat with your friends."

"I-It's okay, r-really, I d-don't mind at all," Izuku stuttered, filing away the comment about 'being too nice' for later review because he was in no state to analyze it at the moment. "You can... y-you're welcome to come e-eat with us. I-if you want."

"...Another time," Todoroki responded after a beat, exiting the alcove he'd pulled Izuku into only a few minutes (that felt like half a lifetime) ago. He turned to walk off, covering only a few feet before he paused, and glanced over his shoulder. "...I'm glad the ointments helped you."

Izuku stared at the back of a head marked with red and white hair, his heart battered and thundering in his chest, and the stain of blood under his face impossible to wipe away.

Izuku twitched as he listened to the buzz of an air conditioner, the flow of cold air ruffling his loose curls. It was just cold enough to be soothing, chilling him to the point where his skin didn't feel hot and itchy under his uniform. He tapped idly at the screen of his phone, barely paying attention to the
forum posts he scrolled through. It was mostly just something for his hands to do, and the textures on his phone case were enough to capture at least a fraction of his consciousness, a tiny grounding node to weather the storm of his thoughts.

After eating lunch and hearing the results of the tournament match-ups, Izuku had spent several exhausting minutes trying to convince his friends that yes, he was okay and no, he didn't want to compete in the side events and please, I just need to be alone for a little while, and yes again I'm fine really it's no big deal. Honestly, it had almost been more tiring than the first two events combined.

Izuku would be a liar if he said he didn't love his friends, but sometimes... they could be a tiny bit overprotective. Not that he could blame them, or anything; he had a pretty bad track record of being hurt and being obviously unable to take care of himself. If the scar on his face wasn't proof enough, then nearly walking into traffic and his self destructive training regimen would help shore up the slack. Not to mention his arm, which he'd practically snapped in half only a few hours earlier. With all those incidents in mind, he could certainly understand their concern.

But he did need a few moments of solitude, just to wind down from the constant energy he was surrounded with whenever he spent time with them. So Izuku had slunk off to isolate himself in one of the waiting rooms in the hope of catching a little bit of sleep, before his fight. But, as he'd half expected, being alone had only given him less options to distract himself from his flaring anxiety.

He didn't know Hitoshi Shinsou very well, having not spoken much which him after their first meeting, but Izuku thought he seemed fairly nice. He was certainly a little snarky, and seemed mostly disinterested in interacting with the rest of the class, but he'd never been mean to anyone, or instigated anything. Izuku had been considering trying to befriend him for over a week, interested in getting to know the perpetually tired General Studies transfer student.

And then Ojirou had withdrawn himself from the competition altogether, his explanation opening porous holes in the veil that shrouded Shinsou and his Quirk. His anxiety had welled and bubbled, spilling forth in paranoid mutterings and intrusive thoughts that robbed him of his sleep. He'd spent only twenty minutes curled up on a padded fold-out chair, desperately trying to find peace within the dark, turbulent clouds that had enveloped his every thought.

And that was how Ojirou had found him, muttered words filling the room like a swarm of insects. His warning burned in the back of Izuku's skull, anxiety solidified into twisted fingers, digging into the nodules of his vertebrae and sending dark sparks through his nervous system. A brainwashing Quirk-Shinsou had the power to control others, to force them into mindless obedience, to bend them absolutely to his will with only a question. Thoughts came to Izuku unbidden, of sprouting teeth and sickly hot blood and the hiss of static. Agony lanced through him at the thought of his own commands, voice a haunting shriek that stripped apart layers of skull and dug into the darkness of others, clawed words dragging forth strips and strands of weakness.

But all he had to do was not say anything. If Shinsou couldn't use his Quirk, Izuku had a chance of winning. Shinsou was definitely taller and heavier than him, which meant Izuku could use his displacement techniques, and either incapacitate him or throw him out of the ring. And if worse came to worse, he could use a burst of Living Nightmare to his advantage. He could win. All Izuku needed to do was be calm, collected, and controlled.

Well, Izuku reflected with a bleak, empty smile as his phone timer told him he had ten minutes before the match began, at least he'd made it to the third event at all.

Static buzzed behind Izuku's ears as he emerged from the cold tunnel into the main arena, the roar of the crowd and the over-the-top commentary from Present Mic barely registering at all. He struggled
to drag his legs behind him, his blood turned to molten lead that yearned to root him in place. He was unable to shake the crawling sensation of eyes on him, intimately aware that he was being stared at, being judged, his every move scrutinized by thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of watchful eyes.

Izuku’s first steps into the arena felt like a march to his own execution, every beat of his heart thundering like the report of cannon fire. Every blink was a crashing guillotine, dulled by meat and bone and the hiss of static, but still so real he could feel it vibrating in his teeth. The arena was larger than he’d thought it’d be, an intimidating stretch of concrete that stared up at him like a tombstone. He took sharp, soft breaths, barely capable of keeping his face from crumpling from the weight of stress on his shoulders.

He glanced up, almost in a daze, when Present Mic began reciting the rules of the battle. He blinked as if in slow motion at the lean form of Shinsou, his wild purple hair clashing with the primarily blue gym uniform, and his deeply set eyes marked with bags of exhaustion. Izuku was struck with a pang of concern, and had to snuff out the urge to ask if he was alright. Shinsou’s expression remained neutral as they closed the distance towards one another, footsteps echoing in the hollow of Izuku’s head.

They stopped with roughly fifteen feet between them, too close for Izuku to feel comfortable using his Quirk right away. He could feel it writhing under his skin, winding through the bones of his arm with such force that he half expected to see tendrils bulging down his forearm. He flexed his fingers in a futile effort to expel the static buzzing in them, blinking hard in an attempt to focus on Shinsou’s face. "G-good l-l-luck," he managed in a barely functional whisper, half aware of Present Mic announcing the fight had begun.

"Hey, Midoriya. You holding up okay?"

Izuku blinked, momentarily stunned as Shinsou's low, calm voice cut through the haze that surrounded him. His classmate's eyes were bright despite the clear exhaustion in them, his normally smirking lips curled into a soft, friendly smile. His tone was so disarming, soft concern twining around his words, a genuine worry for Izuku's well being. He responded before he could even think about doing so, something soft and light fluttering in his chest just from knowing Shinsou cared enough to ask.

"Y-yeah, I'm a-alrigh-"

Izuku Midoriya stared straight ahead, his words strangled into silence as his tongue ceased to move, his mouth ceased to open, his muscles ceased to function. He could feel it, feel the strings that knotted in his bones and pulled him taut and lifeless. His static had become a distant buzz, pushed aside by the cashmere that had stuffed his skull to bursting. Faintly, he attempted to do-something, anything. It was difficult to think, his normally overclocked thoughts slowed to a crawl, like they’d been drowned in molasses.

All he could see was Shinsou's face, his eyes glinting with pride and his lips twisted into a satisfied smirk. "You know, seeing that sad sack look frozen on your face makes me feel kinda bad. Not bad enough to not win, of course, but still pretty bad." Every syllable resonated through his head, clear as struck gongs and powerful as church bells. "Poor Midoriya. You must feel awful, right? Ignoring your friend's warning because you wanted to play nice. What a shame. But, since I know you're such a nice guy, you won't mind doing a little favor for me, right? All I need you to do is turn around, and walk out of the ring."

Izuku was moving before the words even pierced the fuzz muddling his thoughts. The strings pulled tight, jerking him around like an unruly puppet. His limbs moved under another's power (a mouth
filled with teeth blood in his throat drinking fear like wine) but his consciousness hadn't been wrenched out of place. It was still intact enough for dull horror to rumble in his guts, organs knotting like they'd tear apart if they were pulled any tighter.

He could see the line that marked the edge of the arena, the line that would disqualify him if he crossed it. It loomed closer and closer, shuffling footsteps swallowing concrete and dragging him against his will towards his own defeat. Stupid, he was stupid, stupid and worthless and naive and too weak, too weak to fight back when his body turned against him, when his muscles twitched and contracted without his command, sentencing him to a slow, humiliating defeat.

Izuku would have gasped if his throat still belonged to him when Living Nightmare screamed in his chest, breaking free of the dormant state forced upon it only a few steps from the edge of the ring. Wisps of black fumes wandered into his vision, and he could barely feel the impression of heat in his arms, which were surely bleeding fumes like exhaust pipes. Panic sawed at the cotton stuffing his head, cutting through fibers as strings were cut by wires, barbed and piercing and twisting in his bones, the fear in his chest bloating like a blood blister, hot and aching and moments from eruption but Izuku couldn't let it, couldn't let it, couldn't hurt Shinsou couldn't hurt him couldn't hurt-

Izuku choked on fumes when his body was jerked away from the edge, clawing with every inch of his will to hold onto consciousness as the cashmere in his brain was burned away, replaced by the sickening dark of Living Nightmare. His head snapped up hard enough that it would surely have hurt if he were in full control, static hissing in his ears and in his eyes as he stared at Hitoshi Shinsou, the world screeching to a slow, insidious crawl around him. Shinsou's eyes were blown wide with shock and disbelief and the first few sinister worms of fear. Izuku was vaguely aware of the screen in the corner of his vision flickering with static interference, masking the teeth that erupted from his gums and the cosmic hunger that bled into his pupils.

"Leave."

Shinsou's teeth snapped together hard enough that Izuku could hear it through the static shriek between his ears, gasping for air and stumbling to keep his balance as copper oozed onto his tongue. He sucked in a ragged breath, feeling weak and woozy from the vestiges of Living Nightmare that he'd cut off prematurely. He blinked hard to try and regain his vision, his legs shaking uncontrollably beneath him.

When Izuku had finally refocused, he realized with numb confusion that he was alone in the arena. He stared blankly, his heart echoing in his ears, at the sight of Hitoshi Shinsou crumpled on the hard concrete located just outside the fighting ring. He gaped wordlessly, struggling to understand, what had happened what did he do was Shinsou hurt-

["Well, I don't know about you folks watching at home, but I have NO IDEA what THAT fight was about! But either way, it looks like our winner is Izuku Midoriya!"]

The distant cheers of the crowd were indistinct in Izuku's ears, like the sound of waves crashing against the shore. He was ignorant of the blood dribbling down his lip and trickling into his throat. All he could see was Shinsou, curled up in a shaking heap, staring back at him with purple eyes dilated in confusion and terror. What was winning really worth, Izuku wondered numbly as he shakily stepped out of the arena, and watched Midnight help Shinsou to his feet. What was winning really worth, Izuku wondered numbly, when it only left him feeling empty inside?
Izuku trawled the empty stadium halls, ghosting through them like a mournful specter. The roof of his mouth stung where knife blade teeth had sliced into it, and his arms burned from the phantom heat of Living Nightmare wrestling back control of his body. The alien scars under his shirt burned as well, a simmer on the cusp of pain that manifested in a horrible, prickling itch. His stomach wasn’t unsettled enough that he’d have to forfeit his lunch again, but the stony knots forming in it made him feel sick regardless.

Pain was the only thing that kept Izuku in one piece; it was a stringy, visceral webbing between his shattered chunks, slick and ugly but sufficient to keep him from simply falling apart. It was for that reason that he was hesitant to see Recovery Girl (whom had moved to a temporary indoor office, once it was clear the outdoor medical tent wasn’t needed anymore), though his perpetual guilt at having to bother her with self inflicted injuries was also a deciding factor. But he did know that he couldn’t walk around with open wounds, especially not in his mouth. Bacterial infections were pretty much a given, if he waited too long.

The break between fights gave Izuku ample time to both have his wounds closed and helplessly observe as his consciousness unraveled. The aftermath of his match with Shinsou made him feel sick beyond biological feedback; it was an unwellness that permeated the very air he breathed, a noxious fog of fatalistic gloom that made him a specter wearing skin. Everything felt so dull and draining, colors muted and sounds muffled until only his self hatred rang clear. He itched with need for the comforting tug of his hair clips, and the soft warmth of his scarf. Even his nails were bare and dull, due to his own forgetfulness; he’d barely had time to remove the chipped polish earlier that morning, let alone paint each nail a completely different color.

He burned with the desire to make things right, to say something—anything—that would help, that would dissolve the sight of Shinsou's terror that greeted him whenever he dared to blink. Parasitic roots squelched through his thoughts, tainting them with recollections of Uraraka, pale and shaking and haunted, of his mother, quiet and withdrawn and struggling to smile for him, for his sake. He couldn't stop seeing Kacchan's eyes, wide and twitching and so dim, his inner fire snuffed like a candle by the swelling ocean tide.

Ms. Atsuko had told him that relapses weren't unexpected, when dealing with mental illnesses. There was no such thing as a perfect recovery, and he shouldn't give up hope when he lost ground. She had, at one point, suggested he start taking medication to help regulate his mood and dull the edge of his anxiety. He'd said he wanted to think about it, unsure if medication would affect his Quirk or not, and then had been too anxious to bring it up with his mother after the session.

He wasn't sure if he'd ever regretted anything more than that decision. Anything, anything had to be better than his violent mood swings and paper thin stability and barely maintainable coherence. His self sabotage was so finely ingrained in everything he did and everything he thought that it had become nigh undetectable, something he only picked up on once he was left clutching ashes in the wake of self made devastation.

He'd thought he was getting better, slowly letting his vulnerabilities come out with those he could trust, trying to listen to the advice he received instead of letting it wash over him, treating his Quirk as the power that belonged to him instead of the other way around—but maybe he'd been wrong. He still hurt so acutely, needle sharp punctures as fresh as the day he'd stumbled out of middle school half convinced he'd fail the entrance exam and never have a chance of achieving his dreams.

But... he'd proven himself wrong, hadn't he? Izuku had passed the entrance exams, he hadn't been
expelled, he'd fought off villains and he'd come first in the Obstacle Race and won the Cavalry Battle so why couldn't he be proud? Why couldn't he shake the lingering dread that everything would fall apart like poorly stacked cards, that every single accomplishment was built off the backs of his friends and his Quirk?

It was so frustrating to not even understand what to do about his own feelings, to not know why he couldn't just try his best without second guessing himself, why he couldn't love his friends without being afraid they'd grow sick of his awful presence. Labels like 'depression' and 'anxiety' and 'self esteem issues' could only tell him so much. It made him angry, a bitter loathing that pooled in still ponds with abyssal depths, just waiting to pour from him like molten tar. But his anger was ugly, and all it did was make everything worse, made him hurtful and dangerous. He hadn't forgotten the beach, months slipping through his fingers like grains of sand as his frustration built to an explosive outburst of annihilation. Izuku didn't want to be angry. All he wanted was...

"Midoriya?"

Izuku froze up as his oily bubble of self-loathing popped, struck by the realization that he'd been muttering under his breath outside the nurse's office for a solid three minutes. He blinked up into a pair of perpetually tired purple eyes, which for once looked alert and attentive.

"S-Shinsou!" Izuku's voice left him in a yelp, and he reflexively flinched back half a step. "I-I- what are you d-doing here? N-not that um, i-it's any of my business or a-anything, I just didn't expect to find you here and I'm really sorry for getting in your way I can just leave-"

"You talk too much," Shinsou's bone dry mutter cut through Izuku's frantic babbling, forcing him into silence with a squeak of embarrassment. "I get why you'd be surprised. Your Quirk packs a hell of a punch, but it didn't leave a scratch on me. Recovery Girl still wanted to check up on me, though."

"Y-y-you weren't h-hurt? You're okay?" Relief and remorse twined together in Izuku's voice, his gaze flickering over Shinsou as if to confirm that he wasn't on the brink of death. He certainly looked tired, but he always looked like that (maybe he could recommend some sleep remedies?). Although, there was something-clearer, in Shinsou's gaze; he possessed a clarified intensity that Izuku hadn't seen before.

"Well, I doubt Recovery Girl's Quirk works on damaged pride, so. Okay as I can be." Shinsou shrugged one shoulder, a bitter smirk pulling at his lips. It was cutting in a way Izuku hadn't expected, Shinsou's blades inverted from the (dull) barbs he usually delivered. "By the way," Shinsou spoke again, his voice startling Izuku out of his analysis, "if you came here to apologize for beating me, then don't bother. I'm not interested in false platitudes."

Izuku rapidly shook his head, waving his hands back and forth to dispel the assumption. "N-no that's not-I... I'm sorry f-for using my Quirk on you, l-like that. I panicked, a-and I know it f-feels awful so-

"Maybe," Shinsou interrupted loudly enough for Izuku to flinch, his mouth snapping shut, "that Bakugou asshole was right. Maybe you do think this is all a big joke." He skewered Izuku with a harsh look (it was honestly impressive how scary he managed to be, when he also looked so desperately in need of a nap) and lowered his voice to a thick crawl. "Do you think you're the only person that doesn't love their Quirk? The only one that's hesitant to use it on others, because of how it makes people feel, how it reflects back on you? That's pretty self centered, for such a nice guy."

Shinsou brushed past him while he was still frozen in shock, their shoulders bumping together lightly. "It might not really be my place, but I'll give you some advice anyway. First of all, stop
apologizing for using your Quirk. It's insulting. Second, get some perspective. You've got a powerful Quirk, so use it to your advantage. Stop worrying about what other people think; it's not like you can change it, after all."

Izuku twisted around awkwardly to meet Shinsou's gaze behind him, his classmate's mouth twisted into a dryly amused smirk. "So why don't you do me a favor, and think on that? Shouldn't be a problem for a nice guy like you, right?" Shinsou turned off down a connecting hallway before Izuku could fumble for a response, stunned to the point of immobilization as his assumptions were once again disproved.

"...Yeah," Izuku whispered to the empty hallway, his heart pounding in his chest as constricting wires loosened their hold. "I-I'll do my best."

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"Hey, Midoriya! C'mon down bro, we saved you a seat!" Izuku glanced up at the sound of Kirishima's voice, a slightly (exceedingly) nervous smile tugging at his lips. His classmates were sat among one another in a seating area that'd been specifically designated for class 1-A, set several levels higher than the normal stands. Iida, Uraraka, Kirishima, and Tokoyami had secured seats in the front row, and had left a completely conspicuous open seat between Uraraka and Kirishima that was apparently meant for him.

"H-hey, guys!" Izuku called back, his voice slightly pitchy with nerves despite the calming effect his friends had on him. He lifted a slightly awkward hand in greeting, glancing over the rest of his classmates. Ashido and Tsuyu were engaged in conversation with Jirou and Kaminari, who seemed to be trying to defend himself from being the butt of a joke. Satou, Shouji, and Kouda were sat far enough away that Izuku couldn't hear any noise from them, but Aoyama seemed more than capable of keeping up the entire conversation by himself. Hagakure was sat next to Yaoyorozu, and seemed to be emphatic about whatever she was talking about, if the way her sleeves moved was any indication. Most surprising was the sight of Kacchan sat with Shinsou at the fringes of the group, with not a single sign of yelling or explosions between them.

Most everyone glanced at him for at least a moment before being reabsorbed in whatever had previously garnered their attention, though Ojiro did flash him a (proud?) smile. Izuku shyly wiggled his fingers in acknowledgement before he made his way down the concrete steps.

He shared a slight nod with Tokoyami before carefully slipping past his friend, only to yelp in shock when Kirishima bounced up from his seat to wrap Izuku in a one armed hug, his other hand mussing up Izuku's already wild curls. "Glad to see you feelin' better, man! You ready to beat some ass in the next round?"

Iida made a series of (completely incomprehensible) hand gestures from his spot beside a clearly amused Uraraka, his face set with mild disapproval. "Kirishima you really should give Midoriya time to sit down and recover before engaging in your, "Iida cleared his throat, "'manly' roughhousing. He's going to need to be in peak shape for his next match, after all!"

Kirishima laughed, a small note of sheepishness slipping into his voice. "Yeah, you probably have a point there."

I released Izuku with an apologetic smile, which combined with the clear excitement in his eyes made Izuku flush uncontrollably. "Sorry about that, I'm just so freakin' pumped for this, you have no idea!"

"Quite the fallacious statement," Tokoyami mused with mild exasperation, crossing one leg over the other, "considering how extremely transparent you are about your excitement."

Izuku slipped out of Kirishima's embrace while the other boy was busy giving an unimpressed Tokoyami puppy dog eyes, settling into his seat with a sigh. That relief quickly became bewildered
mortification when Uraraka practically pulled him halfway into her lap, her fingers diving into his mussed curls.

"Poor Izuku, did mean old Kirishima mess up your hair?" She cooed at him, laughter in her eyes as she carefully rearranged his hair. Izuku flushed and stuttered out something incomprehensible, glancing at Iida in search of help. Iida looked just as helpless as he did, locked between the urge to lecture and self preservation in the face of a determined Uraraka.

"Mean old-" Kirishima half sputtered, before he adopted a look of faux hurt and placed a hand over his heart. "Jeez, I thought this was the Sport's Festival, not the 'Pick on Kirishima' festival! Totally unmanly, gan'g up on me like that!"

Izuku glanced away from the rapidly compounding teasing that Kirishima was being inundated with when Iida cleared his throat, the taller boy looking slightly uncomfortable. "Ah, Midoriya. I had meant to catch you earlier, but you were busy with Recovery Girl, so I suppose this is the best opportunity to speak with you about something. It's.. about the Cavalry Battle. I hope you understand that it was nothing personal, when I partnered up with Todoroki and his team. I merely thought... it would be a good chance to grow in a new direction, you see. I meant no offense-"

"N-no, I, it's fine, Iida. Really," Izuku interrupted earnestly, half aware of Uraraka pointedly not listening in and instead poking fun at an increasingly 'heartbroken' Kirishima. "I-I understand. It's a competition, after all. We-it doesn't m-mean we're not friends anymore, or anything. I-it's alright."

Iida blinked twice, looking perplexed before he carefully adjusted both his glasses and his expression. "Yes, well-I'm glad you understand. It's relieving, to know there's no hard feelings between us. And I hope that will continue to be the case, should we end up fighting in the tournament."

Izuku barely stopped himself from balking at the thought of fighting Iida, and instead plastered a twitching smile on his face. "Y-yeah, of course! N-no matter what happens, y-you'll still be my friend!" He waited a moment to be sure Iida wouldn't break into a teary, heartfelt speech before speaking again. "S-speaking of the fights, Sero and T-Todoroki are up next, right?"

"Sure are," Kirishima answered easily, dropping back into his seat at Izuku's side. He rested a lax arm around both Izuku and Uraraka's shoulders, apparently having endured her good natured heckling without incident. "I'm pumped to see them both in action, and I'm hopin' Sero can get a few good swings in without getting frozen."

"I-it's honestly a bit of a one sided fight," Izuku murmured, fixing his eyes on the empty battlefield. "Sero has a lot of mobility, but it's mostly tied up in vertical movements which won't help much on a flat surface, and his tape isn't very offensively inclined though I imagine it'd be extremely useful for subduing and disabling any opponent he can get the drop on but Todoroki has a lot of overwhelming power on his side and even though Sero probably out ranges him the confined size of the ring puts them on about even ground and Todoroki could potentially freeze Sero's tape making it brittle and easy to break so that he can't use it to-"

"Holy fuck, will you SHUT UP already?! We're here to watch, not listen to a damn play-by-play!" Bakugou barked from a few rows up. His voice was geared up into a shout, but the normal heat of his anger was practically nonexistent, beyond mild annoyance. Shinsou snickered from beside him and muttered something that Izuku couldn't hear over his own pounding pulse, but judging by the jagged smirk that bloomed on Kacchan's lips, it must have been amusing.

"S-sorry Kacchan!" He yelped, fighting back the urge to flinch. He didn't feel anything close to the blind terror he used to, when Kacchan spoke in his direction, but the instinct to duck away and
silence himself hadn't been scrubbed out just yet. He noticed the absense of Uraraka's hands in his hair a moment later, and glanced over to find her glaring daggers at an oblivious Kacchan.

Internally panicking, Izuku reached out to take Uraraka's hands in his own so that she couldn't use them to float Bakugou into the sun. "U-Uraraka, w-wait, it's fine, really!" He gently squeezed her fingers when she turned soulful brown eyes his way, and attempted to inject some reassurance into his smile. Apparently he'd done well enough, because her harsh gaze softened slightly. "D-don't worry about it. That's j-just how Kacchan is. I know he's n-not really angry."

Uraraka looked him over with a critical eye for a long moment, before she apparently found what she was looking for. She puffed her cheeks out in a displeased pout, and laced her fingers with his own (which reminded him that they were holding hands and he was pretty sure he might faint). "I just don't think you should let him talk to you that way, Izuku."

"It's true that Bakugou certainly could stand to refine his manners," Iida began in his 'I'm going to remind you why Following The Rules matters' tone of voice, only for Kirishima to practically throw himself over both Izuku and Uraraka to physically insert himself into the conversation.

"-Which is why you'll have to beat some manners into him during your fight, ain't that right Uraraka?" He flashed his teeth in a cheeky smile, which widened into a blinding grin when Uraraka's eyes burned with competitive spirit. "I'm sure a little trip into the stratosphere never hurt anyone, right?" He leaned back into his seat, half his body pressed flush up against Izuku's side, a position that forced heat under his cheeks.

"Kirishima please don't goad her into breaking the rules of the bout, it would be unsportsmanlike to.." Iida cleared his throat, and made a few awkward hand gestures as he failed to find less ridiculous words, "'send Bakugou into the stratosphere'. And you, Uraraka! I understand that Bakugou may not have the most palatable personality, but you can't just send everyone you don't like into space, it's completely unethical not to mention illegal! Such an action would not only put a black mark on your record and likely disallow you from ever becoming a pro hero, but it would also-"

"The battle dawns," Tokoyami interrupted shamelessly, his voice catching the attention of the rest of the class before Present Mic began his announcements at an incredibly unnecessary volume. Izuku's fingers twitched with the urge to grab a writing utensil so he could record the events of the match as they unfolded, but all his writing materials were in his backpack, and Uraraka didn't seem particularly inclined to release his hands anytime soon.

He watched closely as Sero and Todoroki stepped out into the arena, gaze flickering between the big screens and the actual bodies on ground level. He read the outward confidence in Sero's smirk, which mostly hid the nerves lurking just underneath it. He certainly looked determined though, and despite not having talked with him much Izuku felt the same surge of pride he always did when he saw his classmates.

Todoroki, on the other hand... If his expression had been cold when he'd confronted Izuku before the Festival, the look on his face as he stepped up into the ring was absolutely frostbitten. His eyes were dark and there was a thick line of tension in his jaw, but he was barely even looking at Sero as the countdown began. His gaze was locked on empty space, as if he were glaring at something that didn't exist in front of him.

Izuku buzzed with nerves as the match began, covering his mouth with his hands (and by extension, Uraraka's) when Sero launched the first attack, binding Todoroki's arms and legs in a flurry of adhesive tape that left him completely immobilized. His heart thudded in his throat as Sero hurtled Todoroki towards the edge of the arena, concrete skidding under his shoes as he remained absolutely still in his binds.
Maybe Izuku was the first one to notice it, but he couldn't be sure. All he could see was Todoroki lock his right foot against the concrete, the first few slivers of ice fanning out from the tip of his shoe—and then the entire arena was blasted with a wave of bone chilling frost, so sudden and overwhelming that Izuku had ice crystals forming on his eyelashes in the time it took him to stare, unblinking, at the titanic iceberg jutting clear out of the stadium.

Dead silence was the immediate response, shock and awe settling in an uneasy film over every observer in the crowd. Izuku's gaze flickered downwards, where he could see Sero, completely locked in the first few feet of the glacial monument. "Hanta Sero, are you unable to move?" Midnight called, looking half frozen herself.

Izuku watched in a daze as Todoroki was declared the winner, and the crowd showered Sero with sympathy. He watched red and white hair bead with condensation as Todoroki began slowly melting Sero out of the glacier, steam rising up in thick, billowing clouds around him. And he could see the vacancy left behind by Todoroki's anger and tension, his shoulders slumped like his strings had been cut as something heavy and sorrowful crept over him. Izuku's chest ached at the sight, a throb of empathy that made him want to do-something, anything he could to take that hurt away.

And then he realized that he'd just witnessed firsthand what he'd be facing in the next round, a jaw dropping display of overwhelming force and technique. "Oh," Izuku whispered faintly, as he was revisited by the thought that he really should have dropped out already.
The one positive that Izuku could take away from Todoroki besieging the stadium with an iceberg was that, in the time it took to clear the field of all the ice, he at least had ample downtime to properly review his panic and apply some rational thought to the incredibly dreadful and stress inducing situation he'd been faced with.

Logically, he had no reason to actually be afraid of Todoroki. Despite the fact that his classmate was perfectly capable of skewering him with a gigantic spear of ice (and had made that abundantly clear), it wasn't a real fight. There were no hard feelings between them (he hoped) and if anything did end up going awry there were professionals equipped to intervene and de-escalate the situation. They'd both just try their best to win, and win or lose, things would turn out okay for both of them. Nothing to worry about.

Of course, knowing that there was nothing to worry about was very different from actually stopping himself from worrying, and thus Izuku remained half petrified by anxiety over his upcoming match. Intrusive thoughts suffocated him like a swarm of moths, their beating wings infused with static. So much could go wrong, there were so many ways he could mess things up, so many ways he could lose-

But more than that, more than the fear of bitter defeat and humiliation and not being strong enough was an older fear, its teeth sharpened on his well worn bones. If he wasn't completely in control, if he didn't plan everything out to the letter, if he miscalculated, if something happened outside of his control... Todoroki could be hurt. Todoroki could die. The stitched together tapestry of human remains made his stomach roil, a thousand scenarios where he moved his hand the wrong way, or Todoroki got too close, and-pop.

Izuku had no doubt, no doubt that a direct hit would be instantly fatal. His power ripped through steel and earth and concrete like wet clay, and a fragile human body would not survive. He could practically see Todoroki sheared in half like he'd been struck with a missile, the wet slosh of organs and the hot spray of blood and the dead, lifeless eyes like glass; Izuku flinched every time the thought wormed its way behind his eyelids.

And it became too much. He could feel the air deaden around him, could taste the sour rot in the back of his throat. His hands stung from the heat crackling in his bones, and the skin of his torso felt raw and itchy. He excused himself from the viewing box with half muttered words, brushing past his friends' concern with the bare minimum of cognitive functioning. There was nothing they could do to calm the malignant pressure of Living Nightmare, straining and deforming his delicate flesh container. He needed to be alone, where nobody could be hurt.

Izuku dove back into the cold concrete depths of the stadium, chilled to the point of discomfort by the air conditioning and lit with impersonal white bulbs that flickered as he shambled by. He could feel the space around him dimming, weighed down by groaning shadows that pulled and stretched with iron fingers. His silhouette snapped into stark relief, a fluid, organic mass that shifted and ebbed and clung to him like shrink wrap. Static roared and pulsed in his ears, a blizzard of fractured pixels screaming in agony.

He hunted single-mindedly for the most secluded corner he could find, practically feeling his way through the static haze that had descended on him. Eventually his trembling legs could take him no farther, and Izuku collapsed, boneless, against a hard wall. He shuffled to press himself against it, pulling his legs up to his chest and waiting, numbly, for darkness to swallow him whole.
Izuku twitched as an outward force pressed against the film of unconsciousness that had settled around him. The locust buzz of devouring fear he'd been drowned in had receded like a fickle tide, and he was left shivering and empty. Goosebumps had risen up on his exposed forearms, likely from the air conditioning vent he'd collapsed underneath. It really wasn't hot enough outdoors to warrant that level of indoor cooling, Izuku mused distractedly, before he was again pressed by the outside voice.

"Young Midoriya? Are you alright?" It was a voice he recognized-All Might. He sounded tired, but that was a backdrop to the concern leaking between his words. Izuku vaguely wondered why he wasn't watching the matches, before he realized he was unsure if the iceberg had been cleared out or not. How long had he been...?

"Y..yeah. I-I'm o-okay," he muttered, blinking heavy lids and squinting past the glare of fluorescent lighting. All Might looked haggard and fragile in his ill fitting suit, his thick eyebrows knitted in concern. "W-What are you doing here? S-sir."

"I was on my way to grab something from the concession stands. Young Iida is duking it out with that young lady from the support course, and... things got a little weird, so I ducked out." All Might's shadowed gaze narrowed on Izuku's face, sending a nervous shiver through him. "More importantly, what are you doing here? Is everything alright?"

"Y-yyeah, uh, f-fine, I-sorry for-I s-should really b-be getting back, h-huh, s-sorry for b-bothering you-" Izuku's word vomit was frantic and barely thought out, a desperate tactic to buy him both time and distance. His arms wobbled as he began pushing himself up, only to yelp in shock when All Might sighed and lowered himself to sit a few feet away, all creaking joints and weathered bones. "S-sir-"

"You remember the promise I made, don't you? As your teacher, it's my duty to provide you an environment in which you can grow and prosper." All Might's voice was low and neutral, with no real inflection for Izuku to read other than the faintest traces of melancholy. "I intend to keep it, to help you, and all of my students grow into fine young heroes. I won't try to force you to open up-I haven't forgotten how stubborn teenagers can be. But I would appreciate if you let me know what's bothering you, so I can help."

"I-" Izuku trailed off as the moment in which he would normally scramble for a poorly thought-out excuse and brush off his suffering remained absent, replaced only by exhaustion, and trust in his teacher. All Might hadn't hated him, when he saw the ugliest part of Izuku-he'd even offered his sacred power, the power to change the world, because he believed Izuku was fit to wield it. And when he'd been refused, he was understanding. There were a lot of reasons All Might was the greatest hero in the world, Izuku thought, and it was a shame that most would never know of the most important ones.

"I-" Izuku had to-he had to take the plunge, and place his trust in his role model, the man he'd looked up to before he could even say the word 'hero'. Maybe All Might's heroic light couldn't burn away the darkness, but he could still offer a torch for Izuku to find his way. "I w-was overwhelmed," he whispered, voice thin as paper and fragile as glass. "I was stressing out about fighting T-Todoroki, and it was just it g-got really bad, so I left to b-be alone. I guess, m-maybe I passed out, o-or something. I'm not sure. I just-

"I c-can't bear the thought of h-hurting him," Izuku croaked, like the words were something deformed and painful to emit. "I- Living Nightmare, i-it's so dangerous, i-if I made one mistake, i-if he did something I wasn't e-expecting, I-I w-wouldn't be able to live with myself."
All Might was silent for a few beats, where Izuku was certain he was mulling over what to say. 
"...You're a compassionate young man, Midoriya. It's wonderful to see someone care so much about 
the well-being of those around them. But your fear of hurting others might hold you back." All 
Might shifted, a motion that drew Izuku's gaze towards him. His deeply set eyes glinted with a steely 
neon blue, but his perpetual frown looked softened at the seams. "You're not wrong in saying that 
your Quirk is very dangerous—it could very easily hurt someone. But there are many, many Quirks 
that the same could be said about. That's why we all have to practice such fine control over our 
powers, to be able to use them without causing unnecessary harm.

"But I do understand where you're coming from. When I was first gifted my power, One For All... 
there were times when I was frightened of it." All Might held out a bony hand, and for a moment 
Izuku could almost see light leaking from his open palm. "I wasn't always in full control, even when 
I learned to use it at full strength. There have been times where that's caused irreparable harm. One of 
the first villains I ever fought, a man calling himself the Pyrrhic Scourge, was an incredible danger to 
the public. He was unpredictable, willing to burn the whole world down to get whatever it was he 
wanted... I stopped him, but not without a cost."

All Might's voice lowered, a long note of remorse in his flattened tone. "Our battle damaged him 
permanently, and he spent the rest of his life paralyzed from the waist down. He passed away a few 
years later. And it was all because I was scared, unsure of my power. I would hate to see you make 
the same mistakes I did. These powers we wield, the power of Quirks—it should be respected, but 
never feared. Heroes must be sure of their actions, and intimately understand the thresholds of their 
strength."

Izuku started when All Might began to stand, looking a little shaky. He scrambled to his teacher's 
side, gently helping him to his feet. "S-sir..." His voice stalled a little, thoughts swirling in great 
twisting loops around his head. Maybe if All Might wasn't his teacher, Izuku would have reacted 
with disbelief. Thinking of the world's greatest hero as anything other than completely confident and 
in control would have been unbelievable. But knowing the man behind that hero made things a little 
easier to swallow.

"Try not to stress out about your match too much, okay? I think you and young Todoroki have a lot 
to learn from one another, and it'll be good for both of you." All Might delivered a reassuring clap to 
Izuku's shoulder, one that would have certainly knocked him over if his teacher had been in his hero 
form. "And remember: you'll never get the chance to learn how to control your power, if you spend 
all your time being afraid of it."

Izuku conjured up a trembling smile, All Might's words echoing inside his head. "I-t-thank you, sir. 
I-I'll do my best." He managed a deep, uninhibited breath, Living Nightmare lying dormant in his 
chest. He didn't exactly feel great, but he was far and away in a better place than he'd been before.

"Well, I am your teacher, after all. I had to impart some wisdom at some point, didn't I?" A laugh 
squeaked out of Izuku's throat, and All Might pulled a lax grin in his direction. "I think young 
Kirishima is up next, if you wanted to go catch the next match. I'm sure your friend would appreciate 
you cheering him on."

K-Kirishima is-" Izuku's eyes widened, a flush crawling up onto his face. "I-yeah, y-you're right, t-
thank you f-for the advice s-sir!" Izuku waved frantically before he turned to skid down the hall, 
linoleum squeaking under his shoes. His fear of his upcoming match had been quelled from a raging 
inferno to smoking embers, and his haste to cheer Kirishima on pushed the charred remains from his 
mind completely.

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Izuku was panting for breath by the time he made it back to class 1-A's viewing stands, the echoes of
his hurried footsteps dying in his ears as the cheers of the crowd swelled around him. He glanced quickly over the seats, noticing that a number of his classmates were missing from their seats, including Iida, Uraraka and (of course) Kirishima.

He nearly tripped on his way down the steps to the front row, glancing quickly between Tokoyami's stoic, avian visage and the arena down below. His heart thundered at the sight of Kirishima stepping into the ring, his teeth bared in an electrifying grin. Standing opposite of him was a student from class 1-B (Tetsutetsu, the numerous screens informed him), his hair a stark silver and his teeth ground together with determination. Present Mic was still talking them up (with apparently recycled intros?) when Izuku collapsed into the seat next to Tokoyami.

"S-sorry for m-missing your match Tokoyami," Izuku wheezed, torn between slumping back in his chair and leaning as far over the concrete railing as possible. Eventually he settled with sitting as far at the edge of his seat as possible, eyes locked on the countdown.

"You seemed unwell earlier, Midoriya. I'm hardly upset you missed my first fight-rather, I'm glad to see you in better spirits." Izuku glanced over to find Tokoyami leveling half of a heavy stare his way, his eyes dark but not unkind.

"A-ah, yeah, I-I'm feeling much better now-" Izuku's smile became a rictus grimace when the buzzer to indicate the start of the match went off much too loudly, before he realized that it wasn't just a painfully loud noise. He lurched back over to watch the match, his heart thumping loudly in his ears. He watched unblinking as Kirishima and Tetsutetsu both delivered a simultaneous opening blow, sparks flying between their fists.

His pulse only quickened as the match drew out into a brutal slug fest, neither Kirishima nor Tetsutetsu giving up an inch of ground as they delivered rock solid blows and steel knuckled punches. Kirishima was amazing—Izuku couldn't believe how strong he was, able to take punches like sledgehammer blows on the chin and keep fighting without missing a step. But his approach was so forward and direct, a frontal assault meant to overwhelm and overpower. He wasn't using the finesse that Izuku knew he had, just from the few times they'd practiced grappling together.

His heart rose into his throat as the match wore on and both fighters began to falter, Kirishima's Hardened skin bearing the marks of several damaging blows. Present Mic's lackadaisical commentary made Izuku's eyes itch and his blood boil, teeth gritting together. He knew Kirishima could win, he knew Kirishima was better than some-mirror match gimmick.

Izuku hauled himself out of his seat and leaned as far over the barrier as he could, Cupping his hands around his mouth to carry his voice as far as it could go. "KIRISHIMA! KIRISHIMA!" He yelled loud enough that his voice broke, loud enough that he could see Kirishima's head turn just slightly, his fiery hair matted and dripping with sweat. "YOU CAN BEAT HIM, I KNOW YOU CAN! USE HIS WEIGHT AGAINST HIM! HIS QUIRK MAKES HIM HEAVIER THAN YOU! COME ON KIRISHIMA, YOU CAN DO IT!"

Tears beaded in the corners of Izuku's eyes from the sheer force of his hollering, his fingers clenching desperately at the railing. His heart just about stopped when Kirishima's head snapped back from the force of Tetsutetsu's right hook, his feet digging through concrete as he refused to go down. The camera caught a side profile of him that took Izuku's breath away, razor edged teeth bared in a gleaming grin and liquid blood orange blazing with determination.

He charged at Tetsutetsu with a wide, telegraphed hay-maker, and Tetsutetsu had just begun to dodge when Kirishima ducked low instead, his feint giving him enough time to ram his shoulder under Tetsutetsu's ribs. There was an audible squeal of metal, Tetsutetsu's eyes widening half an instant before Kirishima roared and lifted him off the ground with his forward momentum, one arm
locking around the inside Tetsutetsu's leg and the other over his shoulder. Izuku was sure time had stopped completely in the single moment Tetsutetsu was airborne, before the deafening silence was broken by Kirishima's shout of exertion. He flipped Tetsutetsu over in a brutal arc, slamming him back first into the concrete hard enough to create a crater on impact.

Two beats of stunned silence followed, before everything became a cacophony of noise. Present Mic howled into the mic and the crowd roared and Izuku cheered his heart out in elation, tears tracking down his face in glistening streaks. Tetsutetsu twitched once on the ground before he went limp, and Kirishima thrust a shaking fist into the air, his grin as blinding as the sun.

"Tetsutetsu Tetsutetsu is unable to fight!" Midnight called out above the din. "The winner is Eijirou Kirishima!" Izuku flopped bonelessly into his seat as the declaration rang out, his grin too large to withhold, even as it was dampened by his tears.

Izuku slowly blinked out of his haze of excitement a few moments later as he was very suddenly reminded of the fact that the majority of his classmates had been sitting right behind him when he'd begun actually crying from sheer happiness over Kirishima's victory. He endured a single heart beat of eyes burning into the back of his head before he sprung out of his seat.

"H-h-haha w-wow," Izuku began before anyone even had a chance to say anything, his tone a hysterical facsimile of casual. "I c-completely f-forgot, I n-n-need to go s-see Uraraka b-before her m-match s-starts, well s-see you later g-guys!" He made a halfhearted effort to walk normally instead of sprinting away in acute mortification like he really wanted to, and almost tripped on his way up the stairs. He darted back into the interior of the stadium, accompanied only by the echo of Kaminari's loud 'What the hell was that about?'

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Izuku lingered outside the 'Player 2' waiting room that he was (fairly) sure Uraraka was in, anxiety pinning him in place with indecision. He didn't he knew she was facing Kacchan, next. And as much as she talked about sending him into space when he said something rude, there was no denying the fact that Kacchan was terrifyingly strong. Beyond being just powerful, he was intelligent and creative and tactical and mobile, with incredible endurance and inhuman amounts of drive.

It wasn't that Izuku didn't believe in Uraraka, because he did. She had frightening strength (he could still taste dirt after their sparring sessions) and a passionate spirit, and all she needed to do was activate her Quirk on Kacchan once to win. He knew she was capable of winning, and that was why he was so hesitant to see her. What advice could he possibly offer her? His only fight with Kacchan that didn't involve running or being passively beat up had ended in absolute catastrophe, which meant he had no leg to stand on.

It'd be awful of him to not say something encouraging, and Izuku really did want to offer Uraraka his support. He just didn't want to screw things up for her right before her fight. He couldn't say anything to unsettle her or damage her confidence, which meant he basically couldn't mention Kacchan at all, not even indirectly-

"Midoriya?" Iida's voice broke through Izuku's clouding thoughts, blinking down at him in mild shock from the open doorway. "I was wondering where you were. You disappeared earlier; are you alright?"

"A-ah, yeah, I-I'm fine now. I-is Uraraka...?" Izuku stepped back a few paces, and was greeted with a head of brown hair slipping past Iida.

"Hey Izuku!" Uraraka greeted him with a thinly applied cheerful grin, her shaken nerves barely contained beneath it. Her voice sounded strained with the effort to sound carefree, and Izuku's heart ached at the sound of it. "I was worried when you ran off earlier. You promise you're really okay?"
"I-I-yeah, I pr-promise. I j-just..." Izuku plastered on the most confident grin he could manage, a crooked, unseemly thing that bled sincerity regardless. "I-I wanted to wish you luck, i-in your fight. I'll be r-rooting for you."

Iida's expression suddenly looked a little nervous, and there was a beat of silence before Uraraka's gaze softened with fondness. "That's really sweet of you, Izuku. Thank you."

That should have been the cue to let her walk by, to end the conversation and move on. But words bubbled out of Izuku before he could think to stop them, rushed and smashed together. "D-don't be a-a-fraid of him. H-he's strong, but-but I k-know you can w-win, I know y-you can."

Izuku's babbling was silenced when Uraraka stepped boldly into his space, sliding her arms around his middle and gently linking her fingers behind him. "Don't worry so much, Izuku," she spoke into his shoulder, her voice slightly muffled. "I'm-I'm glad you believe in me, I really am. But you should focus on winning your own match, okay?" She squeezed him long enough for him to gently return the embrace, thrown off-kilter by his inability to see her expression and know if she was really okay, if things were really alright-

Uraraka slid from the embrace as quickly as she'd initiated it, the smile on her face trembling but unbreakable. Her eyes shone brightly, and she forced a slightly competitive bite into her tone. "So you better watch out, Izuku; I won't hesitate to kick your butt in the finals." The buzzer inside the waiting room sounded insistently, and Uraraka took a deep breath. "Well, guess I should get going. Bakugou won't beat himself, will he?"

Uraraka turned away with none of her usual flourish, her frame set with solid determination and simmers of confidence. He stared after her even as she left his sight, unable to process how he'd managed to befriend such incredible individuals.

He was startled out of his reverie by a hand resting stiffly on his shoulder, and turned to meet Iida's smiling visage. "I suppose we should go make good on your promise to cheer Uraraka on, don't you think?"

"I-y-yeah. You're right. W-wouldn't want to miss her winning, huh?" Izuku's smile was partially functional, sufficient enough to hide the worry coiling in his stomach. He walked in step with Iida, paying half attention to the recap of his fight with Mei Hatsume, and attempted to convince himself that everything would be fine. Uraraka was strong, and determined, and Izuku believed in her. And that was enough, wasn't it?

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Izuku shuffled through the stadium halls with leaden feet, the dark whirlwind of his thoughts reduced to a single, damning statement etched on the inside of his skull. *Uraraka lost.* Watching from the stands had been unbearable, seeing her weather explosive blows one after another, flinching and faltering but never giving up, even when she was painted in grime and smoking burns. Her meteor shower had been brilliant, an ingenious plan that *should* have allowed her to win, and he'd never been more proud of her than in the moment she'd unveiled it.

But it wasn't enough. Kacchan's power was so unbelievably overwhelming, and it had saved him even after he'd been outsmarted. Despite all of her talent, and strength, and ingenuity-Uraraka lost. She'd lost, and Izuku had no idea what he could say to make her feel better. His experience with losing in the past had been a dull ache of certainty, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt that he'd never amount to anything, and thus his failure didn't sting as much. But trying your best, putting all your heart and soul into winning, and then coming up short-what could he possibly say to that?

Izuku stopped short at the sight of ash blond hair bobbing up the stairwell to his right, his limbs locking in place as magmatic eyes seared into him. "H-hey, Kacchan," he offered meekly, raising
one hand in a jerky wave.

Bakugou sneered at him in response, looking slightly worse for wear. His forearms were plastered with bandages, and there was a bandage taped to the side of his nose where he'd been scored by a sharp chunk of rubble. ".Tell Uraraka she put up a decent fight for such a fucking loser. And tell her I expect better next time." There was heat in his words, but not the sort meant to harm. Kacchan was an open furnace instead of a raging wildfire, his burn low and controlled.

Izuku blinked in shock, completely caught off guard by Kacchan's barked request, thought it was probably more like a command when he thought about it. "U-uh... y-yeah, I'll, uhm. D-do that. C-congrats on w-winning. I-I'll see you later.-"

Izuku only managed a single step before he was frozen in place by Kacchan's voice rising into a near shout. "I'm not fucking done talking yet, shithead! Let me make one thing really fucking clear to you, Izuku. Your dumbass girlfriend went out there and tried her fucking hardest, even against me. So if you don't fucking go out there and do every-fucking-thing you can to beat that stupid half-and-half bastard, I swear to god I'll fucking come in that ring and bury you alive." Izuku quivered under the molten weight of Kacchan's stare, his eyes wide and unblinking. "Got it?!" Kacchan barked, startling Izuku out of his shock.

"Y-yeah, I-I got it. I-I'll do my b-best!" Izuku nodded frantically, a crooked, rictus smile on his face. Kacchan's eyebrows furrowed as he brushed his way past, presumably heading back towards the viewing stand. Izuku heaved a breath of relief when he left, still unused to handling a Kacchan that was one hundred percent intensity, and zero percent malevolence.

He hurried down the hallway towards the 'Player 2' waiting room, relieved when he didn't run into anyone else on the way. He heaved a shaky sigh and pushed through the door, only to stop short at the sight of Uraraka seated at one of the tables, a fresh jacket wrapped in plastic on the table in front of her and a bandage taped on her cheek. Her burns had vanished, but the stench of nitroglycerin still clung to her. He was struck with the image of her smoking and still on blasted concrete, having weathered Bakugou's assault to the breaking point. She looked smaller, sitting alone in the ugly concrete room; her battlefield presence had shrunk in the quiet.

"Oh, hey Izuku!" She greeted him with painfully false cheer, her eyes dim with smothered fire. "Ugh, I can't believe I let Bakugou beat me! Guess I'll just have to kick his butt the next chance I get, huh?" Izuku could see goosebumps on her arms from the air conditioning, the jacket pristine and unopened on the table.

Izuku was silent for a few moments too long, struggling to figure out what to say before he realized he had to actually say words. "U-uh-it-y-you were a-amazing out there, U-Uraraka," he blurted, refocusing on his memory of her plan to make the sparkle in his eye as genuine as possible. "Y-your-you were s-so cool, I h-had no idea your Quirk was s-so strong." He faltered for a moment when her smile broke into shock, something liquid hot behind her eyes, but resolved to push onward. "Y-you were incredible. I-I don't think I've ever s-seen Kacchan look so nervous when he fought someone."

She blinked up at him for a moment, her eyes taking on a glassy sheen before she smiled sadly down at the table. Her cellphone was clutched in one hand, a battered looking flip phone with a key chain bearing little ornaments. "That's really sweet of you to say, Izuku-"

Sensing the defeat in her voice, tinged with the surety of being undeserving, Izuku forced himself to interrupt. "I-I'm serious! E-even Kacchan-he said to t-tell you that y-you put up a-a really good fight, a-and he thinks you'll b-be even better n-next time!" Izuku's enthusiastic recounting dimmed a little when Uraraka sent him a skeptical look, and he flushed and sheepishly scrubbed a hand through his hair. "H-he... didn't say it in those exact w-words of course, but t-that's probably what he meant."
Uraraka regarded him carefully for a moment, before a soft, wobbly smile appeared on her face. It might have been enough to fool anyone else, but Izuku could see the fragility behind it. "I-it's really nice for you to want to cheer me up, Izuku. I... I really appreciate it." Her breath hitched a little as she spoke, and Izuku was besot by a spike of panic that she might start crying. "But I'm okay. Really." She paused as the echo of Present Mic's announcing the beginning of the second round permeated the walls, and offered a brighter smile. "Sorry for distracting you—I'll be cheering for you, okay?" Her expression wasn't solid quite yet, but she didn't look moments from falling apart either. Izuku was struck with the urge to just-sit with her, as long as he possibly could, but there just wasn't time.

"I-I, y-yeah, n-no, y-you're fine really-" Izuku floundered a little, unused to working with a time limit. He sucked in a deep breath and leaned in to wrap his arms around Uraraka's shoulders, pulling her in for a quick hug before backing off. "I-I should get going. U-uhm, see you!" He had half a moment to see her wide, shimmering gaze before he forced himself to leave, certain that he couldn't do anything else for her in the few minutes he had.

He rushed out of the waiting room, the door clacking shut behind him as his sneakers squeaked against tile. His forward momentum was brought to a catastrophic halt a few moments later, as he was intercepted by echoing footsteps from his right. They were powerful and purposeful, and Izuku was struck very vividly by the realization that he did not want to see who possessed them when he was accosted by a titanic mass of muscle and flame, more akin to a burning wraith than any normal man. Izuku's eyes nearly bulged out of his head, terror cramming itself into his throat at the sight of the number two hero, Endeavor.

"Ah, Izuku Midoriya, correct? I've been looking for you." If Todoroki's anger had been frostbite, then his father was an arctic blizzard trapped in human form. Every inch of him radiated cold despite his flames, his eyes narrowed and impossible to read. "I've been watching you closely since the first event-you have an impressive amount of power, a sort I've never seen before." Rather than the compliment it could have been mistaken for or the observation it was structured as, Endeavor's words sounded harsh and calculating.

"U-uh... t-thanks. W-what did y-y-you, uhm, n-need me f-for?" Izuku shrunk under his shadow, fear positively boiling under his skin. He couldn't read a trace of anything from Endeavor except for latent fury wreathed by flames. He would have been intimidating even if Izuku didn't know the truth about him-his monstrous abuse and lack of empathy only made him more terrifying.

Endeavor's eyes narrowed further at the sound of Izuku's stutter, his lips curling with displeasure. "Hmph. Despite its wielder, your power can't be ignored. It will provide an adequate hurdle for my son; a marker of his progress towards surpassing All Might. Be sure to use that power to its fullest. After all, anything less would be shameful." There was a moment of silence where he appraised Izuku further, his eyes resting on scar tissue for an instant before he turned away. "That was all I had to say. Apologies, for taking up your time."

Izuku could practically feel the chill radiating from Endeavor's frame, a physical indication of what resided inside of him. The lights in the hallway flickered as something hot and putrid rose in Izuku's chest, squeezing in alongside his fear. Endeavor's callousness, his disregard for the feelings of others, even those of his own son, made Izuku angry.

"I-I am not an obstacle for your son to climb," Izuku uttered, his fingers clenched at his sides as wisps of dark fumes seeped through his skin. Endeavor halted and turned to glance at him over a shoulder, his eyebrows knitted together in annoyance that quickly became stark shock. Izuku's silhouette snapped around him, an inky backdrop that ached to magnify and consume. "And y-your son is not a legacy for you to g-groom, Endeavor."
For perhaps a nanosecond, Izuku saw through the warped layers of hatred that twisted and twined around Enji Todoroki like a cocoon. He plucked at the fear that clung to his insides like black mold, deep and cold and poisoning. He strummed a resonating note that made eyes like frostbite dilate with terror, breath locked in a chest used to spit fire and fury. If Izuku so desired, he could extend gnarled fingers deep into the core of primal fear, and unravel Enji Todoroki with a single tugged wire.

And then Izuku blinked, and Endeavor blinked too, all traces of Living Nightmare vanished as if it had been a trick of the light. Silence rang between them like a struck gong, Endeavor cemented in place. Izuku choked and turned away to hurry down the hall a moment later, his breath tight in his throat until he was sure there were no pursuing footsteps. He couldn't dwell on it, he didn't have time. Endeavor wasn't important. Izuku sucked in a deep breath, and stepped out into the sunlight.

The roar of the crowd buzzed like white noise in his ears, nearly deafening in its intensity. But Izuku was not a mess of shaking nerves and a cracking psyche- he moved with heated purpose, Living Nightmare throbbing like a second pulse under his skin. He shivered as it coiled around his ulna, seeping between the cracks in his metacarpals and forcing tiny, twisting fumes from the pores on his palm. It almost felt eager.

Izuku grit his teeth through the discomfort, forced shaking legs to obey and his lungs to inflate despite the winding tendrils and pulling wires. Living Nightmare was his power to control. It did not define him. It was to be respected, but not feared. Izuku climbed the steps to the arena, eyes locking on bicolor hair and a heterochromatic gaze that scorched him like a freezer burn, and resolved to never run away from the things he had to face.

He faced Todoroki without flinching, his hands shaking but his spirit unbreakable. Present Mic's voice echoed in the background of the silence that settled between them. Izuku had to fight, had to do his best to prove that everyone supporting him, everyone believing in him meant enough for him to change. He was terrified, but he wasn't backing down. Izuku braced himself as Todoroki slid his right foot half an inch forward, shaking from fear and nerves. He curled the fingers on his left hand into claws, and cocked his right arm backwards, palm facing forward with the heel of his hand jutted outward and his fingers curled inward to the second knuckle. Izuku stood with a smile like a paper mask battered by the breeze, and stared into eyes as hard as permafrost.

["BEGIN!"]

Living Nightmare roared to life in Izuku's chest, a great and terrible howling that he forced to bend to his will. The concrete under Todoroki's right foot turned slick with ice, crystals growing in chunks and columns in their race to freeze Izuku solid. He thrust his right arm forward like a firing pin, a plume of coal black fumes erupting from his arm in the same moment the concrete buckled and cracked, his power carving a deep groove that shattered Todoroki's forming iceberg into shards.

In an instant the air between them was choked with dust and fragments of ice, the kickback pulling Izuku's breath from his lungs and fuzzing his vision with spots of static. He staggered backwards and threw his left hand in an upward arc, spitting out a choked cry as he bled fumes and carved through obfuscating dust, thinner grooves peeling the concrete apart like paper. The air boiled like glass in the space where his power lashed out for something to destroy, warping the silhouette of Todoroki braced against a wall of ice.

Izuku panted for breath and stability, blinking hard through spots of static to search Todoroki for injuries. His arms were scored with thin red lines from frozen shrapnel, his breath leaving him in puffs of white mist. He stared Izuku down through the space between his arms, his voice carrying clear across the arena. "You won't hit me directly, will you?"

That was the only warning Izuku got before another wave of ice blitzed towards him, a thin, curving
wall of crystals that obfuscated Todoroki behind it. Izuku backpedaled as quickly as his shaking legs would take him, eyes darting to try and pinpoint Todoroki to avoid using his Quirk on him directly. A flicker of hair caught his eye over the top of the ice, and Izuku swept his arm out in a backhand, fingers pressed tightly together. His stomach roiled and churned, a wave of nausea making him dizzy as the wave of ice shattered into dust.

But instead of seeing Todoroki retreat away from the force of his attack, Izuku's heart slipped through his ribs as his opponent vaulted over the destruction on an icy slope, leaping off the end of it and making himself an obvious target that Izuku couldn't afford to hit. He staggered backwards in an attempt to avoid the collision, his right leg half numb underneath him. He avoided Todoroki's fist by a hair, eyes widening as it was cushioned by the wreath of ice that sprouted around it.

He struggled to create some distance, fumes drifting lazily from his arms in stark contrast to Izuku's wild panic. The ice crept towards him faster than he could get away, a thousand screeching notes echoing in Izuku's head before he grasped a single tone. He wrenched his left hand up and aimed into the open air at his side, his fingers flexing outward as Living Nightmare's power burst from his palm. He was flung like a rag doll from the writhing force, deafened by static and gasping for air even as he struggled to angle his right arm.

It moved like it'd been filled with lead, his fingers barely able to twitch as Izuku fired at an angle to send him hurtling back towards Todoroki's side of the ring, crying out as he was jostled by the abrupt mid-air turn. Instead of the open concrete he'd been hoping to land on, Izuku was greeted by a set of widening eyes and a shock of red and white hair before he slammed bodily into Todoroki, sending them both crashing to the ground.

Izuku's head rang from the force of slamming it into Todoroki's shoulder, a ringing ache behind his temples that made the whole world lopsided. It was nothing compared to the static, a breath of fresh air that he had to use to his advantage. Desperately afraid of being frozen by Todoroki's right hand, Izuku kicked out of the tangle of limbs before his opponent had time to recover, skidding across concrete in his effort to retreat.

Todoroki was up on his feet barely a second later, his forearms smeared with blood and his clothes dusted with powdered concrete. He heaved a misting breath, and it was only then that Izuku realized he was trembling. "You can't regulate the strength of your attacks, can you? That's why you were hesitant to dodge, why you won't use it directly on me. You're afraid of it, aren't you?" A sheen of ice formed from the tip of Todoroki's shoe, the ground slick underneath him. "That's why I'll beat you. And I'll do it without his power." White clouds leaked from between his lips, his eyes darkened into black ice by resentment.

"Y-you're wrong. I'm n-n-not afraid of it. N-not anymore." Izuku's heart thundered in his chest, Kacchan's fire flooding through his veins and twining with the oil slick of his resolve. Izuku staggered to stand upright, shadowed by thick clouds of Living Nightmare's fumes. The world was dim and muted around him, his pupils blown wide in their effort to devour what light remained, to swallow whole the sight of Todoroki, marred by blood and streaks of his own ice. Izuku's resolve soaked into his words, bloating them with absolute certainty. "Y-you're not strong enough, Todoroki. You'll never beat me, not like that. Not w-when you let your Quirk control you."

Todoroki's lips twisted with anger, and that was all the indication Izuku needed to cleave his hand through the air, annihilating the oncoming wall of ice before it could fully form. He gasped and fell backwards from the recoil, his right arm burning like he'd lit it on fire. The fumes were thicker, flowing stronger and heavier even between attacks. He didn't have many left—if he wanted to win, he had to end things quickly. But he couldn't—he couldn't shake the image of Todoroki's pain, the tremor in his voice as he spoke of his mother, the hurt and rage that twisted around his father's name like
poison. And beneath it all, beneath the mask and layers of ice and the hurt and the loathing and the drive—there was fear. There was always fear.

And Izuku couldn't let anyone be afraid ever again. He glared into the obfuscating static, and raised his right arm in a fist, even as it trembled and burned and bled fumes like a broken engine. "W-well?! Are you g-going to beat m-me or what?! Sh-show me w-what really m-matters to you! A-are-are you g-going to give it y-your all, or l-let your Quirk c-control you?!"

He stared unblinkingly into the darkness, waiting for the slightest indication of an oncoming attack. ". . . What the hell are you trying to prove?" His head jerked left towards Todoroki's voice, fingers twitching uncontrollably. "You want my fire, is that it? Why are you even trying? I know you won't hurt me. I know every attack you use weakens you. Do you really think you can win when you can't even see me?!"

Living Nightmare burst to life in Izuku's left arm as he swept it in a wide arc, the concrete rumbling underfoot as all sound was replaced by a static drone. But he wasn't frozen, he wasn't out of the ring, which meant he must have destroyed the attack. "I-d-don't want to h-hurt you, Todoroki," Izuku half sobbed into the silence, because he knew someone was listening. "I don't want t-to hurt anyone. B-but I won't a-always have a choice. Y-you-do you r-really think y-you're the only one th-that doesn't love their Quirk? Th-this power..." Izuku raised his right arm, the muscles trembling and contracting uncontrollably as it slowly raised into the air. He pressed his numbed fingers against the side of his face, tracing the scar he knew was there. "T-this is what h-happened, b-because I was afraid! Th-this is the p-price I paid," Izuku choked out, his eyes squeezed shut as tears trailed down his face. He wouldn't run away, he wouldn't run away, he wouldn't let anyone be afraid like him-

"It happened, b-because I let my Quirk control me! Just like you! But it isn't in control!" Izuku staggered through his unraveling senses, struggling to blink color back into his retinas and parse through the static that deafened him. "I-it's your power, Todoroki! Y-yours, and n-nobody else's!"

Izuku's senses returned to him in a crawl as he tore at the knotted wires in his chest, his arms sputtering fumes in dying spurts. He blinked through a blindfold of static and a sheen of tears, colors colliding together at the same moment that he was battered by a wave of heat. Shouto Todoroki stared back through half a suit of living flames, his left half engulfed in a crackling blaze. His lips were pulled into a wild grin, pulled into place by so many emotions that Izuku couldn't even read them.

"It really is a shame... that you're so nice. It almost makes me feel bad for wanting to win." A laugh poured from Izuku's mouth before he could contain it, relief and elation and joy exhuming the raw fear of Living Nightmare. Of every emotion on Todoroki's face, there wasn't even a single trace of fear.

Izuku struggled to raise his left arm, fingers limp and his joints aching and his skin scorching hot. He stared into the swelling depths of Todoroki's fire and the sub zero frost radiating from his right side, and all he could do was smile. He poured Living Nightmare into his arm, and clenched tight the moment before it burst free. A cry left his throat, the power exploding under his skin as it built, and built, and built. Fumes plumed off him in gargantuan clouds, a swirling mass of noxious darkness that heated his skin until it was unbearable.

Izuku's charged burst and Todoroki's sheets of ice and lashes of fire collided with a series of concrete barriers that had formed in the middle of the ring. The power that burst forth from Izuku's arm tore and snapped at the air around it, super-heating molecules until they erupted in showers of white sparks. Their Quirks met in a maelstrom of burning heat and suffocating cold, choked with horrid, noxious fumes like the ashes of dark matter, framed by a galactic cluster of crackling white sparks.
The impact turned Izuku's vision to static in an instant, and he could barely feel the air explode around him as he was flung to the concrete, skidding and scraping against it.

He panted for air as the dust swirled around him, unable to hear anything through the howling wind. The tears on his face had evaporated entirely, his face sticky and tacky and prickling with heat as he flattened his cheek against the ground. It hurt, every inch of him hurt so much, but it was okay, as long as he'd helped Todoroki. He'd done his best, he'd done everything he could, and all that was left was to hope it was enough. Midnight's voice rang out over the arena, muddled and distant as Izuku's consciousness slipped from his grasp.

"Todoroki is out of bounds! Iz..u M..or..a .. .he win..r!"

Oh, Izuku realized hazily, he'd actually won. That was surprising. The corner of his lips twitched upwards, and the world faded away as he was swallowed by darkness.
Izuku Midoriya found his consciousness in much the same way he might find his place among the stars. He plotted lines between the fractured shards of his mind like constellations in the night sky, a galactic map to lead him through the inky ocean of dissociation. Synapses glimmered with electric starlight, cosmic currents bringing nerves to life, thoughts lighting up in soft nebulae to combat the colorless void. With every breath that continued to flow through his lungs, the wires loosened their hold, little by little.

And eventually, he woke up. Liveliness crept sluggishly back into his static limbs, veins incensed by the spark of sapience. Izuku blearily cracked open his heavy lids, squinting up at the harsh light of buzzing fluorescent fixtures. It was a sight he was becoming unfortunately familiar with. His second foray into forced unconsciousness of the day made his head feel thick and his thoughts disoriented, and Izuku struggled for a moment to remember why he was in Recovery Girl's temporary office again. He licked at his teeth in a futile effort to cleanse them of the bitter flavor of disappointment, only to jump in shock when a familiar voice uttered his name.

"Midoriya, you're awake!" Izuku had half a second to sit up and register the sight of Kirishima at his bedside (again), his hair loose and wavy instead of set in his normal stiff spikes. There was a bruise forming in dark splotches on his left cheekbone, and he stank of sweat, antiseptic, and nitroglycerin, but it did nothing to take away the breathtaking sheen of his relieved grin.

"K-Kirishima," Izuku stuttered, his heart thumping hard in his chest as he was assaulted with memories of his friend's fight, of Kirishima's shining determination and awe inspiring strength and the blinding heat of his smile. Izuku's cheeks burned hot, his eyes shining even as he reoriented himself. "I-I'm so sorry I m-missed you after your match-y-you were so incredible! Th-the way you fought-your Quirk is so cool, a-and I had no idea you were so strong and I'm so glad you won, y-you were amazing out there-"

Izuku's starstruck babbling ground to a halt in a blasted wreckage of shattered syllables when Kirishima's chest shook with a wet laugh, his eyes shiny with tears. The sight of it caused a hurt like feeding his heart through a meat grinder, and Izuku choked in his effort to apologize, to right whatever he'd done wrong-

"I can't-you can't do that to me, man," Kirishima laughed breathlessly, his grin held up through sheer force of will. "I guess it figures, huh? You wake up after passin' out for three hours, and the first thing you do is tell me how cool I am. How do you expect me to handle that, Midoriya?" Kirishima's shoulders drooped in sync with his smile, the teasing note in his voice overwhelmed by relief and upset. He ran one hand through his hair, crimson locks parting for his fingers. The sheen over his eyes coalesced into droplets that trailed down his face, each one making Izuku feel like he was being eviscerated. "You-I'm so proud of you, man, and I'm so glad you're alright, but.." Kirishima's voice wavered for a moment, "you can't keep doing this to yourself."

Izuku twitched and shifted under the sterile white sheets, guilt filling his throat until he was sure he'd choke to death on it. "I'm-I'm so-sorry," he croaked, his thoughts colliding in a frantic mantra of make it better make it better. He reached out to press the tips of his fingers to the side of Kirishima's hand, and resisted the urge to shy away when fingers clenched around his own. He squeezed back in
an effort to provide some sort of reassurance, blinking hard to quell an uprising of tears. "I-I didn't I didn't mean t-to-"

"I know, I know you're not trying to make anyone worried," Kirishima interrupted, clutching at Izuku's hand as if it were a lifeline. "But I'm worried anyway, man. You can't push yourself like that, over and over again. I thought-" Kirishima visibly struggled to dislodge the words from his throat, and Izuku frantically wrapped his other hand around the one in his possession. "I thought it'd be like the USJ again, where I had no idea if you were gonna wake up or not." Tears dripped steadily from the tip of Kirishima's nose, landing in silent impacts and darkening Izuku's sheets in tiny splotches.

Izuku swung his legs over the side of the bed, barely capable of thought beyond the thundering of his heart and the empty ache of regret. He leaned forward to rest his head against Kirishima's slumped shoulder, gently releasing the grip on his hand to instead capture him in a hug. There was a long moment of silent inaction, thick and crushing, before Kirishima returned the embrace, his arms strong but vulnerable around Izuku's back.

Izuku pressed his nose into the fabric of Kirishima's uniform, his breath hitching a few times as he struggled not to cry. Kirishima was the one that was upset-it'd be selfish to cry and force his friend to comfort him. "..You s-said I was out f-for three hours. W-what happened, with the tournament?" Izuku's words left him slowly and hesitantly, apologies clouding the entrance of his throat like gnats. Apologizing over and over again wouldn't change anything, wouldn't undo what had happened, but the desire still burned in him.

"After you won against Todoroki, there was a break while everyone waited for you to wake up. But uhm.. yeah, you were out so long, they gave Todoroki your spot in the bracket. He beat Iida, and lost to Bakugou in the finals. The award ceremony had to be cut short, because Bakugou tried to throw his medal at Todoroki, after he didn't use his fire in their fight." Izuku sagged with relief at the hint of a smile in Kirishima's tone, and gently curled his fingers in the loose fabric of his uniform. "Tokoyami came in third, by the way. And, technically Iida did too, but he had to leave early..." Kirishima's amusement fled as quickly as it had come, replaced by something quiet and somber. "He uh, said his brother, Ingenium... apparently he got hurt by a villain."

Izuku stiffened with dread and horror, easing out of the embrace so that he could make eye contact with Kirishima, his hands lingering on bare forearms. The warm, firm skin under Izuku's palms was oddly calming, and the soft tickle of arm hair made a small, distant part of him vaguely wonder if Kirishima's Quirk affected keratin in addition to his skin cells. Izuku blinked to force himself to refocus on blood orange eyes that were dim with concern, all traces of Kirishima's smile wiped away. It was a sobering reminder of the situation. "T-that's awful. Is-does Iida kn-know if he'll be okay?"

"I'm not sure," Kirishima muttered uneasily, the corners of his lips twisted into a frown, "he didn't really stick around long enough for us to find out. Uraraka and Tokoyami know too, but they're heading back to class right now. ..Which is technically where I should be too, but I talked to All Might about making sure you were okay, so, I've got a pass."

Izuku hummed quietly to indicate he was paying attention, the air between them thickened into a strange, melancholic intimacy. He swallowed something hot and oily in his throat, struggling to maintain eye contact. "Th-thank you f-for telling me-I'll be sure to text Iida later. And, um..." Izuku's face colored slightly, thumbs reflexively rubbing along the lines of Kirishima's forearms. "I-I promise to be more c-careful. I s-should have been earlier, but it-it just... f-felt right in the moment, I-I guess? N-not that that's an e-excuse, or anything I-I just-"

"It's okay, Midoriya, I'm not like, mad at you or anything." Kirishima's eyes turned soft, gently
smoothing over the solemn edge they'd taken before. His lips quirked into a grin that only flashed a small strip of teeth, and he reached out to boldly pat the side of Izuku's face. "How am I supposed to be mad at a face like that, anyway? That'd be criminal, man."

Izuku's face turned hot so quickly he vaguely worried he'd burst a blood vessel somewhere along the way, his unmarred cheek burning from the brief contact with Kirishima's palm. He wrapped both arms around his face to try and contain his embarrassment, torn between either suffocating himself or screaming into his forearms. "Th-than-thank y-you for n-n-not b-being m-mad with m-m-me..." he stammered in a catastrophic amalgam of broken syllables, feeling vaguely nauseous from the warm, fluttery sensation under his ribs.

Kirishima laughed, something softer than his usual boisterous amusement that nonetheless captured the essence of his brightness. "You'd have to try pretty hard to get me mad at you, bro. And as long as you're more careful with your Quirk from now on, I won't have any reason to worry, right?"

There was a beat that suggested Kirishima's question wasn't rhetorical, and Izuku nodded through the cage of his arms, unable to trust his voice not to break. "Good. We should probably run you by Recovery Girl and get you back to class, now that you're up."

He offered Izuku an open hand, and Izuku haltingly unwound his arms to grasp Kirishima's hand. The redhead easily pulled him to his feet, and the heat on Izuku's face persisted when he made no move to release his grip, instead twining their fingers as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Izuku endured Recovery Girl's admonishments in a daze, consumed by the sudden realization that Kirishima's hands were much softer than he would have thought. The redhead had no significant callouses, leaving behind smooth and unblemished skin that was likely a result of his Hardening, when Izuku really thought about it. He was unable to devote any significant processing power to analyzing Kirishima's Quirk considering his mental faculties were already on the brink of overload just from holding his hand, so Izuku resigned himself to theory crafting some other time.

He blinked out of his thoughts when Kirishima nudged him with a shoulder, offering him a side profile of a brilliant grin. "Now that I don't have to worry about Recovery Girl calling me out for 'disturbing her patient', I get to tell you how awesome your fight was!" Kirishima knocked their shoulders together again out of excitement, bright liquid eyes making Izuku's insides melt into goop. "You totally gave Todoroki a run for his money, man, you were freakin' crazy! You wrecked his icebergs, got him to use his fire, and still knocked him out of the ring! It really sucks that you had to be disqualified-if anyone could'a knocked Bakugou on his ass, it'd be you."

Izuku shrank against Kirishima's side as they walked, partially from the inability to handle being praised, and partially from the brief shock of terror at the thought of what fighting Kacchan would have been like. "M-maybe being disqualified w-wasn't a bad thing, though.." Izuku trailed off for a moment, only to sputter back to life when Kirishima fixed him with a worried look. "N-not to say I d-didn't want to w-win, and keep going-but y-you said it yourself. I-I was pushing myself t-too hard."

Izuku stared hard at the open space between the tips of his shoes, his melancholy lightening noticeably as his fingers were gently squeezed. The corner of his lips twitched upwards, and he squeezed back. "..W-when the Sport's Festival started, I wasn't really sure what w-winning meant to me. Hearing how excited everyone was, h-how much everyone wanted to do their best.. h-hearing it from Uraraka, and Kacchan, and-and you, it made me w-want to do my best too. After the first two events, I thought... I thought 'this is it, this is w-what I want'. I wanted to w-win, and prove I was good enough, prove I was s-strong enough. B-but after the fight with Shinsou..

Izuku paused to take a short, rattling breath, hoping it could exonerate him of the memory of static and cotton, strings and wires. "I-I wasn't so sure anymore. I di-didn't know how much winning was
r-really worth, i-if I had to hu-hurt people." He leaned a little further into the comforting weight of Kirishima's frame, the full body warmth keeping his tears at bay. "B-but seeing you and Uraraka fight, and during my match with T-Todoroki... a-as much as I wanted t-to win, I thought that maybe it w-wasn't so important. I-if I could do my best to h-help other people do their best, l-losing doesn't seem so bad. M-maybe that sounds dumb, b-but... it f-feels right, I guess."

Izuku was pulled from his reverie by the sound of a loud sniffle, eyes widening as he looked up to find Kirishima with his lips quivering and tears budding in the corners of his eyes. "I-I'm sorry, a-are you o-oka-" His words were squeezed into a breathless squeak when solid arms wrapped around his middle, embracing him with such vigor that Izuku was sure he'd snap in half.

"I can't believe how manly you are, Midoriya," Kirishima practically wailed into his hair, nose pressed firmly against the crown of Izuku's head. "How the hell am I supposed to compete with that, man?!" Izuku breathed a sigh of relief when he realized Kirishima wasn't actually upset, a squeaky giggle easing out of him at the sound of Kirishima's melodrama. He closed his eyes and sagged into the embrace, the horrible twitching tension in him finally, finally draining away.

The Sport's Festival was over, and even though he hadn't won, it'd still helped him, and he'd hopefully been able to help the people he cared about. Things weren't perfect, of course-the thought of Iida's brother being injured sent a nauseating jolt through him-but they weren't awful. Engulfed in the warmth of Kirishima's arms and tentatively acknowledging the pleased fluttering in the pit of his stomach, it dawned on Izuku that he might have even begun to understand what happiness really meant.

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Eijirou Kirishima had never really thought of himself as the kind of guy that was good with complex emotions. As with all things, he tried his best to be both honest and straightforward with his feelings, and considerate with the feelings of others. Usually, that was easy enough to do, and he didn't give it much thought. It was just something he did.

And then he'd met Izuku Midoriya, and everything had been turned on its head. His first impression of Midoriya... hadn't been the most flattering, when he really thought about it. He'd felt awful even at the time, wondering if the boy that could barely squeak out full sentences and couldn't run without tripping over his own feet had ended up in the hero course by mistake. The first showing of his Quirk had been even worse. Eijirou had worried if it was even safe for him to use it, let alone try to be a hero with such a wild, explosive strength.

That would have been the end of it, but... seeing Midoriya's misery, so thick and palpable that it looked like he was choking on it-there was no way Eijirou could have ignored it. Talking with Iida and Uraraka to follow up on his concern was one of the best decision he'd ever made, and he knew he'd never regret what it led to.

Finding out who Midoriya really was, the boy behind the anxiety, the stuttering, the tears-he was kind, unbelievably so. Eijirou had never met someone that embodied selflessness as wholly and seamlessly as Izuku Midoriya, someone willing to forgive any slight, willing to hold out his hand again and again despite the pain it surely caused him. And there was no mistake that Midoriya was hurting. Every time Eijirou saw his eyes gloss over with tears, saw his limbs shake and heard his voice crack, he felt an echo of that pain, a a product of the empathy he couldn't expunge even if he'd wanted to.

It made him want to ease that pain, to take dim eyes and make them bright with excitement, soft with contentment, warm with happiness. Seeing those eyes turned on him, like spotlights in pitch darkness-that's where the complexity coalesced. Midoriya looked at him with something he could only describe as adoration, something so soft and gentle that it made Eijirou's heart flutter in his chest
and kept him awake at night, buzzing with thoughts of what it might mean.

He had an idea of what those looks meant, of course. As much as Midoriya's love for the rest of their friends was obvious and palpable, flowing like sweet syrups, he never looked at them the way he did Eijirou. As much as he wanted to bring it up, to find out if it meant what he thought it did, he knew it wasn't the right time. Midoriya was still so fragile, still trying to find himself... and so was Eijirou. So no matter how much he yearned, he couldn't push things, couldn't do something he might regret. He'd do whatever he could for Midoriya as things were, and if the dynamic changed...

"H-hey, Kirishima?" Midoriya's voice wobbled unsteadily through the evening air, which had begun growing thicker and more humid as of late. The setting sun burned the world with orange streaks, outlining Midoriya with a golden glow that contrasted his dark hair and soft toned uniform. "I-I know we don't have school for the next two days, but... I-did you, w-want to hang out? O-over the break?"

Eijirou quirked his lips into a bright grin, half hoping it could mask how vulnerable Midoriya's wide, dewy gaze made him feel. "Yeah, sure thing man. Should we meet at the station, maybe see if anyone else wants to hang too?"

"Y-yeah, that, uhm-s-sounds good." Midoriya failed to mimic his smile, ending up with something small and lopsided that Eijirou couldn't help but find endearing. One of Midoriya's wild curls shifted over his forehead, his hair infinitely more messy without his clips to tame it. Eijirou converted his urge to delicately sweep the curl away into mussing his hand through Midoriya's entire mop, earning a squeak for his efforts.

"I'll catch you later then, Midoriya. Take care of yourself, okay?" Eijirou's grin widened without his direct intent when Midoriya nodded emphatically, so unbelievably genuine. He was so important, and didn't even realize-Eijirou had always wanted to be a hero, to live a life without regret and protect those that couldn't do it themselves. He wanted to be someone others could look up to and rely on, a force of good that made a real difference in the world.

"I-I will! U-uhm, s-see you tomorrow, Kirishima!" Midoriya's smile grew until the right side of his face was uneven with his left, and he waved a little awkwardly before he turned to catch his train. Eijirou stuck around to watch him leave, just like he'd been doing for weeks. He'd always wanted to be a hero, but his desire had always seemed intangible, incomplete. But Midoriya gave him something real to work towards. Someone to cheer him on, to inspire him, to remind him of why his dream existed at all. Eijirou Kirishima would be a hero; for his sake, and for the sake of Izuku Midoriya.

Chapter End Notes

Pure and wholesome art for this chapter!  
http://colpfiction.tumblr.com/post/164458324090/soooooo-ive-been-reading-this-awesome-bnha-fic
Chapter 33

Izuku huddled quietly in his preferred corner of the train car, staring intently at the screen of his phone in the dim hopes of drowning out the pounding rain outside. It made him feel twitchy and restless, his scars itchy under his shirt and his fingers trembling on the slick screen of his phone. He mindlessly browsed hero forums, frustrated with his inability to focus on contributing to online discussions as he normally did.

His thumb paused on the screen for a second before he swiped back to his contacts, staring mournfully at Iida's name, along with the unanswered message next to it.

'M: Hey Iida, I'm really sorry to hear about your brother, I hope everything works out okay!! I'd really appreciate knowing if everything is okay but please don't feel obligated, take all the time you need! Take care of yourself!!'

The tiny 'Read' status had been haunting him for a day and a half, his dread and uncertainty pushing him to go back to it over and over, even though he knew his alerts were turned on. His outings with his friends over the weekend had helped distract him a little, but every moment spent alone slowly but surely brought him back to it.

Izuku bit his lip, thumb hovering over Iida's name for a few moments before he swiped back to his browser, closing forum tabs in favor of the news. Hero news had been fairly light (save for the events he'd actually been part of), and Ingenium's injury hadn't been released to the public yet, so he hadn't been paying as much attention to current events. He swiped to his news feed, his thumb hovering over his screen as the headlines loaded.

'Hero Killer Stain Found Dead, Hero Ingenium In Critical Condition!'

Shock snapped through Izuku's veins in a crackling lightning strike, strong enough that he dropped his phone and had to fumble to catch it before it broke on the floor. Thoughts erupted in his head in buzzing clouds, each one struggling to compute what he'd just read. He'd known that the Hero Killer was at large, felling heroes one by one and leaving only fearful speculation in his wake. He'd had Ingenium meant to-? Would that mean Ingenium was the one who-?

Izuku forced himself to cease speculating, reminding himself that he had access to the full article. He shakily tapped the headline, eyes flitting back and forth rapidly as he read through it. There was a frustrating lack of actual information present in the news piece, but from what he could glean from the context, a number of details were glossed over for a reason. Stain's... remains, had only been described as 'gruesome', and Ingenium's injuries were only said to be 'debilitating'. It made sense; if they released the exact details of Ingenium's condition, it could lead to other villains doing something stupid, and attempting to take advantage of his injuries.

Izuku read further, anxiety tight in his throat as they shared a few scarce quotes from Ingenium himself, describing his assailant and Stain's killer as 'an unknown villain', one wearing a mask that made him impossible to identify. Izuku closed out of the tab as the article devolved into baseless speculation, a distant, sour dread curling in his chest at the thought of a villain that could kill someone like Stain. Maybe it was just-someone with a vendetta, who had achieved his goal and it wouldn't lead to any more killings.

Izuku's sigh went unheard as the train's brakes hissed, discarding his brief sliver of optimism along with further speculation of the situation. It wasn't—there wasn't anything he could do about it, so he couldn't drive himself crazy worrying. The rain was already doing an exemplary job of that.
Izuku clutched the handle of his umbrella tightly as he crept towards the exit of the station, staring bleakly out into the heavy rainfall that awaited him. It was almost ignorable when he was indoors, a distant buzz that could only unsettle him if he didn’t have anything to focus on. Walking around in it with only a flimsy umbrella to protect him from the downpour, however, left him significantly more rattled. It did very little to insulate him from the awful sound, and left him feeling disconnected enough to do things along the lines of nearly walking into traffic, and nearly drowning himself on abandoned beaches.

He lingered near the exit for longer than he should have, hesitation thickening his blood to a tarry consistency. Missing school wasn’t an option—he’d just have to pray that the rain let up as the day went on, and that All Might didn’t decide to hold class outdoors for some sort of ‘bad weather’ training. Izuku heaved a sigh because that was exactly the kind of thing All Might would do, resignation clouding around him as he opened his umbrella and made his way out into the pouring rain. After everything that was going on he doubted Iida was in any state to walk with him to school, and as much as he completely understood, the thought still made loneliness pang in his chest—

"Midoriya."

Izuku's nerves, having already been wound tight by the pounding white noise of rain and the awful headline he was still struggling to wrap his head around, burst with fright when his name was called out of nowhere. He jumped in shock, flinching so hard that he managed to whack himself in the face with the handle of his umbrella. He yelped in pain, sacrificing one hand to rub at his unblemished cheek to soothe the ache.

"...Is this a bad time?" The voice that Izuku barely even recognized as Todoroki's piped up again, and he followed the source of it to find his classmate stood underneath his own umbrella, his posture uncomfortably stiff and his tone of voice awkwardly concerned.

"Y-you-I, no, y-you're fine, w-why, wh-what are you-um, w-what did yo-you need?" Izuku's words dripped out of him in a messy pulp, his head fuzzed over with static that made it difficult to properly construct sentences. He quivered for a moment under Todoroki's gaze, struggling to read through his neutral expression.

"I wanted to speak with you, about the Sport's Festival. Or, rather.. about what you said to me during it." Todoroki's expression shifted towards vague discomfort, before he abruptly turned to begin walking away from the station.

Izuku stared after him in bewilderment for half a second before he rushed to catch up, his sneakers clapping against the wet sidewalk. "I-I, uhm-a-about that-I r-really hope I wasn't... s-speaking out of turn, or p-pushing your boundaries o-or anything. I-I'm really s-sorry if I-"

"You did push my boundaries," Todoroki interrupted, his voice raised slightly to be heard over the rainfall. "And I wanted to thank you for it. You said some things that I think I needed to hear." He glanced over his shoulder, his eyes piercing and humorless. "So I suppose I can forgive you this one time."

Izuku nearly tripped over his own feet, stricken by the sheer impact of Todoroki's words. He hunched his shoulders together, burying himself as deeply into the fabric of his scarf as possible while his heart raced in his chest. "I-I'm so-sorry-"

"Ah," Todoroki cut in again, something almost like embarrassment shifting on his face, "that was supposed to be a joke. I really do want to thank you for... everything you said. It.. you've given me a lot to think about." He turned away too quickly for Izuku to get another glimpse at his expression, but there was something soft and grateful in his voice, tinged with a weariness he'd never revealed
"O-oh," Izuku mumbled faintly, a part of his thought process preoccupied with how Todoroki's delivery left quite a bit to be desired. "I-I'm really glad I c-could help. I-what I said before... y-you, if you ever want to t-talk, I promise to listen." He relaxed a little from his defensive hunch, relief helping to erode the shores of static that boxed him in. He struggled to study the lines of Todoroki's shoulders, but failed to find any tell of what his classmate might be thinking.

"You are very kind, Midoriya," Todoroki stated, as though it were an obvious fact that brokered no debate. It made Izuku's face prickle with warmth and his chest run cool with relief; he'd been dreading the fallout of the Sport's Festival, and knowing Todoroki held no ill will towards him helped ease some of that pressure.

Izuku suddenly realized the opportunity he'd been presented with, since Todoroki had confirmed for him that everything was alright between them. "H-hey, uhm... T-Todoroki?" He shrank in on himself a little when his classmate glanced back at him, his expression just barely flickering with curiosity. "I-I... would you like to, um-i-if you're not busy, you-we c-could eat l-lunch to-together? I'm-it's o-okay if you d-don't want to or-or you have something else g-going on, I j-just, if you ever changed your mind th-the offer is always open-"

"If.. you don't feel like I'd be intruding, then.. sure." Todoroki's voice cut through Izuku's rambling wall of noise, sounding just faintly unsure of himself. He didn't offer any expression for Izuku to read, which left him floundering for a response that wouldn't be-insulting, or something.

"N-no, not at all! You-I-I'm sure it'll be fine!" Izuku's attempt at sounding reassuring ended up more frantic than anything, which probably wouldn't do much to inspire confidence that it wasn't a big deal. It was actually a somewhat poor time, considering the situation with Iida and the fact that Kirishima might still have a chip on his shoulder about how Todoroki had acted before the festival began but he couldn't exactly rescind the offer just after making it that'd be incredibly rude and would likely ruin whatever chance he had at befriending Todoroki or at least becoming acquaintances with him-

"Your mumbling isn't very reassuring, considering you usually do it when you're nervous." Todoroki's voice broke him from his (apparently audible) thoughts, and Izuku ducked his head in embarrassment. "I saw the news this morning. If this is a poor time, I won't take any offense. We could simply have lunch another time." Todoroki turned to catch his eye, the corner of his mouth pulled into something that could have been called a smile. "So don't start apologizing, okay?"

"I-I, yeah. S-so-" Izuku clamped down on the reflexive apology, and flashed what he hoped was a coherent smile. U.A.'s campus was visible just down the road, windows grey and opaque from the reflection of the gloomy weather. His anxiety eased a little, both at the thought of escaping the rain and the knowledge of Todoroki's understanding. "A-another time."

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Katsuki Bakugou was not a happy camper (which was an infuriating travesty in its own right because he loved camping) when school rolled back around, the downpour of Thursday morning feeling like nothing more than an extension of his irritation over the Sport's Festival. The whole thing had turned into a fucking joke, all because of the two most infuriating fuckheads he'd ever had the displeasure of knowing: that Icyhot bastard and fucking Izuku.

His final match still felt like a charred, sizzling wound that he couldn't help but poke at, each revisiting of it making him clench his teeth until his jaw ached. That fucking freezerburn fucknut had ruined everything, made the moment that should have been Katsuki's triumph into a fucking circus show of bullshit. The look on half-and-half's face when Kasuki had nailed him in the side of his head before.
with that worthless medal had almost made him feel better, but being physically restrained by All Might before he could follow up by strangling the stupid bastard had soured that, too.

He just didn't understand why-why had Izuku been good enough to see Icyhot's fire, to be the only one to fight a real match against the supposed strongest student in their class? Why had he gotten lucky with his opponents, fighting only people that were at a disadvantage, those fucking assholes that had still given him a run for his money, made him work for a victory even when he had the upper hand? Fucking Uraraka had pursued him with such dogged determination to win that he'd almost been convinced she would, when debris rained from the sky and cut at his face, her fingers coming inches away from sending him into the fucking stratosphere, like she always threatened.

And of course he'd had to fight that fucking asshole with sharp teeth and stupid hair, the one that Izuku mooned over with starstruck eyes-Katsuki was stillsmarting from the half finished throw that bastard had snagged him with, barely able to avoid being pile-driven into the concrete like the worthless imitator he'd obliterated in his previous match.

Even the dipshit bird freak had put up a fight, his stupid weird chest-demon thing forcing him into overusing his Quirk until his fingers locked up with crippling pain, the muscles in his arms strained to their limit. It made him furious to know, so furious-but that bird guy could have won, if Katsuki hadn't fucking put a megaton of explosives into it in the cavalry battle and weakened it for their match. And even after all that, after Katsuki had refused to see Recovery Girl because he was already running on nothing but fumes and fury, Todoroki had still fucking lost.

It felt like fucking pity, being pitted against an opponent only using half his strength, still fucking mooring over his fight against Izuku with angsty sighs like a fucking moron. Standing on that podium after he'd been knocked out, after he'd screamed himself raw in that fucking bastard's face to fight, to fucking prove he deserved to be there-

It had hurt. Katsuki hadn't felt like a winner. He'd felt lucky, like everything had lined up to give him the path of least resistance. He knew that if Izuku had been the one facing him in the final match, staring at him with those big fucking eyes that never looked angry at him, not like he deserved, always so full of empathy and compassion, his fear was gone and even though Katsuki knew it was better that way-he knew he would have lost.

Katsuki had gotten lucky, because he wasn't better than everyone else. He wouldn't have even tried his best-he would have frozen up, cowed by that fucking scar that was his fault, his fault, the thing that kept him up at night with nightmares of bloody teeth and static voices caressing his name, the fear of glassy green eyes, what could have been. He would have lost, and he would have fucking deserved it, too.

And as a result of all that frustration and anger (which his therapist had fucking failed at unraveling in time that fucking hack shrink whoever gave him his PHD should be burned at the stake) he'd been in a.. less than approachable mood. His own reflection had pissed him off, which had been a sure sign that the rest of the day would be fucking shitty. Whatever-it wasn't like anyone really tried to talk to him anyway, except fucking Sticky Elbows and Cosplay Horns. That fucking walking corpse with purple hair had smirked at him, but Katsuki still didn't understand what his deal was, so he didn't count.

They steered well clear of him when he rolled into class like a super cell thunderstorm, his abysmal mood wrapped around him like a net of thorns. He'd bristled further when Izuku walked in, chatting up his friends (he had friends and Katsuki couldn't even call that a role reversal because the fucking losers that fawned over him in middle school weren't friends) before he stopped over at Stupid Glasses's desk, all somber and soft eyed.
Katsuki had seen the news that morning, so he wasn't ignorant of what they were talking about, even if he couldn't hear it. He had no frame of reference for whatever Engine Fuck was feeling, but judging by how gently Izuku took his hand and the way Uraraka embraced him with a stupid sad sack look on her face, he guessed it was pretty shitty. Whatever-Shitty Glasses hated him anyway, so there wouldn't be any point in saying anything to him, even if Katsuki had been able to offer something other than worthless platitudes in the first place.

Katsuki tensed up when shitty Izuku turned his way, gritting his teeth and forcing himself not to break eye contact when he saw that fucking scar. He curled his lips in a snarl when that dipshit nerd opened his mouth to say something stupid, and hurried to cut him off. "Don't fucking come over here with your shitty simpering nonsense, asshole. I know you'll probably try to fucking congratulate me or something equally idiotic, and I don't wanna hear it. I'm already fucking pissed at you-you've gotta be the only fucking moron in the world that can fuck up winning-so unless you have something actually important to say, go away."

He didn't dare to flinch when Izuku faltered, that stupid fucking wobbly smile barely hanging onto his face. "S..sorry for b-bothering you, Ka-Kacchan," he whispered, his tone lacking the fear that had been half of their relationship for nearly ten years. He barely even sounded disappointed—it was all contrite bullshit that made Katsuki feel like he'd swallowed hot coals.

He pointedly glanced away and didn't watch the idiot shuffle back to his desk, glaring holes into the surface of his desk instead. He didn't fucking get why Izuku kept trying to—what, be nice to him? Even that was different from when they were kids, and Katsuki had been stupid enough to believe everything made sense. But everything was different, and he was stuck with the Izuku that had friends and smiled despite the mark on his face and looked at Katsuki like-like something else, something that didn't hurt him or torment him.

And Katsuki found those looks unbearable in a completely different way than before. It used to be that he could physically feel the little fucker's gaze on him; his skin itched and crawled and it made him angry, an anger he could barely pinpoint as anything other than 'hating fucking Deku'. Just being around Izuku had been enough to enrage him, sending him into a violent spiral of negativity every time they were anywhere near each other. He didn't understand why it was different, but he at least knew enough to pin down the exact difference, to know why being subjected to wide green eyes and tentative smiles and hopeful utterances of his nickname was so awful.

It was because he didn't deserve it. He didn't deserve Izuku's forgiveness, he'd written that fucking stupid note for a reason and that thickheaded bastard had the fucking audacity to offer it anyway. He acted like he wasn't the reason Katsuki could barely sleep some nights, the reason he had to see a fucking therapist, the reason he had no idea what his place in the world was anymore-

"Morning," came the tired drone of the Greasy Bastard, his voice carrying through the open doorway as he stalked inside. He didn't have that back brace he'd been wearing, but his posture was still a little stiff. Katsuki ignored the rest of the kiss-asses bleating back at him, waiting for the prick to say what was going on. The one good thing about him was that he usually got to the point pretty quickly.

"Today's class is important," the unkempt asshole continued, sounding as unenthusiastic as possible, "it's on hero informatics." Katsuki waited half a second for him to fucking spit it out, gritting his teeth and stamping down on the urge to bellow when the bastard just stood there, watching the rest of his worthless classmates squirm in anxiety. "...Which means you need code names." Fuck, was it really that hard not to act like a sadistic asshole?

Katuski tuned out the rest of the class as he focused on the actual important information. Hero names... he'd never been great at naming things, but he'd thought long and hard about what he
wanted to use as his own name. He'd even been coaxed into sharing it with his dumb ass therapist, who hadn't really said anything except that it was *creative*. Creative didn't mean *good*, but it was the only thing Katsuki didn't hate after weeks of trying to come up with a name, so his only choice was to bite the bullet.

Katsuki clenched his fingers against his jaw as the Greasy Prick yammered on and on about draft picks and other shit he'd already explained in their last class, only tuning back in when he actually mentioned something *important*: the offers they'd received. He glared pointedly at the board as the list appeared, from most offers to least. He nearly bit off his own tongue when he saw Todoroki's name at the top, dwarfing him with over a thousand more offers. Whatever, *whatever*, he'd still gotten more than everyone else, including Izuku, who had a paltry '1' hovering next to his name.

He ignored the rest of the losers bemoaning their lack of offers, as if it was somehow someone else's fault that they weren't impressive enough to be noticed. He twitched when that idiot with the weird earlobes pointed out the *obvious* that Todoroki had gotten more offers than him, his temper flaring the moment that fucking electric piece of shit opened his mouth.

"Guess the pros realized Bakugou was a lunatic, after he tried to strangle Todoroki with his own medal." His fucking voice was so infuriating, that smarmy confidence and the caustic distaste lurking underneath, like Katsuki was something foul he'd eaten.

He bit down on the urge to scream, his chest tight and hot as he whispered a trembling "Fuck you, asshole," under his breath. He knew that fucking greasy asshole was keeping a close eye on him—if he blew up in class, he'd have hell to pay. He briefly imagined wrapping his medal around that blond fucker's neck instead, and pulling so tight his stupid fucking head came off. It didn't help.

"Regardless of the offers shown, you'll all be participating in an internship. The USJ may have given you some raw experience with fighting villains, but proper field experience is invaluable. You'll learn a lot more from working under actual pros. Your codenames aren't set in stone, but don't screw around, otherwise-"

The door to the classroom slid open as Midnight entered with a flourish, her over the top entrance barely even registering on Katsuki's radar. ":-You might end up with something absolutely indecent! The names you pick today could stick with you for the rest of your careers, so be sure not to pick anything out of sorts!"

Aizawa barely even blinked as she barged into the room, vacating the space behind his desk to grab his atrocious sleeping bag off the floor. "Right. Midnight will have the final say on your code names, since it's... not really my thing. Remember, hero names are important. They serve to represent both your brand and your ideals, the kind of hero you aspire to be. Don't screw it up." The greasy shithead fixed them all with a tired-eyed glare before crawling into his sleeping bag like the fucking vagrant he was.

Katsuki snagged the stack of whiteboards he was given, passing the rest of them over his shoulder and uncapping the marker with his teeth. He glared down at the blank surface for a few moments, his fingers tight around the marker. Whatever, it wasn't like he could come up with anything better on the spot. He scrawled over the board with the squeak of marker ink, his teeth clenched in concentration.

His fingers tightened on the edge of the whiteboard as Midnight announced that they'd be *sharing* their names (what the fuck, were they in fucking preschool or something?), suddenly filled with an even deeper loathing for the name he'd stuck himself with. But it wasn't like he had anything else, and he'd actually *tried* to come up with something instead of half-assing it. He stared down at it as the rest of the idiots shared their stupid shitty names, tracing the characters over and over again until
he could see them behind his eyelids when he blinked.

The number of students that hadn't gone dwindled by the second, and Katsuki gritted his teeth before he decided to just get it over with. He stood from his desk with a clatter, stomping up to the front of the room and hesitating for half a second before he slammed the whiteboard down, his name facing outwards. "Master of Deathstruction," he bit out, his teeth bared in a snarl, daring anyone to fucking say a word-

"I'm going to say no," Midnight's voice rang out, making Katsuki's fingers tighten around the edge of the board until his knuckles turned white. "That's a little too violent."

Katsuki bit his tongue to stifle an outburst, it didn't matter it didn't matter he didn't fucking care, even if it was the only name he even half liked, it didn't- "Hey Bakugou, how about you be the Mad Bomber instead?" That fucking electric fuck called out, a fucking stupid smirk on his face and a handful of laughs echoing around him.

Katsuki clutched the whiteboard against his chest until the marker smeared on his uniform, overcome with the same hot, tightening sensation in his chest that made him feel fucking awful. He stalked back to his desk, dropping the whiteboard with a clatter and pressing his forearms hard against the desk top, so he wouldn't be tempted to fling the board at that fucking asshole. He stared down at the wood grain on his desk until his eyes unfocused, because it didn't fucking matter what anyone thought, he'd come up with-something, something even better-

"Really?" Katsuki's head snapped up so he could glare molten fury at the purple haired dipshit strolling past his desk, who regarded him with barely more than a smirk. "Should've just gone with Napalm, or something. Oh well; second time's the charm, right?"

Katsuki went completely still as Shinsou breezed past him towards the front of the classroom, his heart pounding in his chest as a single word ricocheted around inside his head. He glanced back down at his whiteboard, the previous attempt smeared until it was completely illegible. Napalm, huh? --

Izuku shifted anxiously in his seat as his gaze flickered between the hero name staring up at him from his whiteboard, and Shinsou's slow gait up to the front of the room. He'd been filled with awestruck excitement to hear the names his classmates had come up with (hearing Kirishima's admiration for a hero he looked up to and his passion to follow in those footsteps had brought tears to his eyes) but the slow crawl of anxiety had slowly twined around him, making him second guess himself. It really wasn't anything new, but knowing it was a symptom of his anxiety didn't make it much easier to ignore the intrusive thoughts whispering about how awful his chosen name was, that he shouldn't even bother.

But he couldn't-he wasn't going to give up. Maybe it was true that he was still finding himself, still struggling to figure out who he really was, but he also had a better grasp of who he wanted to be. He'd tempered his aspirations, shaved them down and smoothed them over from a wild, distant desire to be a hero into something more concrete. He finally knew what kind of hero he wanted to be, the image he hoped to portray, the ideals he hoped to inspire in others. He wasn't the same person he'd been before U.A. He wasn't going to give up anymore.

Izuku glanced up as Shinsou placed his board against the surface of the desk with a loud 'clack', his lips tightly sealed and his eyes narrowed as if daring anyone to comment on the 'Trick Question' that shone with fresh marker ink.

Midnight peered over his name critically, her expression thoughtful. "A bit cumbersome to use on the field, but it's certainly creative! If you can come up with some shorthand for it, then you're golden!" Shinsou nodded mildly at her before trudging off, but Izuku could see the way his shoulders
loosened with relief.

Izuku's thoughts clouded his head as Uraraka went up next, looking almost as nervous as he felt. His heart eased a little just from the sight of her relief over Midnight's approval of 'Uravity', which he absolutely mirrored—he'd have to gush about how cool everyone's names were later on. Maybe after he was done feeling like he'd throw up from nerves.

Whatever relief he'd acquired by proxy from Uraraka swiftly shriveled up when Iida wordlessly strode to the front of the room, his expression carefully blank. Izuku hadn't had much of a chance to speak with him yet, save for a brief moment before classes began where Iida assured him everything was alright, and apologized for not answering his text. He had seemed sincere, but Izuku couldn't help feeling a distant unease prickle at the back of his head when Iida presented his placeholder hero name without a sound, his normally impeccable handwriting looking uneven. He-it'd be better to speak to him after classes, when he could avoid pressing Iida in front of everyone else. The last thing he wanted to do was push too hard.

"Midoriya? Are you ready to present your name?" Midnight's voice cut through his somber musings, and Izuku forced himself to focus on the present. He stumbled slightly as he slipped from his seat, shrinking in on himself when he became the center of attention. He clutched the whiteboard tightly against his chest, his heart thundering in his throat. He shuffled behind Mr. Aizawa's desk, his head spinning as his every insecurity emerged to crowd his rib cage, compressing the air out of his lungs. He tapped the bottom of his board against the desk before he could choke, barely resisting the urge to squeeze his eyes shut.

"The Pick-Me-Up hero, Starburst." The words left Izuku in a rush of air that emptied his lungs, absolving him of his insecurity and laying flat the carefully cherished efforts of his identity. He didn't even dare to blink, staring at a far point on the wall that allowed him only a glance of Uraraka's encouraging smile and Kirishima's shining grin.

Midnight eyed him over for a nerve wracking moment, making a contemplative sound as he trembled in place. "Interesting, and unexpected. I imagine there's a reason for that name other than aesthetic, yes? A hero's name is more than just a title, after all."

Izuku swallowed back the urge to balk in horror, attempting to gently unwind the knot in his throat so that he could actually force words past it. "Y-yeah, I g-guess it, uhm-makes more sense wi-with the costume.. I-Starburst i-is the kind of hero th-that I admire the most. Starburst is s-someone that others look t-to with relief and hope, so-someone with the power to take away f-fear, just by b-being there. St-Starburst can, can make a-any situation brighter, can p-protect those in danger and-and inspire confidence in them." Izuku paused and took a short breath, words flowing just a little easier, his voice soft and wobbling and bolstered by his passion. "I-I... I'm not Starburst, not yet at least. B-but-that's th-the hero I aspire to be. A-and, maybe one day, I-I'll get there." Izuku quickly blinked away the beads of moisture building in the corners of his eyes, growing more flustered the longer silence followed his words. "I-I hope th-that makes sense, a-again it really-you n-need the costume t-t-to uh, t-tie it together."

"Very well thought out, Midoriya!" Midnight praised, her voice dwarfing his meek mumbling, "And very inspiring, too. I approve!" Izuku flushed up to his ears when there was a smattering of applause (the majority of which was provided by a brightly beaming Uraraka and Kirishima, who was openly crying 'manly' tears), scurrying back to his desk with a tiny note of happiness singing in his chest.

Izuku listened with half an ear as Kacchan stormed back up to the front of the room and barked out the name 'Napalm', looking completely out of the loop when Midnight commented on his clever wordplay. He'd reached another milestone, another checkpoint towards being the type of hero he'd
always dreamed of: Izuku Midoriya, the Hero Starburst. He only hoped he could live up to the name.
"Y-you wanted to s-see me, sir?" Izuku's voice barely managed to echo off the walls of the corridor leading to the bathrooms, his anxiety coming through clear in his trembling words. It had already reached its peak a few minutes earlier, when he realized his single offer had come from Endeavor's hero agency, and having All Might pull him out of class during lunch with that twitching smile on his face had only exacerbated it.

His teacher was facing the other direction, allowing Izuku only a glimpse of the rictus grin on his face. "Yes, I did. You've... gotten an offer, from a pro hero. His name is... Gran Torino." All Might turned just enough to meet Izuku's gaze, his excitement snuffed when he noticed the sweat beading on All Might's forehead, and the dread knocking behind his teeth.

Izuku's eyebrows knitted together in concentration as he ran the name through his head, his latent excitement dwindling further when he only drew a blank. "G..Gran Torino? I-I've never heard of a h-hero by that name before."

All Might cleared his throat, sounding like he'd somehow lodged an entire cactus in it. "No, I imagine you haven't. He was only on the scene for one year, when he taught at U.A. as my homeroom teacher. Taught me everything he knew. He knows about my power, as well; the man trained me to use it himself."

Izuku's eyes widened steadily, from an even mix of 'holy crap the hero that taught All Might had sent in an offer for him', and his confusion regarding All Might's incredibly shaken demeanor. Clearly, something about the situation was too good to be true. "S-sir? Is-d-do you have any idea w-why he'd send me an offer?"

All Might's grin twitched erratically, his voice coming out with none of the confidence Izuku had come to expect from his hero form. "Well, I... may have happened to mention to him that I was looking for a successor. And that you were, you know-someone I had my eye on. It's possible he wanted to-judge your potential himself!"

Izuku covered his mouth to stifle a yelp of shock at the look of naked horror on All Might's face, his eyes so wide he could barely blink. "Of course, you-you should think hard about where you want to intern! Gran Torino-" All Might actually winced just saying the name how scary was this guy, "well, he might be a little... intense, for you. I doubt old age has mellowed him out one bit," All Might muttered more to himself, his deep set eyes looking distinctly haunted. "Of course, you're not obligated to take his offer! You have many options available to you; didn't you get another offer, after all?"

Izuku had the distinct feeling that all of reality was conspiring against him. "Y-yeah. Fr-from... from Endeavor." It figured that his only offers would lead to either being set on fire by one of the strongest heroes alive that he'd been stupid enough to provoke, or having to face a mysterious pro that was apparently scary enough to make All Might himself shake in his boots.

"...Oh. Well-it'd be unprofessional of me to influence your decision..." All Might trailed off, clearly conflicted about something- "Which is why this will be off the record." Or maybe not as conflicted as Izuku had thought. "Gran Torino helped me learn to use my power in combat, without overdoing things. It's... possible he could help you with regulating your own Quirk."

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"Here's the address, just in case. Of course, Endeavor is a very accomplished hero, and there are many fine agencies willing to take on interns this year! So-so be sure to think it over!"
Izuku accepted the paper like it might explode if he handled it without enough care, his mind whirring with possibilities. Someone that could teach him to regulate Living Nightmare... "I-I will, sir. Th-thank you very much."

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Izuku Midoriya clutched the bulky steel briefcase containing his newly constructed costume, nearly vibrating out of his skin from a combination of his excitement over said costume and his mounting anxiety in the face of his internship, which was only minutes away. At the time, Izuku had been as sure as he could possibly be that Gran Torino was the right hero to choose, but as the seconds ticked away his self-doubt reared its ugly head. But it was too late to second guess his decision, Izuku firmly reminded himself. He'd simply have to do his best to learn from Gran Torino. But that wasn't the only source of his anxiety; there was... something else, as well.

Izuku jumped a little as Mr. Aizawa's dismissal broke him from his daze, blinking and glancing around as his classmates dispersed to board their own transits. He waved at Tokoyami before he left, and received a bow of a feathery head in return. He'd apparently gotten an offer from an underground pro called 'Grave Keeper', which led Izuku to wonder if his friend had chosen that offer for aesthetic alone. He knew Tokoyami was pretty serious about hero work... but he was more or less equally serious about maintaining his image. Hopefully his internship would be good for him.

Thankful for the station being mostly empty in the middle of a weekday, Izuku scrambled through the gaggle of his classmates in pursuit of a head of navy blue hair, desperate to catch the primary source of his unease. His voice rose in his throat, Iida's name on his tongue-

"Heeey, Iida! Wait up!" Uraraka's voice cut through the moderate background noise that permeated the station, loud enough to both bring Iida to a halt and startle Izuku badly enough that he almost tripped over his own feet.

Izuku scurried over to Uraraka's side the moment she entered his field of vision, having been obscured by load bearing pillars and the thinning crowd of their classmates. Iida faced directly away from them, his shoulders drawn so tight Izuku was worried they would snap, and his normally rigid posture amped up until he was statuesque.

Uraraka side eyed Izuku as if she hadn't expected him to be there, before clearing her throat. "I-we just wanted to make sure you were alright. You know you can talk to us, right?" Izuku mumbled a quiet 'y-yeah' to try and back her up, though it sounded less confident than he actually felt.

Iida turned to face them, stiff as a clockwork toy. His fingers were tight around the handle of his costume case, and his expression was marred by a closed lipped smile. "..Yes, I know," he uttered unconvincingly, his normally sharp eyes dull and bloodshot behind his glasses. Izuku was impaled by a spike of panic when Iida simply about-faced to continue walking briskly away, concern bleating in alarm within his chest.

Before he even knew what he was doing, Izuku rushed forward to lock his hand around Iida's wrist, a paltry "W-wait!" escaping him. He faltered for half a moment when Iida locked in place, but forced his hesitance back with a burst of will. He wouldn't run from the things he had to face. "I-I.. w-we're all really wo-worried about you, Iida. Y-you haven't been yourself lately. I-um, i-if things are-if you f-feel like you need m-more time, I'm sure we-you can talk to Mr. Aizawa, and-postpone your i-internship if you n-need to. N-nobody would blame you. W-we.."

Izuku blinked back the sheen of tears that welled in his eyes, choking on the heat of fear and concern. "W-we just want to d-do whatever we can to make sure you're al-alright." He unwound his fingers from their desperate grip on Iida's wrist, hand falling limply at his side. He forced himself not to cower away and avert his gaze when Iida's head turned back, his glasses flashing for a moment
"...Your concern is very much appreciated. You're both dear friends, truly. I just.. need a little time, is all. So please, don't worry yourselves, alright? Everything will be fine." Iida's lips curved into a much more natural looking smile, small and private but no less warm for it. He still looked tired, his eyes dulled, but he'd lost the glassy sheen that had consumed them.

"A-alright.. I-good luck w-with your internship. S-see you soon." Izuku raised a hand to wave farewell, hearing a quiet 'Bye, Iida!' emerge from Uraraka. Iida gave them a stiff wave and a bow of his head in return, before he resumed power walking towards his train. For all intents and purposes, he seemed as alright as he could be, with his brother in the hospital. He was probably just a little stressed with everything else happening on top of that, and was feeling out of sorts. It made perfect sense. But even so, watching him walk away... Izuku couldn't shake the tiny, festering dread that something was wrong.

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The mid-morning sun beat down with a vigor that had been lacking in past weeks, warming the air to the point where Izuku half considered removing his uniform jacket. It wasn't quite stifling yet, but the combination of mild heat with his anxiety was enough to lead to clammy palms, softening the paper map to Gran Torino's address. Gran Torino... Izuku hadn't ever heard of him, which was practically unthinkable considering his connection to All Might. It would have made more sense if Gran Torino hadn't been an officially registered educator at the world's most esteemed hero academy, but taking that into account with the absolute dearth of information about him was... foreboding.

It didn't help that his meeting of a mysterious hero that had not only taught All Might, but was also capable of reducing the world's greatest hero into a shaking mess of nerves was congruent with a week long venture away from any and all familiarity that he'd come to rely on. An entire week away from home, away from U.A., away from his friends—it was one of the few times Izuku could ever remember feeling justified in his anxiety.

Logically, he knew that his internship wouldn't be some forced isolation equivalent—he had his phone, so he could text and call his friends or his mother whenever he needed to, as well as a number to call the school in case of any emergency. He also had more than enough pocket money for transit, along with his terminal pass that had more than enough money on it to take him wherever he needed to go. He had absolutely everything he needed that could possibly fit inside his backpack.

He also had his costume, which was way heavier than he'd expected it to be because the case he'd carried his original costume in hadn't been nearly as hard to lug around. But as the one who designed it (in collaboration with the support course) as well as the one who commissioned it (from the support course), Izuku only had himself to blame. He only hoped it wouldn't be too heavy to move around in comfortably. He'd put so much thought and care into making sure it would elevate 'Starburst' from a formless ideal into a physical goal, something more attainable than his endless yearning to become a hero. He finally had a real chance, the opportunity to become something more than the awful curse of Living Nightmare. He really could become a hero.

And his internship was an important step towards that. He just had to... Izuku glanced down at the map in his grasp again, squinting to make sure he was reading the address correctly. He was on the right street, but—he glanced up to regard a squat, four story derelict apartment, surrounded on all sides save the narrow entrance by tall fencing painted in hazard symbols. Izuku took a hesitant step forward, and proceeded to simultaneously leap out of his own skin and scream at such a shrill pitch that it hurt his own ears when a chunk of railing plummeted off the roof, crashing to the concrete with a deafening clatter.

Izuul stared in stunned silence at the cloud of dust engulfing the impact, failing both to unstick his
breath from where it had caught in his throat, and calm the frantic thumping of his heart."T-t-th- there's n-no way this is the pla-place, r-right?" He glanced back at the address in his shaking hand, but the address (though smudged by his sweaty palms) hadn't changed at all.

He briefly considered using his briefcase as an impromptu helmet in case of any other falling debris, but it was heavy enough that it'd probably cause more harm than anything. Izuku hastily sucked in a lungful of air and ignored the static whine in his ears, creeping up through the entrance to strike his knuckles against the aged wooden door.

"H-hello? M-Mr. Torino, s-sir? I-thi-this is Izuku Midoriya, fr-from U.A.! I-I'm here about the internship?" He waited nervously for a response, his anxiety thickening exponentially as silence followed. Maybe he just.. hadn't knocked hard enough?

Izuku knocked on the door as loudly as he dared, wincing at the crack of bony knuckles on wood. "H-hello! I-a-are you in there, Mr. T-Torino?" After another long bout of silence, Izuku reached for the handle in the aims of rattling the door, only to find himself surprised when it was completely unlocked. That was.. that was definitely not a good thing. He burned with the urge to call up U.A., and hopefully get in touch with All Might, or Mr. Aizawa about the situation, but..

But what if Gran Torino was hurt? What if someone had broken in, and he'd been unaware or unable to defend himself? He couldn't see any signs of forced entry on the door, but it was equally possible the lock had been picked, or Gran Torino had merely forgotten to lock it behind himself. He-All Might had said he was a pro hero, but that was probably decades ago-

Overcome with the hysterical panic that something might have gone horribly wrong, Izuku flung the door open and scurried inside, immediately struck by the lack of lights that turned the entrance dim and shadowy. "M-Mr. Torino sir, a-are you-" Izuku's costume case slipped from his limp fingers, clattering loudly against the tile floor. His pupils blew wide, horror rushing through him in a tidal wave of clinging tar.

Blood-there was a pool of blood, an old man lying in a pool of blood unresponsive he was dead Gran Torino was dead--Izuku slapped a hand over his mouth to stifle a scream, legs shaking like leaves in a stiff autumn breeze. But-wait, something was-Izuku couldn't smell blood. Blood had such a thick, nauseating stench (that he couldn't scrub from his brain no matter how hard he tried), one that was completely absent from the situation.

Okay, Izuku amended, he probably wasn't dead. But he was still face down on the floor in a puddle of something (sriracha? ketchup?), and that was definitely not good. "S-sir, are-are yo-you okay?!" He rushed forward maybe two and a half strides before Gran Torino abruptly sat up, a wide, vacant grin on his face that made the corners of his mask crinkle.

"Oh, I'm fine!" He sprung to his feet with surprising dexterity for someone that immediately stooped over to lean on a knobbly wooden cane, looking absolutely minuscule even compared to Izuku's lacking height. "I was carrying some dinner and must've tripped on my own feet! Clumsy me!"

Izuku glanced over the former pro to try and confirm that he was really uninjured, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. "A-are you really sure you're okay, s-sir? You-a-are you in any pain? I-is there-sh-should-do you h-have a c-caretaker I could call, m-maybe?" It felt rude to assume Gran Torino was-incapable, or something of that nature, but he had to make sure the man was actually okay, even if it meant slighting him unintentionally.

Gran Torino froze him on the spot with a look that appeared impossibly shrewd in conjunction with his mask, his lips pursed for a moment before he spread them back in that same empty grin. "Eh, what did you say your name was, sonny?"
"I-Izuku Midoriya, s-sir. F-from U.A.," he tacked on at the end, growing increasingly worried for the state of Gran Torino's mental faculties. Was-had he sent the invite by mistake? It didn't seem very plausible, but equally implausible was the image of a mysterious pro that could strike fear in All Might lining up with the stooped old man smiling obliviously in front of him.

"..Toshinori?" Izuku blanched at the clueless, genial smile pointed in his general direction, struck with the fear that Gran Torino really was senile, and had just-what, been left by himself, with nobody to help him? That was-he had to call All Might, make sure he knew his old teacher was unfit to live by himself.

"I.. uhm, p-please excuse me, s-sir, I.. n-need to make a call really q-quick." Izuku smiled as calmly as he could manage, which turned out a malformed, misaligned grimace of barely contained horror. He fished his phone out of his pocket, stepping over to the still open door and thumbing towards his contacts. It was awful that Gran Torino had been left alone in such a state for so long, but all he could do was inform All Might so that he could be taken care of-

Izuku glanced over at the sound of metal latches opening, and jumped at the sight of Gran Torino digging through his costume case. He called out hastily, his voice cracking from his attempt to sound less flustered than he felt. "S-s-sir that's m-my costume, p-please don't-"

"How about you hit me with that Quirk of yours? Show me if you've got a handle on it or not." Gran Torino's voice had leveled out from the whimsical, meandering cadence he'd spoken in before, hands steady as he rifled through Izuku's case. "Pretty good costume; pragmatically designed. Bit too much fluff for my taste, though." He glanced sharply over his shoulder, his stare piercing Izuku's bones and forcing a flinch out of him. "Well, where's that attack?"

"E..excuse me?" Izuku's throat was dry, his head spinning in confusion. Was Gran Torino senile or not? Was it not a total degradation of his mental faculties, and he'd just had an episode when Izuku walked in? But the change in his demeanor was so fluid and immediate, with none of the confusion Izuku would expect from someone dealing with Alzheimer's, or dementia.

Gran Torino regarded him for a long moment, before he broke back out into his mindless grin. "Oh hey, did you need something?" Izuku was thrown for a loop by the switch back to 'doddering old man', gears clicking in his head as he tried to make sense of what was going on, why was Gran Torino acting so strange, was.. was he really just-

Izuku's eyes widened, realization blossoming at the same moment a hot flush of humiliation seared the inside of his chest. Gran Torino was messing around with him. He wasn't senile, or injured-Izuku had been so concerned for his well being, but he was really just-his lower lip trembled with a sudden flare of hurt, undercut by rotten strings of anger. "I r-r-really do-don't appreciate you t-trying to trick me, s-sir. If-if this internship is j-just a j-joke to you, th-then say it, s-so I can sto-stop wasting my t-t-time." It hurt to spit words like venom, sour and unfamiliar on his tongue, but the thought that he was just being made fun of (so stupid, so stupid thinking it was in the past, wouldn't happen again) hurt even worse.

"Weell, looks like you're not totally spineless after all, are you? Still thick as a brick, but I've seen worse." Gran Torino regarded him with that same shrewd stare, his smile sharpening at the edges until it was biting. Izuku had half a moment to stare dumbly at him before he leaped through the air like a bullet, zipping with speed and dexterity that made Izuku's head spin.

He ricocheted off the walls, so fast it was a struggle to even see him do it, before he crunched to a halt in the space above the front door, gripping the crater he'd left in the plaster. "You're right about one thing-you need to stop wasting time, and show me what you can do." He flashed that same leering grin, almost as if he were aware of the cacophonous blaring inside Izuku's head because he
I had no idea what was going on anymore- "I watched you on TV, during the Sport's Festival-the way you swing your power around... so unrefined, so unaware, it's a miracle you even placed. It's no small wonder why All Might thinks you'd make a good successor-you're just as clueless and reckless as he is. It makes my skin crawl to watch you blunder around with that Quirk of yours, which means I'd better teach you how to use it. Get that costume on, kid, we're heading out. Can't have you knockin' this whole building down, now can we?"

Izuku's eyes widened gradually, his previous hurt twisted on its head with confusion and something he was hesitant to label relief. But as long as Gran Torino was taking things seriously.. "Y-Yes, sir," he whispered with equal parts dread and excitement, nerves jittering with the reality that he'd (hopefully) learn how to better control his power.

Izuku scurried over to his open costume case, pulling out the individual components and arranging them in the correct order to put them on. He'd already read the instruction booklet that had come with his costume, so he had an idea of how all the pieces fit together into a cohesive unit.

Izuku's heart leaped at the sight of shimmering yellow stars and gleaming silver and eye popping color that left him giddy like he hadn't been since he was a child. He pulled out the first part of his costume with shaking hands, rubbing his fingers along the fabric of his jumpsuit. It was primarily dyed a soft green, halfway between mint and pastel, with lines of shiny little lemonade yellow stars trailing down his biceps and thighs in neat lines on smaller, rounded rectangular patches of forest green. The fabric was thick and breathable, with a kevlar weave built into it that made it slightly bulky around his chest and a zipper running down the back. Elbow guards wrapped snugly around his arms, topped with thick pads decorated with rose pink star decals. A high collar brushed against his throat akin to a turtleneck, and pouches had been sewn into his waistline to carry essentials.

His gloves were thick and blocky, their ends stretching past his wrists until they ended halfway up his forearms. They were the same soft green, marked with taffy pink stars on his knuckles and darkened to a forest green on his fingers. The material was flame retardant, and also affixed with texturing on the palms and faces of his fingers to enhance his grip.

The next piece was a rounded piece of armor akin to a bolero, composed of plastic polymer meant to deflect and absorb moderately powerful blows. It slipped on over his jumpsuit, ending just below his ribs and fitted with an open collar that revealed a patch of his jumpsuit. It was decorated with a massive rose pink star decal over his chest, ending in five points and outlined with a darker taffy pink on a background of pastel mint and secondary forest green.

The second item was a pair of bulky steel toed, knee high boots composed primarily of a plastic polymer casing that gave them a smooth, rounded appearance. They were primarily colored in a bright mint green, decorated with a bright, rose pink, five pointed shooting star outlined in a darker taffy pink. It swept down the shin with a three lined trail composed of lemonade yellow, forest green, and taffy pink behind it. That shooting star decal was repeated on a pair of thicker armored knee guards located on the top of the boots, rounded at the tops to meet the mouth of the boots and ending in a shallow point just below his knees.

The tips of his boots were more like steel cudgels, curving over akin to the armored boots of a joust. They were polished to a mirror finish, treated with an alloy that allowed him to see his own unmarred reflection in them. The soles of his boots were built for shock absorption, which both gave him a slight heel and contributed to the weightiness of the boots overall.

The last major piece was his mask, composed of three separate parts that all slotted together, seamlessly. The first part was a slick white ceramic half-mask that contoured to the shape of his face and covered everything below his nose, resting high on his cheekbones and curving over his chin. It
was blast dampening (according to the support course), and had a layer over the surface that made it shiny and smooth like a whiteboard. It clasped together in the back with silver metal stars, and had a removable mouthpiece that allowed the rest of the mask to be worn independently. A bright pink translucent visor fitted over the top half of his face, capable of slotting into the lower portion but also coming with a smooth fabric strap that could allow him to wear it independently, or let it dangle around his neck.

All that remained were his accessories: he had a belt similar to the one from his original costume, composed of the same capture weapon alloy and decorated with a silver star clasp that could allow him more material to work with. He also had a pair of sliver bands that could link together into a pair of magnetic handcuffs, similarly decorated with stars and located on his left bicep and his right thigh. He also had an assortment of star shaped clips to thread through his hair, a set of shimmery silver face paint, and assorted water soluble markers that could be used to draw on the surface of his mask.

Izuku was in tears by the time he managed to force his trembling fingers to tighten his belt, filled to bursting with emotion as thick and sweet as strawberry syrup. He couldn't stop running his gloved fingers over his costume in disbelief, thumbing at the star clasps and the scrunched fabric of his elbow guards and failing to stem his tears. For the first time since entering U.A.-the first time in his life, Izuku felt like a hero.

"C'mon kid, wrap it up! We're burning daylight!" Gran Torino's voice was barely even dulled by the front door to the building, where he'd been waiting impatiently for Izuku to don his costume. He flushed and fumbled to close his costume case, hanging his mask from a loop on his belt and allowing his visor to rest around his neck. Excitement burned hot in his limbs, filling him with pleasant sparks that fueled his desire to learn, to push himself to the next step.

"C-coming, Mr. Torino!" He called back, rushing to open the door and embrace the shining sunlight. It helped to burn away the lingering traces of his anxiety, static quelled into silence by the sugar sweet rush pounding in his veins. If he could find a way to regulate his power-if he could fight to protect without causing serious harm-if Izuku could learn to use Living Nightmare to save others, absolve them of fear.. then it would all be worth it in the end.
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

Time for some fanart! :D
First up is the official design for the Starburst costume, from
https://flammenwerfer.tumblr.com/post/164991169357/new-daymare-costume-3cccc
who I'd like to thank again for helping me finalize the design!

And then some other wonderful fanart I received of the Starburst costume as well!
https://fingertolips.tumblr.com/post/164979197157/the-pick-me-up-hero-starburst-from
http://dawnieserix.tumblr.com/post/165008867519/finally-caught-up-on-
introspectiveinquisitors
http://oldseablues.tumblr.com/post/165073220953/the-pick-me-up-hero-starburst-flying-
away

Thank you all so much for the wonderful art, and everyone be sure to check out the
artists!!

The heavy heat of a fully risen midday sun beat down on the barely populated streets leading away
from Gran Torino's apartment building, uncovered by clouds and untethered by the chill of winter. It
was hot enough that Izuku was beginning to regret designing his costume to be so heavily insulated,
his armor practically cooking him alive. He was at least relieved of the mobile oven a full helmet
would have been, the shimmering star-point clips that framed his visor a minimal weight that
afforded maximum reassurance. Less reassuringly, the mirror-shine of his boots was blinding him
whenever he stepped at a certain angle, and he hadn't been able to figure out exactly what angle that
was. The original intention of the design was to help him see around corners, or blind opponents,
or... provide whatever other miscellaneous uses a mirror could have. Instead, they seemed to be very
good at causing him retinal damage. They at least managed to fill the space his stickers had occupied,
shining and bright and helping to lift the gloom around him.

Of course, he couldn't expect to be used to his costume immediately; it would take time to get used to
wearing, as well as using his accessories. He definitely wasn't used to the substantial weight of his
boots, which were probably a little more dangerous than he had initially intended. Kicking someone
would really hurt them. On the plus side, they were sturdy enough that he could probably drop a
cinder block on his foot and not feel it, which would be extremely useful for disaster rescue. He just
needed time to train with them, so they wouldn't feel so clunky and awkward to move around in.

And speaking of training.. "M-Mr. Torino, s-sir? W-where exactly are we going?" Izuku's voice
broke the stoic silence that had hardened between himself and Gran Torino, the retired hero
managing to outpace him despite being a foot shorter and (probably) fifty years older. Izuku glanced
around nervously at their surroundings, which had transitioned into neglect and dilapidation at some
point when he'd been lost in thought. The buildings were old and in disrepair, the streets lined with
potholes and all signs of foot traffic completely vacant. It looked like the sort of place Gran Torino's
apartment would have been dragged and dropped out of.

"Training grounds," Gran Torino called back to him, not even sparing a look over his shoulder.
"There's a junkyard a few streets down. A good place for you to show me that Quirk of yours up
"Y-yes sir," Izuku answered reflexively, realizing half a second later that it was probably rhetorical. He just couldn't help it-Gran Torino made him nervous. All Might hadn't been wrong about him being a little intense. The thought buzzed in his head, reminding him of what else All Might had told him. "U-uhm-you m-mentioned earlier, a-about... Mr. All Might th-thinking I could b-be his successor. I-is that why y-you put in an offer f-for me?"

"Mister All Might?" Gran Torino's voice was half amused and half exasperated, dredging up a pang of embarrassment in Izuku's chest. "That's it on the nose, kid. Tosh-All Might mentioned you by name, said he saw a lot of potential in you. After the Sport's Festival, I wanted to take a closer look." Gran Torino gave him half a glance over his shoulder, gaze made unreadable by his domino mask. "You've got a lot of power-let's hope you can figure out how to use it."

Izuku nodded hastily, feeling both hopeful and pressured about figuring out a better way to use his Quirk, so that he could live up to All Might's recommendation. Izuku couldn't bear the thought of letting him down-of letting anyone down. It wasn't like before; he had people that believed in him, and he had to make them proud.

As caught up as he was in his own internal monologue, Izuku didn't realize Gran Torino had stopped walking until he nearly tripped over him, and then nearly tripped over his own feet a moment later when he frantically backpedaled.

He flushed when Gran Torino speared him with a critical look, sighing in exasperation. "Alright kid, time to shake the lead out. We're here." He turned to stroll right under the traffic barrier separating the junkyard from the open street, the booth beside it seemingly abandoned along with the mountainous piles of decommissioned vehicles and miscellaneous scrap that populated the sun baked plot of land. It was tucked at the back of what Izuku assumed was an abandoned factory, most likely a vehicle manufacturer considering the abundance of ruined cars littering the junkyard.

"I-Is it l-legal for us to be here?" Izuku questioned warily, ducking under the barrier to retake his place at Gran Torino's heels. He was struck by the smell of the junkyard a few steps in, which reminded him strongly of his beach, only with less sea salt and more motor oil.

"Hm? Oh yeah, sure," Gran Torino replied in a dismissive tone that did very little to inspire confidence, disappearing behind a stack of rusted oil drums propped up next to a dilapidated tow truck. Izuku squeaked in fright when the stack rattled ominously, before Gran Torino reappeared, dragging a slightly dented barrel behind him. He pushed it out into the middle of a clearing between a pile of sedans and a wall of miscellaneous junk set up on racks in wooden crates, adjusting it so it was set as far apart as possible from everything else.

Gran Torino knocked his knuckles against the drum, looking satisfied when it made a hollow 'clunkclunkclunk'. "Alright, there's your target. Now show me that Quirk of yours." He stepped off to the side, seemingly unconcerned with the way Izuku immediately locked up with performance anxiety.

"Y..yes, sir." Izuku fumbled to strap on his visor and click his mask into place, wary of being impacted with shards of tetanus bearing shrapnel. He hesitated for a short moment before forming the fingers on his right hand into a fist, raising his trembling arm and resisting the urge to flinch when the power of Living Nightmare snapped to life, slithering into his arm and squeezing his bones with yearning tendrils. He sucked in a breath, and before he could overthink it any further, he thrust his fist towards the oil drum. It snapped back from the recoil, but the weight of his boots kept him steady on his feet, leaving him frozen in place as inky fumes seeped from his arm in lazy clouds, the oil drum erupting into a shower of rusted shrapnel and metal dust a fraction of a second later.
His vision fuzzed over with static for a short moment, the whine of squealing metal and chorus of showering debris dying away to leave him mostly unaffected, save a curl of nausea in the pit of his stomach. After the half-blind battle with Todoroki at the Sport's Festival, the drawback of using his Quirk while well rested and well fed was almost a relief.

"How much range you got with that, kid?" Gran Torino's voice served to snap him from the tenuous grasp of static, and Izuku glanced up in time to see the retired pro inspecting the pile of powdered rust left behind by the barrel. He didn't say a word about it, merely walking past to size up a nearby set of cars.

Izuku brushed his arm as if he could clean it of the dissipating fumes, unsure if he was supposed to follow Gran Torino or not. "U-uhm... r-roughly forty feet, s-sir. I-I haven't found any d-discernible delay between using it on d-distant targets versus c-closer range, b-but it do-does, uhm, h-have a baseline delay of f-fourteen milliseconds-"

"A real chatterbox, huh?" Izuku nearly bit his tongue in his haste to quell his nervous rambling, uttering an apology so quiet that Gran Torino didn't even seem to hear it. He regarded Izuku with a shrewd stare, before gesturing for him to step forward. "Just remember that this is physical training, not an oral exam."

Izuku shrank under the retired pro's critical gaze as he skittered up to stand in front of the ruined sedan, glancing back at Gran Torino for further instructions. "Let's see what close range applications that Quirk of yours has, shall we? This car should be able to take a few hits at least. Just try not to break your hand or somethin'-I'd hate to cut this short with a hospital trip." Gran Torino thumped the trunk of the car, which rested on a set of cinder blocks in lieu of tires. "Show me what you've got."

With a nervous nod, Izuku swapped places with Gran Torino, sizing up the rear of the vehicle while the former teacher watched from a few paces away. It was so different from practicing with Tokoyami at the beach—he was terrified of messing up under Gran Torino's scrutiny, and felt off-kilter from being in an unfamiliar place with an unfamiliar face. But he couldn't let that stop him; he had to learn how to use his Quirk more effectively. Izuku sucked in a deep breath to brace himself, curling his fingers into a tight fist-

"By the way, let me know if the side effects of your Quirk get to be too much," Gran Torino interrupted, his voice shattering both Izuku's concentration and his built up power, which dissipated into a few paltry wisps and a flash of heat under his knuckles. "I'm here to train you, not kill you. Got it?"

"G-got it, Mr. Torino." Izuku flashed a weak thumbs up, feeling a smidgen of relief. At least Gran Torino wouldn't work him to exhaustion. He pulled in a slightly smoother breath, holding the air in his lungs and tensing his legs to help keep him grounded. He shifted just enough that it'd feel natural to twist into his punch, instead of throwing it loose and wild like his ranged attacks. Izuku dug into the pit of his chest, threading his will through a single wire and yanking it into his arm.

The wrath of Living Nightmare exploded from his knuckles and the tops of his fingers, excess power venting all the way up to his shoulder in a gush of opaque fumes. The destructive force ripped through the rear end of the vehicle in an instant, breaking worn metal down into dust and reducing everything up to the front seats into useless, finely powdered detritus. The front end of the car groaned as its weight shifted, the hunk of vehicle sliding off the cinder blocks and crashing to the ground a moment later.

Izuku could barely hear the shrieks of abused metal through the haze of static hornets swarming in his ears, his stomach twisting into a knot and his smoking arm half-numbed between the tips of his fingers and the crook of his elbow. He staggered backwards, vision swimming, and gasped for air.
behind his mask. The world fell out of focus for a few moments, but Izuku was prepared. He forced the migrating shelves of his drifting consciousness back together, gritting his teeth and clenching his twitching hand until the nerves fell back in line. He controlled Living Nightmare, it did not control him.

"A lot less collateral that way, huh?" Gran Torino ambled up to inspect the remaining chunk of car, which rested half on the cinder blocks and half in the pile of what used to be its rear half. He lingered only for a few moments, before pressing on towards another part of the junkyard.

Izuku hurried after him, feeling increasingly nervous from Gran Torino's sparse comments, all which were maddeningly neutral. Mr. Aizawa and Mr. All Might were always quick to point out strengths and weaknesses, highlighting areas that needing improvement and helping them figure out ways to do so. Without a verbal acknowledgement of his progress and shortcomings, he had no idea if he was doing something wrong or not. It was extremely disconcerting, but he was too nervous to bring it up; he was fairly sure annoying Gran Torino was the last thing he wanted to do.

"Next up is accuracy and reflexes." Gran Torino stood next to a pile of old tires, having rolled one off a precarious stack to rest upright at his feet. It stood nearly as tall as he did, and Izuku had to lean over to the side a little to actually make eye contact. "I'm gonna launch this into the air, and you'll take it down with your Quirk. Simple enough, right?"

Without any further warning, Gran Torino wrapped both hands around the lip of the tire, lobbing it up into the air a few feet, snapping out with a powerful, flat footed kick to launch it like a rubber bullet with his Quirk (Izuku still wasn't sure exactly what Gran Torino's Quirk was, but it was definitely propulsion based; perhaps a localized burst of air pressure?).

Izuku hesitated for a fraction of a second in surprise before he peered up at the tire through his visor, taking another half second to judge how far he had to lead before he activated his Quirk. He thrust his arm into the air like a lance, obscuring his own vision with the blast back of fumes bursting from his arm. The tire burst open like a tarred balloon, roughly half of it erupting in a gout of smoking rubber scraps that showered the junkyard like raining embers. The air roiled like melting glass in the space where Izuku's power had lashed fruitlessly, creating a pocket of exploding molecules that sent the ruined remains of the tire shooting horizontally through the air, disappearing over the top of the building bordering them in.

"U-uhm.." Izuku piped up hesitantly to catch Gran Torino's attention, pulling his gaze away from where he'd been watching the tire sail into the distance. Izuku attempted to squeeze some feeling back into his fingers, while also failing to ignore the anxious pit that was widening in his chest. "D-did I do.. a-alright?" Izuku flinched as a car alarm abruptly began to wail in the distance, a small part of him thankful that his mask helped hide the absolute wreck of a smile on his face.

Gran Torino regarded him with a stare so heavy he could practically feel his organs collapsing, his lips set in a thin line that make Izuku's knees wobble. "You've got a long way to go, kid." His words were cutting, but his tone of voice lacked anything Izuku had been expecting; he wasn't disappointed that Izuku hadn't met his expectations, or resigned to the fact that he'd made a poor choice in sending his offer. He was just.. stating facts. "It's clear you have a solid grasp on the fundamentals of your Quirk, how to use it at peak effectiveness at your current level and understanding. You're mindful of its overwhelming destructive force, but not so cautious that you hesitate to use it at all. You're careful not to overexert yourself, and you understand your limits.

"But," Gran Torino continued before Izuku had a chance to catch his breath and recover from the whiplash of his emotions, "you're too slow, too stiff, too unrefined. You can't fight villains with an artillery cannon, and you can't save civilians with a mortar strike. Regulating the output of your
Quirk is the biggest obstacle you face; you can't plan through every move you make. Until you can use your Quirk as if it's second nature without causing harm to yourself and others, it's useless to you."

That... wasn't as bad as Izuku had been expecting. Gran Torino was just telling him the truth, outlining his exact strengths and weaknesses, highlighting where he had to go to improve, where he still fell short. He was definitely All Might's teacher. "I-I... I know, sir. I'm just-I don't k-know how to regulate it. Th-that's the smallest amount of p-power I've ever managed. I... I d-don't know if it even can g-go lower-"

"Listen, kid," Gran Torino cut in, before Izuku could start spilling self deprecating statements without meaning to, "there's no such thing as a Quirk that's all or nothin'. When you turn a doorknob, you can stop yourself from ripping it right off, right? You can toss a ball without throwing it as hard as you can?"

"W-well, yes, b-but like you s-said my Quirk isn't second n-nature yet so I d-don't-it d-doesn't feel like a muscle y-yet, I-I'm just not sure-" Izuku's words devolved into a yelp of fright when Gran Torino activated his Quirk, snapping six feet upwards in a split second of motion that left a cloud of dust flying out from under him. He twisted around in a somersault, legs cracking outwards again to launch him through the air on a dime, the retired pro reorienting himself so that the sole of his shoe hurtled towards a quickly panicking Izuku's face-

The flat of Gran Torino's shoes tapped against Izuku's mask, the sudden weight forcing his head to crane backwards. Izuku peeked open an eye in bewilderment when he didn't experience the expected pain of being kicked in the face, only to feel a small gust of air ruffle his loose curls, no stronger than an oscillating fan. He nearly tripped backwards when Gran Torino pushed off his face like a springboard half a moment later, twisting through the air to land effortlessly on his feet.

"Every Quirk can be regulated, kid." Gran Torino planted his hands on his hips, pinning Izuku in place with another critical look. "That smoke that comes out of you arm-what purpose does it serve?"

Izuku rubbed self consciously at his forearm, frantically trying to organize his scattered thoughts. "It-it... I'm p-pretty sure it's a result of using my Q-Quirk-like v-venting, maybe? It-u-uhm, it gets r-really hot the more I u-use it, a-and I produce larger q-quantities as well. It's d-different from my other symptoms, though..." When he really thought about it, that smoke wasn't present when he used any other aspect of Living Nightmare, as far as he knew. He'd never woken up on the beach in a cloud of it-the only link was when the scars on his torso felt hot, but they never reached that horrible burning sensation. Even his stun had never produced anything similar, resulting only in his familiar flashes of static, numbness, and loss of muscular control.

"Venting, huh? It's interesting you used that word. What's the purpose of venting, then?" That shrewd look was back on the retired pro's face, his lips curled up in a smirk that almost felt expectant.

The gears in Izuku's head whirred rapidly, spitting sparks as he frantically connected his racing thoughts together. "V-venting is usually u-used in machinery, l-like automobiles, t-to.. to relieve an e-engine of excess h-heat, and.. i-in oil fields, wh-where they would burn off e-excess power-" Every moving part in Izuku's head ground together in gridlock, his eyes blowing wide behind his visor as realization flashed through him in an electrifying wave. "I-I really am using too much power, a-and my Quirk has to burn it off s-so I don't hurt myself! So-so there has to be a way to c-control my output, right? B-but.. how does knowing t-that help me?"

"The way we view and internalize our Quirks is paramount to how we use them. Perspective matters more than you might realize." Gran Torino smirked in satisfaction, clearly pleased that Izuku had come to that conclusion on his own. "The next step is helping you put your perspective into action.
Do you visualize anything when you use your Quirk? Got a metaphor of some kind?"

"Y-yeah, s-sorta. It's.." Izuku wrung his fingers together, practically twitching with apprehension and excitement bled together in a bubbling froth, feeling unbelievably close to some kind of revelation, to the next stage of his development. "I-it's like wires, c-connecting every p-part of me on the inside. A-and... and when I n-need to use my Quirk, I find the r-right wire, and just... p-pull on it."

"The right wire, huh?" Gran Torino's forehead wrinkled in thought, one gloved hand brought up to rest against his lips. "Gotta say, from where I'm standing it seems more like you're a bit off. You're reaching for fishing wire, but every time you grab a suspension cable." He turned away with a swirl of his cape a moment later, one hand thrown casually through the air. "But we can save that for another time-I think that's enough training for today. Let's head back and grab some grub."

Izuku stood frozen in place as his teacher ambled towards the entrance of the junkyard, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he wasn't being followed. Izuku's eyes were wide and glassy behind his visor, pupils searching empty air as his gears clicked together, their teeth red hot. He felt off balance, but simultaneously more even footed than he ever had before. It was like every molecule in the universe lined up for a split second, right in front of him, and he was left behind in a fundamentally changed world to contemplate what it meant. "The wrong wire...?"

"Hey, hurry up already, kid! I'm starvin'!"

"I-y-yes sir, Mr. Torino!" Izuku called back, fumbling to unclip his visor and remove his mask, hanging it from the loop on his belt. He was incapable of impeding the crooked, ecstatic grin that spread across his face, the transcendental glow of revelation bursting in his chest. He practically skipped out of the junkyard after Gran Torino, his heavy boots feeling as light as air. The only thing he had to do was find the correct wire, right?

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Tenya Iida was losing control. Slow and subtle, his rage wormed through every crack of his body, seeping into his joints, into his very bones. It crashed into his ribs like a roaring piston, a 'thumpthumpthump' that shook loose the bolts and screws that held him in a single piece. It was maddening to walk the streets under a brightly shining sun, his costume's armor gleaming brightly and the hero Manual chattering cheerfully, the sounds of life singing sweetly in his ears. He was grateful for his helmet-it at least allowed him the small mercy of not forcing a facial expression.

"-nings have been pretty tense around here, after everything that's happened." The normal hero, Manual. Tenya had nothing against him-he seemed kind and earnest, and entirely genuine in his hospitality. Perhaps it would have been a worthwhile internship under other circumstances. But seeing him act so casual and amicable, knowing that the world had no intention of stopping merely because his brother was-

Grief poured over the red heat of his anger, hissing and igniting like a thick, putrid oil. But he still needed more time-he just had to be patient, and then.. "So you're keeping a presence on the streets, to dissuade further incidents and inspire security in the civilian populace." What a lie, what a joke, the steady hum of his voice and the worthless small talk he manufactured were bitter on his tongue.

Manual turned to offer him a brief smile, his features chiseled but youthful. "Yeah, that's what we're hoping for." His gaze turned again and Tenya followed it robotically, to find a pair of middle schoolers waving in recognition. It brought forth a pain like a live wire, sparking and sizzling and impossible to ignore.

Perhaps it was merely a symptom of grief, to have everything remind him of Tensei, of what he could no longer do, what he could no longer be. "It really is an honor to have you interning at my
agency, Iida! I'm honestly a little surprised-I'm sure you had way better offers to choose from."

Manual's modesty was distant, the hum of machinery locked behind concrete.

It was all he could think about-the man who murdered the Hero Killer. What sort of man could that be? What sort of man could kill such a notorious villain, and mutilate a professional hero in the same night? Perhaps it was hopeless-Hosu could be a complete waste of time. Tenya had no way of knowing if that man was even in the city anymore, if he'd skipped town and left behind only a cold case in his wake. Perhaps it was fruitless.

But he couldn't simply let it rest. Tenya would not rest until he'd who it was: found the man that killed the hero killer, the man that shook his world apart, the man that took his brother's livelihood, his passion, his accomplishments, his Quirk-Tenya would do everything in his power to find the man who took the hero Ingenium's arm, and bring him to justice.

"So.. you're the one that killed him, right? The guy that killed Stain?"

A hovel dressed in filmy smoke and splashes of intoxicating spirits, rancid rot masked by wood grain and paltry bulbs—yes, he'd been lead to a hovel, a disgusting little pit home to a putrid morsel playing a prime cut. The sight of this Shigaraki filled him with the desire to clean between his teeth, to rid them of the foul gristle scraping at his patience.

"You know this. That is why you've brought me here." Methodical and frosted, shaped by the familiar embrace of iron, his ire was thick and broiled black. It was meant for the one that had interrupted his work, a flimsy curtain of shadows meant to obfuscate the weak carcass underneath. It was effort wasted-in the end, he was nothing but meat. "To join your 'League of Villains', to scrape you out of the gutter after your failure. I'm sure you could have found any manner of filth willing to beg for your scraps—what is it you think I have to offer you."

The shadow billowed, ill at ease in fine cloths designed to falsify the human form—his blades would not mind them. "We had been keeping an eye on the motives of the Hero Killer while he was yet at large. The original intention was to seek him out, and make a powerful ally. But your handiwork lead to a change of plans."

"We need another carry, after the USJ." Shigaraki, cloaked in hands that squeezed sickly flesh, his face contorted as though it were not used to being exposed—perhaps that would have been for the better. "And you've gotta be pretty high level to take out Stain. You'd be a valuable addition to our party."

"What is it you expect from this arrangement. What are you after." Perhaps not greed, the gluttonous yearning to gorge upon blood soaked currency, fattened up until they were bloated and ready for slaughter—Shigaraki was bone and silver flesh, scummy with dull scales and wide, bulbous eyes.

"What are we after? Well... killing All Might would be a nice end quest. You seem like the type of weirdo that'd be into that." Not quite bristling—only the cold pulse of distant anger, its bite long lost in the blades he cherished. They did all the biting he needed. "I want to kill all the things I fucking hate, like this—" A photograph, clutched in two sickly fingers that trembled with rage-wide eyes, green hair, an abundance of scar tissue, "-this disgusting fucking freak. I hate him, and I want him dead. You can chop him up nice for me, isn't that right Mincemeat?"

His assumptions had been correct—his valuable time was being wasted on human dregs, meat unfit to be eaten. Disposal seemed the correct solution. "Your words are heavier than you can carry, Shigaraki. You want to kill All Might—perhaps you believe you can rise above your station." There were no gloves—not when he was on business. Though he could not feel the bite of wood in his palm, the rasp of steel on leather was sufficient. It had not been long since his cleaver tasted muscle and
bone—he could only hope there would be less fuss. "I will be the judge of that. Prove to me you are strong enough to challenge All Might. If you are unable, then you may submit to your place... or die. Stain made his choice. What will yours be, Shigaraki."

Rage was his answer, as he had expected. It prickled through Shigaraki like bone splinters, turning him from a mere strip of gristle into something septic. "Who the hell do you think you are...? You really think you can tell me what I can and can't do...?! Kurogiri, get rid of him."

Yes, the teleportation—the shadow, Kurogiri, was responsible for it. It was just as well; Shigaraki was too thin to carve into anything worthwhile. He did not mind spilling blood, but being given the opportunity to return to his work was hardly an inconvenience. He could hunt down Shigaraki again in the future—or perhaps he'd be eaten alive by his folly. The head of his cleaver fell to dig into the floorboards, splitting wood like cartilage. "It is just as well. Let us be done with this charade."

Darkness brought to life, the space between worlds that soaked into reality would bring him back to more important matters—"Just a moment, Kurogiri—don't interrupt. It's possible that a hard lesson is the only way he will learn. Our guest has quite the knack for inspiring growth in others. Let's see what he has to offer, shall we?" A voice far removed, masked by glass and wires—the computer in the back of the room must belong to the one that held the leash.

"Sensei..." Frustration, irritation, spilling like blood from salt dry lips—yes, Shigaraki wore the collar, held in check. It was likely the only reason he had not yet been stomped beneath larger heels. Like a snake he lunged—teeth bared and palms grasping to constrict, consume, throttle—yes, a scaled cobra, eyes blackened with hunger for death dealt. Too many bones, not enough meat—but easy enough to gut.

Mincemeat was not one to be caught unawares. Heavy boots and blade scarred hands, clicking together bones weak enough to be mistaken for poultry. Shigaraki wriggled in his grasp, fingers clawing and fangs spitting worthless venom. His hands... "You are not fit to wield this." A cleaver was designed for use of momentum, the blade thick and dull so that it would not break when smashing bones. Mincemeat pressed his boot between birdcage ribs, but he would not be butterflying. The squelch of tendon and meat, bones snapping jagged but cleanly broken by the head of his cleaver. Going through the motions—Shigaraki's hand was limp in his grasp, the stump free of blood save for the necessary waste of the cut. Pale little fingers, nails bitten and crusted with blood. It would need a proper washing.

He pressed down on ribs until air was forced from them, the head of his cleaver resting against a throat ravaged and scarred. A sick animal, tearing itself apart—it was unlikely he wouldn't have to put Shigaraki down. "You are weak—that is the truth of all mankind. We each seek to grow, to become more than what we are, but your effort is lacking. You claim you will kill All Might—but without true strength, those are only empty words. Surrender, and I will let you live so that you might grow to carry their weight."

"You arrogant piece of shit..." A serpent whipping, bloodied and lashing—a pale palm grasped his blade, five fingers turning steel to rust, "you talk about real strength, but I only need one hand to kill you." A blade with no bite, teeth dulled and pulled—Mincemeat retreated, his interest piqued by the cold hatred that had consumed Shigaraki's infantile anger. He lurched aloft, one wrist dripping blood, teeth bared—perhaps not a rabid dog, but a hunter. "You must be pretty stupid to think I'm weak—as though I'd challenge All Might to a fair fight. I will be strong enough to turn the symbol of peace into dust, and I'll break him to pieces to do it. This whole fucking world, worshiping human garbage—I'll pull it all apart, piece by piece. And if you get in the way of that, I'll kill you, too."

...Interesting. "..Very well, Shigaraki. Come to Hosu, and prove to me your strength. If you have the
means to do as you say.." Pale fingers twisting and twitching, a palm alive with no heart to beat for it-his will exerted, the open, bloodless stump of Shigaraki's severed hand closed over, whole anew in Mincemeat's possession. "Then I'll give this back to you." Shadows opening behind him, swirling darkness-business was concluded, and the real work could begin. "Show me that you are strong enough to carry the weight of your words.." Mincemeat sheathed his ruined blade, boring holes into the bloated, filmy eyes of Shigaraki, compelled to see what he might truly have to offer, "lest their gravity crush you beneath them."

Darkness, silence, familiarity-night was approaching, and there was work to be done.
Chapter 36

It was kind of Gran Torino to offer him a bedroom of his own to stay in, furnished with an actual bed to sleep on. Technically it was more of a futon, but Izuku had expected to have to sleep on the battered couch on the ground floor, so having a fairly comfortable surface to curl up in the blanket he’d packed was something he wouldn’t take for granted. The transition from his mother's home cooking to having to subsist entirely off of taiyaki was... slightly harder to get used to, but he wasn't going to make a fuss about it-the fact that Gran Torino was willing to feed him at all was more than enough.

And while the apartment building itself was old and creaky and made unsettling noises in the middle of the night that made him twitch under his blanket and filled him with the urge to use his phone's flashlight app to burn away the darkness, that wasn't the only thing that kept him from sleep. Normally, Izuku was out like a light only a few minutes after lying down—sleep had never been difficult to find. He theorized that it had something to do with the physical, mental, and emotional strain of his Quirk along with his exhausting levels of anxiety that let him simply pass out after dark.

But that night, he just... couldn't turn his brain off. Izuku sat huddled against the wall atop his futon, his pillow propped up behind him and his blanket strewn over his lap, unable to stop thinking. He'd distracted himself for a little while with his phone, texting back and forth with Kirishima and Uraraka in the group chat they'd set up. But it had gotten late much faster than he'd been ready for, and the absence of Iida made the whole thing feel uncomfortably hollow. Before long, he'd been left to mindlessly scroll back through their messages, his thoughts recirculating back to the same thing.

The wrong wire... Izuku raised his arm, dyed a ghostly white by the moonlight seeping through the window, and idly clenched his fingers. He could faintly see the tendons moving underneath his skin, the organic blues and purples of blood vessels a distant but obvious contrast against his skin. If he pressed against his arm, he could feel the bony knob of his wrist, trace the lines of his bones. His flesh, his muscle fibers, his winding blood vessels, his radius and ulna—they all held his arm together, winding and twisting and woven like a network of wires.

And Izuku had to find the right one. He'd been grasping blind for so long, his upset and his ignorance snapping handfuls at a time that lead to utter catastrophe. Tangled and bound and rubbed raw and bloody by the snares he unwittingly created, he'd been afraid of what he didn't understand. That fear still lived of course—he wouldn't ever be able to unknow his pain, both given and received. The entrance exam, the combat training, the USJ, the Sport's Festival—the villain—Izuku wouldn't ever be able to expunge his fear and regret.

So he had to make sure he never repeated it, right? Izuku traced his fingers along the inseam of his arm, his touch light enough to force a shiver down his spine. Every part of him was connected to Living Nightmare, whether he liked it or not. He wouldn't let it rule him again. But... Gran Torino had told him his Quirk needed to be second nature—a reflex, and a muscle. It didn't feel like one yet, and he certainly hadn't been treating it like one. Living Nightmare was a last resort, something he used only when he couldn't think of any other option. He treated it like a tool, pointing and directing it impersonally. He only used it at certain times, in certain places, with certain restrictions. He was terrified of hurting someone with it, of losing control, so he kept it under lock and key, and relieved himself of the pent up energy alone, as though it were something hideous and unwanted. So what if he...?

Living Nightmare came to life in his chest, but Izuku did not recoil. He did not yank, or clench, or push, or release. The hum of static buzzed unpleasantly at the back of his skull, but he did nothing to
stop it. He relaxed his arm as much as he could, muscles lax and suspended above him. He reached inward for the thinnest wire he could visualize, but instead of pulling, he merely touched it, waiting for it to come to him. Like tar it crept outward from his chest, oozing through him. It was almost hypnotic, the sensuous, ponderous crawl of Living Nightmare, trickling in thick, inky pulses into his arm.

He could feel the warmth of the power, venting through his skin in tiny, delicate curls. It was an uncomfortable, feverish heat, but it was far from the scorching burnout of pushing himself too far. He followed its path with the fingers of his free hand, tracing the indomitable progress of his power. It was not a bloating of force, a horrible writhe and ache that pushed and bulged against his containing flesh with the gluttonous need to destroy— it filled him evenly, smooth and uniform.

Izuku raised his hand in a dreamy daze, static a heavy murmur instead of a shrill hiss, and twitched his fingers towards the ceiling. Living Nightmare oozed forth, an expression of will instead of a cartridge struck by a firing pin. The air itself boiled in slow, undulating waves a foot above his grasping fingers, the invisible sway of nebulaic heat death. There was no recoil, only a steady, humming force, something he had to press and shape to keep in containment. Fumes trailed off him in infinitesimal curls, accompanied by a steady burn that bordered the line between discomfort and pain. But Living Nightmare did not burst forth in a howling eruption, turning the ceiling to splinters and crashing the building down upon him. He was not subjected to whiplash, the wire tension 'SNAP' that left him weak, nauseous, insensate. Izuku Midoriya's power was an extension of himself.

A startled gasp slipped past his lips as he abruptly severed the connection, Living Nightmare going dormant in a flash of heat that left him sitting straight up in bed. Izuku grasped at his arm and stared in astonishment at his hand as his daze faded away, the ambient noise of midnight chasing away his static. The heat under his skin subsided back into the warm flush of blood, his fingers trembling not from discomfort or a loss of control, but from excitement. His Quirk— his Quirk—

There was no possible way he could sleep after that. Izuku nearly fell on his face in his haste to jump out of bed, fumbling to shed his pajamas and unlock his costume case. His thoughts were a whirlwind, a thousand threads of rotating exhilaration winding together into a tapestry of possibility. There was so much to figure out, to explore, to experiment with and record data for and— there was relief, too, an overwhelming flood of cool, placid solace that extinguished the smokey, suffocating burn of uncertainty. He'd illuminated the path he was meant to walk, and couldn't wait any longer to take his first step.

Izuku slipped into his jumpsuit, wrestling slightly with the fabric as his impatience made him clumsier than usual. He internally debated wearing his armor over the suit, before reaching the conclusion that he'd rather be safe than sorry if he put a little too much force behind his Quirk and broke something. He squeezed into his armor and tightened the straps so it was flush against his chest and back, fitted his elbow guards into place, and laced up his gloves, feeling a strange sense of wholeness that grew with every piece of his costume.

Eventually he was left with only his boots and mask, the former of which were much too loud to put on indoors, unless he wanted to immediately wake up Gran Torino and potentially get yelled at. Izuku stared down at the blank white canvas of his mask, biting his lip in thought for a moment before he finally caved to his whims and dug a pair of sharpies out of his case. He doodled a field of bright red and blue stars over the expanse of his mask, slipping out of one of his gloves just long enough to carefully smudge the edges of them, to give them the illusion of motion. He almost reached back to find darker reds and blues so he could shade them, but Izuku got the distinct feeling that he'd be there all night decorating his mask if he didn't stop himself.
With boots in hand (which quickly became both hands because *wow* they were heavy and Izuku could probably benefit from physical workouts outside of his heroics class) he crept out of his room, wincing as the floorboards creaked under his pastel rainbow socks. He swallowed his apprehension for the few heart stopping moments it took to peer into the crack of Gran Torino's door, some of the tension leaving him when he saw the retired pro was dead asleep. Getting lectured in the middle of the night would definitely kill his momentum.

Izuku rushed out of the apartment as quietly as he could manage, slipping on his boots once he was safely located on the front step. He'd tucked his phone into one of his not already filled pouches to keep track of the time, along with a bottle of juice he'd snagged from the fridge on his way out. Hopefully it'd be able to replace some essential sugars if he ended up throwing up again, and it was definitely more nutritious than the microwave pastries he'd had for dinner. Hopefully he wouldn't have to eat those for the whole week.

It was only once he was out on the lamp lit streets that anxiety began to creep its way back into him, piercing his confidence with winding tendrils. The junkyard from earlier was... probably not safe to walk to in the middle of the night, considering how run down that section of city was—it would be catastrophic if he was mugged or something while he still had a tenuous grasp of his Quirk, and it'd probably reflect badly on Gran Torino if he was injured on his internship. But where else could he practice?

Izuku paced a little down the sidewalk in front of Gran Torino's apartment, his boots clomping loudly and echoing down the empty street. He just needed somewhere isolated, where he didn't have to worry too much about collateral damage or being spotted by whomever was still out so late at night. Izuku gravitated towards one of the towering, narrow alleyways that split the buildings apart into separate entities, biting his lip as he stared into the dimly lit depths. It was a little cramped, and a lot crammed with old garbage bags—not exactly an ideal location, but he couldn't afford to wander the city at night without Gran Torino's explicit permission. He staunchly sidestepped the fact that he was already guilty of that, and crept into the alleyway. It was right next to Gran Torino's building, so it wasn't a big deal, right?

The interior was less awful than he'd expected, the scent of garbage stale and stifling but far from putrid. Or maybe he'd just ruined his sense of smell by spending so much time around junkyards. Was there some kind of weird connection to be made between his Quirk and junkyards, or was it just coincidental? Either way, there was probably a better time to ponder that. For the moment, Izuku had to focus on his next step.

He shuffled past the garbage piled on either side of the alley, picking his way through until he was deep enough that the street lights no longer illuminated him. The cold light of the moon trickled down in slivers so that he could at least see his own hands and the brick walls on either side of him. Izuku sucked in a deep breath, holding one hand in front of him, fingers loosely curled, and reached inward for the thinnest wire of Living Nightmare. It thrummed as he brought it to life, a smooth surge of power that pulled a gasp from his lips.

He couldn't say it was a pleasant experience by any means, but it was... *interesting, fascinating,* and didn't bring him any pain aside from negligible discomfort. He eased the power into his fingertips, releasing it in a controlled flow that turned the air into a molten kaleidoscope. It was almost mesmerizing how the air folded and shifted over itself, destroyed molecules creating vacuums that collapsed nigh-instantaneously. At least, that was his closest understanding of the phenomena. He didn't really have the necessary laboratory equipment to study the science behind his Quirk, and probably wouldn't know where to start even if he did.

Izuku slowly dragged his hand through the air, leaving a brief trail of power that managed to last for
roughly half a hand length before the air restored the lost volume. It was certainly a difference from his massive, instantaneous distance bursts, which was a good sign, but he wasn't sure how to make it useful. Izuku briefly eyed the brick wall on his side, before immediately tossing the impulse aside—he didn't want to cause any property damage. But maybe if he...

Izuku sifted carefully through the trash bags littering the alleyway, searching for one that would cause the least mess possible if he blew it up. As he'd thought, none of them contained food waste, but old furniture and styrofoam were definitely a bad idea to burn, or tear apart into a million pieces that he'd inevitably pick up by hand because littering was wrong. He brightened at the sight of a bag filled with old cardboard, which both didn't emit toxic gasses when it burned and would be easy enough to pick up if it broke into pieces.

He hefted the bag off the ground, tossing it up a little to get a feel for its weight, and practiced his breathing exercises to calm the rapid pounding of his heart. If-if he could manage to find a way to use his power more effectively, a way to fight without seriously hurting someone, then it'd all be worth it. All his pain, his struggling, his crippling loneliness—they wouldn't have been in vain.

Izuku sucked in a deep breath and held it, tossing the bag at a slight arc so that it would go above him without being directly over his head, and thrust out his arm with the intention to not break the bag. His breath released in the same moment Living Nightmare did, a smooth transition through his arm that left him more forcefully than before, but with significantly less impact and recoil than with his previous, debilitating attacks. He struck the garbage bag slightly below dead center, the force ripping open plastic in a wide tear and pulverizing the cardboard beneath it in a narrow swathe, punching a hole clean through to the other side. It flew forward with roughly the same force as if he had thrown it at full strength, spilling bits of burning cardboard and flecks of boiling plastic in its wake.

It hit the ground with a 'thump', and Izuku tentatively lowered his arm, fumes curling in thick, lazy spirals. He experimentally flexed his fingers, which twinged slightly, but retained full connection to his nervous system. He felt a few prickles of nausea, the sort of thing he'd feel from tasting something unpleasant, along with a feverish heat under his skin, but it wasn't even close to as bad as before. Even with that improvement, something still felt wrong. Izuku frowned down at his arm, which bled the last few traces of fumes into the air, where they dissipated harmlessly.

Was he still wasting energy with his attacks? Was there a way he could minimize his venting, make his side effects negligible, increase the effectiveness of his Quirk? ...Would it still hurt someone? Izuku glanced down at his hand, flexing his fingers. ...There was only one way he could find out, right? There was only one way to be sure he wouldn't hurt someone else.

Izuku raised his opposite arm, unlacing his glove and hanging it off his belt before he rolled up the sleeve of his jumpsuit. He stared blankly at his own unblemished skin, his pounding heart echoed by pulses of static. Plastic bags and old cardboard weren't as durable as human skin, and he wouldn't even fire a burst—it'd just be for a split second, just calling it to his hand. It-it was better to know in a controlled test, than to find out because he'd hurt someone permanently. He had his phone, and Gran Torino was in the next building over. Izuku couldn't afford not to know.

Living Nightmare spilled into his right arm, his left trembling where he held it in the air. The power streamed from his twitching fingertips, melting the air in a display that sent alarms blaring through his head. Of course it was a bad idea, of course it was, but—he couldn't leave it up to chance. Izuku had to know, had to be sure for once in his life.

Before he could overthink it any further, Izuku sucked in a breath and clenched his teeth, jamming his right hand forward to brush the very edge of his active Quirk against his bare arm. For a split
second, there was nothing—and then pain, the heat that lived under his skin come to life and spreading across his arm like molten lava it was hot so hot it hurt it hurt-

Izuku ripped his hand away with a pained cry that he struggled to muffle, severing his connection to Living Nightmare and pulling his left arm against his chest, the pain transitioning from a white hot inferno to a heavy, throbbing sting that seemed to mimic the beat of his pulse. "F-fuck," he whimpered through clenched teeth, tears trickling down his face as he struggled to figure out what to do with his injury, he couldn't grab it and he didn't have anything on hand to relieve the pain—wait, he had burn cream, didn't he?

Fumbling with his pouches with one hand, Izuku shakily stepped through the alleyway until he could hold his arm out in the light of the nearby street lamp and get a good view of the damage. At the very least, he hadn't managed to break the skin—an amorphous blob of angry red marked the side of his forearm, throbbing and stinging and itching so intently that it was maddening. It looked like only a bad first degree burn—and felt like one too, as the pain ramped up in intensity and the pulses shortened in duration but grew closer together.

Retrieving the burn ointment from one of his pouches, Izuku left it hanging open as he brought it to his mouth and twisted the cap off with his teeth. It clattered to the ground a moment later, but—he'd just pick it up after he was done. It was fine. He hissed at the flare of pain when he moved his arm to hold the tube, squeezing some out onto the fingers of his right hand so that he could properly apply it. When he looked closely enough to begin rubbing it on his wound, he noticed that the edges were marked with a thin outline of translucent dead skin, and the burned flesh itself was uneven. He treated the burn with ointment slathered fingers, applying quick, even layers over the rough, bumpy skin. It stung even worse than the moment he'd burned it, and Izuku swallowed back a whine of pain.

He blinked through the film of tears impeding his vision, reaching down in halting motions to find the cap for the ointment and put it away, staring at the oily surface of his burn. It'd probably heal up okay, but the pain would persist for several hours at the very least. The sight of raw, inflamed skin dug a pit of nausea in his stomach, and opened the path for regret to spill into his chest. What a stupid thing to do—what had he been thinking? He was such an idiot, experimenting with his dangerous Quirk without supervision, and on himself. Of course it would hurt—what would he have done if it just burned a hole straight through his arm? Gran Torino would have had to call the school, call an ambulance, he would have to leave his internship, he'd probably be put on-suicide watch, or something, be taken out of U.A., have his Quirk monitored by specialists that'd keep him trapped like an animal—

Izuku ripped off his mask and muffled a wheezing, high pitched sob with his uninjured forearm, struggling to mop up tears with his jumpsuit sleeve. Stupid, stupid, stupid—that ugly word struck against the back of his skull like an ice pick, a piercing force that made him want to just curl up and cry. His legs trembled so violently that he was forced to sit, practically falling into the bags of garbage so that he could press his sleeve over his mouth and bawl, a dark, nebulous cloud of depressive thoughts engulfing his head. He was so unbelievably stupid, such a disappointment—he'd crossed the line between self sacrifice and self destruction, hurt himself deliberately, he was such a waste, wasting Mr. Torino's time, time he was supposed to use to train instead of injuring himself like an idiot.

He'd hurt himself again with his Quirk, he'd done the exact thing Kirishima had pleaded with him not to do—he had made Kirishima cry because he was such a reckless screw-up, and then he just-just-Izuku choked on another sob, tears streaming endlessly down his face. It felt like his chest had collapsed into a black hole, pulling and twisting and crushing everything around it, the pain so acute that he could barely breathe through his outpouring of misery and self loathing. So useless, so
useless—he just wanted to curl up somewhere and disappear. At least then he wouldn't be around to screw things up.

Izuku wasn't quite sure how long his crying fit lasted—he wasn't in much a state of mind to pay attention to the passing of time. It might have been only minutes, but it felt like hours that had slipped away from him, lost in the dark shroud of anguish that deadened his ability to perceive anything else. It was only once he'd run out of tears and the searing pain in his chest had hardened into a cold, numbed lump that he was able to stand on trembling legs and scoop his discarded mask off the ground. The stars he'd doodled earlier were nothing more than red and blue smears, marred by his own hand.

Izuku dragged his feet through the bags of garbage, reaching down to pat through his pouches in search of a bandage, or some gauze—something he could use to cover his stinging burn. It took a few moments of halfhearted effort, but he eventually found an adhesive pad large enough to cover his burn, and slapped it on with more force than was necessary. The wound twinged in pain, but part of him felt like he deserved it—he was stupid enough to cause it, after all, so he had to accept the consequences.

Just like he had to accept the consequences of staying awake all night. The sky had brightened into a deep blue-grey, a clear sign of the impending dawn. What a waste—he was wasting Mr. Torino's time, exhausting himself by foregoing sleep to fool around with a Quirk he hardly understood, and now he'd barely be awake for their training. Rather than tears, the thought brought only a cold, prickling resignation, the only thing that managed to thrive within his numb emptiness.

It reminded him of how he'd felt after the combat training, staring down the scar that would mark his face forever in the bathroom mirror, denial slipping down the drain along with his tears. But it was different—there was no mistake involved, no extenuating circumstances, no outside factors, no possible excuse for his burn. It made him feel shameful, struggling to pull his sleeve over the evidence and lace his glove back up. Maybe that was a good thing—he should feel ashamed of himself. Izuku hung his mask off a loop on his belt, reaching up under his visor to scrub at his eyes and hopefully wipe away the dried tear tracks. Maybe Gran Torino wouldn't even notice.

Stewing with resignation and regret, Izuku plodded down the sidewalk back to Gran Torino's building, his shoulders hunched defensively and his posture creaking with defeated weight. He slipped through the front gate, boots clacking like death knells on his way up the front steps. Izuku bowed his head, creaking open the front door with a fumbling hand, and slunk inside, bearing only a shadow of his former spirit, with dawn light burning behind him.
"Jeez, kid-you look terrible. How’d you manage that?" Gran Torino's greeting echoed slightly down the stairway, the genial tone achieving the opposite of its intent. Izuku flinched where he stood, looking lost and exhausted in the foyer. He wasn't quite sure how Gran Torino could tell how awful his state was-maybe it was his posture, or maybe his eyes were still puffy. He couldn't bring himself to care enough to ponder it any further. His temporary teacher hobbled down the steps, looking as rickety and fragile as Izuku knew he wasn't. He wasn't sure why Gran Torino kept up the facade when he'd already broken it. Only... wasn't he guilty of that, too? Pretending to be fine after falling apart and coming undone countless times.. did that make him a liar?

"Eyes up kid, I asked you a question."

Izuku flinched hard, a holdover from the days when Kacchan would greet him with bruises and burns freely given. He refocused in time to see Gran Torino's eyes narrow in suspicion, and felt some of his energy return in a sicking pulse of panic. "A-ah-I'm so-orry, sir, I ju-just-I w-wanted to p-practice, w-with my Quirk, and-and I guess I sta-stayed out later t-than I meant t-to." It was hardly convincing; Izuku had always been a terrible liar, his jumping voice and cracking syllables easily giving him away. Perhaps he'd only been able to keep Living Nightmare a secret for so long because nobody would have even believed it was true.

"Should'a been resting, so you'd be ready for today. You'd better be prepared." Gran Torino wasn't unkind, but he was certainly stern, clear in his expectations (that Izuku had already failed to meet). Izuku opened his mouth to say 'yes sir, sorry sir' and hopefully brush it all aside, but Gran Torino beat him to the punch. "And it doesn't explain why you look like you got run over." The retired pro's lips twisted a little in thought, his gaze so intense that Izuku squirmed on the spot, overcome with the sensation of being peeled apart. "Maybe more like your dog got run over."

Of course Gran Torino would see right through him-was he really dumb enough to think he could trick a man that had already proven himself to be extremely insightful and observant? Should he just keep denying and deflecting, or would that make things worse? Izuku couldn't be sure-if it were All Might or Mr. Aizawa, he'd definitely be better off confessing. Sure, he'd be scolded (especially in Mr. Aizawa's case), but his teachers were understanding, and they'd be able to help him. He just-he didn't know Gran Torino well enough yet; the last thing Izuku wanted was to make him angry.

Before he had a chance to make up his mind Gran Torino sniffed audibly, his forehead wrinkling with concentration and eyes narrowing in suspicion. "You smell like the inside of a first aid kit, too. What the heck happened?"

Well, that made things a little easier, in that he at least had no choice in which bullet he bit. "I-I, uh-uhm." It was better that he just got it out, right? Lying wouldn't help him. He just had to say it. Izuku struggled to squeeze words through the twisted column of barbed wire that clogged his esophagus, his gaze locked unwaveringly between the tips of his boots. "..I-I figured out, h-how to, uhm... u-use my Quirk m-more effectively. To-regulate the o-output of power. So I w-went out to p-practice, and, while I w-was figuring it out, I-I.. I wanted to know if it w-was-safe, to..."

Izuku squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, as he was assaulted with pulsing, organic images of Living Nightmare's potential-tar black flesh detonated into vapor, sickly red muscle pulsing and regenerating and spilling blood down slick white bone-and took a deep, shaky breath. "I-I had to know if it w-was safe to fight with. S-so I... tested it, on-on myself. I kn-know it was stupid, I-I jus-just wasn't thinking st-straight, I s-should have-waited, a-and talked to you a-about it. I-I'm sorry for w-wasting your t-time, Mr. Torino." Izuku fell into a rigid bow, holding his left arm at a stiff angle
"...How badly did you hurt yourself?" Unable to see Gran Torino's expression, Izuku was only able to read his voice for any tells, but came up practically empty. He didn't sound angry, or accusatory, or even disappointed—there was an unrecognizable edge to his words, but they were painfully gruff and neutral besides.

"J-just a first d-degree burn, s-sir. O-on my arm. I a-already p-put burn cream a-and a bandage on it."

The silence dragged on long enough that Izuku's back was starting to get sore, and he lessened the harsh angle of his bow just enough to take a bit of the pressure off. A sudden laugh startled him enough that he cocked his head up in confusion, only to be met with a gloved hand thunking him on the head.

"Is that all? Jeez kid, you had me goin' for a minute there! I thought you lost a toe or somethin'." Gran Torino wore a genial grin, but the sharpness of his gaze hadn't dulled into his 'doddering old man' persona. Izuku opened his mouth to express even a fraction of his confusion, and yelped when Gran Torino tweaked his nose. "Quit yer' bowin', this is nothin' to make a big production about."

Izuku shot upright and covered his twinging nose with his uninjured hand, his remorse eased aside for the moment by bewilderment. "S-sir?"

"You're actin' like I'd cut your head off for a single misstep. Sure, what you did was pretty darn stupid, but you know not to do it again, right?" After a moment where Gran Torino's gaze suddenly narrowed, Izuku realized it wasn't a rhetorical question and nodded so hard it made him dizzy. "And you understand what you should have done instead?" Izuku nodded again, gently enough that his eyeballs might find their way back into the proper sockets. "Then I don't see any reason to waste our time by lecturing you. We've only got a week, and we gotta make the most of it."

Izuku sagged in place, his shoulders slumped as all his tension drained out in a sudden torrent. He sucked in a breath to heave a long sigh—"Besides," Gran Torino continued, a devious smirk curling on his lips, "I think a whole day of training on no sleep is punishment enough." Izuku nearly choked on his own breath, resignation rearing its head to nest alongside his relief. He hadn't expected to get off scot-free, but the reality of operating on no sleep was still a bit disheartening.

"Now, show me what you've figured out. You said you found a way to regulate your Quirk, right?"

Gran Torino thumped across the hardwood floor, his unnecessary cane clacking loudly. He scratched a hand through his hair (which was a lot fuller than Izuku had expected of a man his age) and gestured widely with his cane. "I think a whole day of training on no sleep is punishment enough." Izuku nearly choked on his own breath, resignation rearing its head to nest alongside his relief. He hadn't expected to get off scot-free, but the reality of operating on no sleep was still a bit disheartening.

"R-right, yes sir." Izuku hurried over to a more open spot of the living room, skirting around to give the couch a wide berth. He took a deep breath to try and center himself, reaching inward with slow, cautious feelers to sift through the network of wires that connected every inch of him to Living Nightmare. It was no wonder he'd never been able to find the thinnest before, when he'd had no idea of what to look for; were it to be physically represented, his thinnest wire would be fine as spider's silk, and sharp enough to split skin like tissue paper. But if he was delicate and careful, reaching out with the intent to merely strum instead of tug—

Living Nightmare was roused by the harmonic vibration, spilling into his right arm with something almost approaching fluidity. Izuku gasped when the connection stabilized, tiny curls drifting from his skin as the air inches from his fingertips began to waver and writhe. Removed from the heady excitement of achievement and the cosmic glow of pale moonlight, his power was... unsettling. The silent thrum of destruction resulted in a nearly invisible force, capable of searing straight through human flesh. Something about it still echoed his lingering terror, faint fingers of the fear that had
strangled him with both hands. Despite his progress, it just... didn't feel right.

"Still got that smoke, huh?" Gran Torino's voice startled Izuku out of his internal musings, and he glanced over only to squawk in alarm when a gloved hand brazenly wrapped around his forearm. For a moment, it was almost as if Living Nightmare had bucked, straining to explode outwards and voraciously engulf the outside force that dared to act upon it—but nothing happened. Izuku's connection was steady save for a single startled moment, though he tensed up regardless. "Heatin' up pretty fast too," Gran Torino continued, his eyes narrowed in thought. "How's it feel? Any side effects?"

"Y-yeah, b-but they aren't as i-immediately severe. It'd p-probably take longer for them to build up."

Izuku took a moment to concentrate, and extended the spherical pocket of collapsing molecules a few inches higher. He could feel the heat in his arm that Gran Torino had mentioned; was it just inevitable that his Quirk had to burn off excess power, or was he still doing something wrong? "I-it still feels... wrong, somehow. L-like I'm still not d-doing it right." Izuku stared into his suspended handful of destruction for a moment as Gran Torino released his grip, before severing the connection with a sigh.

Gran Torino hummed in thought, his expression more pinched than Izuku had seen it yet. An illogical part of him felt guilty for the complexity and mystery of his Quirk—maybe if he'd gotten properly assessed at a young age instead of hiding it for so long, everything would have worked out better. He wouldn't be skewered with regrets, or struggling to understand the thing that had ruled his life for so long if he'd just been brave enough. But it was a waste to keep agonizing over mistakes that he'd already made, right? He had to learn from them, and move forward, but that was a lot harder to do than it sounded.

After a long moment of silence, Gran Torino's expression suddenly relaxed, and the deep thought clouding his eyes suddenly gave way for a shrewd glint. "The smoke and heat comin' from your arm is a result of venting excess power, right?" Izuku blinked and stared, before nodding hesitantly. Was Gran Torino trying to lead him to a revelation again? "And the problem you had before was that you couldn't regulate your output; it was too much all at once, right?" He hesitated a second longer before nodding, the gears in his head steadily clicking together. If he'd already solved his output problem-

"Then what excess is left to be vented?" Gran Torino's words echoed almost one to one with Izuku's own realization, his eyes widening as it rushed through him in a fizzing torrent. The retired pro smirked as he met Izuku's starry eyed gaze. "Something's holding you back kid, and I don't think it's your Quirk anymore. You're worried about hurting others, isn't that right? You're cautious, hesitant—that's why you burned yourself, after all. You wanted to be sure it was safe, but the truth of being a hero is that no Quirk is ever really safe. If you wanna survive against a villain in a fight, or rescue civilians from a disaster, you can't afford to hold back and worry. You're a U.A. student, ain't ya? Where's that Plus Ultra spirit, then?! You've gotta prove that you've got the mettle to go beyond, kid!"

Izuku was consumed by the light of revelation, his legs trembling under him as his vision tunnelled in to rest solely on the palm of his hand. Gran Torino was right, wasn't he? He was still afraid of Living Nightmare, still afraid of hurting others, of going too far, of losing control—but he couldn't afford to be. All of his classmates, all of his friends pushed themselves to improve, to strengthen their minds and bodies, to increase the power of their Quirks, to find new applications, to overcome their weaknesses, and all Izuku had ever done was limit himself. How could he have ever expected to become a hero like that? His only choice was to hone himself, to hone Living Nightmare into a force meant to save others. He couldn't be afraid anymore.

Izuku thrust his right hand through the air and plucked his thinnest wire without hesitation, the power
of Living Nightmare rushing to erupt through his arm. He didn't pull back, didn't wait for his power to even out, or carefully meter out how much actually escaped. Instead, Izuku simply let go. The air in front of him snapped like it was suddenly filled with fireworks, a loud ‘crackackack’ of super-heated molecules erupting in white sparks. It was a far cry from the nebulaic boiling glass of his slow and hesitant channeling, a flashy expression of destruction that felt almost alive. He still had control, could still manipulate his output and sever the connection whenever he wished. He could feel the heat escaping through his fingers instead of from his arm, his fumes either so negligible they were impossible to see or-or gone altogether. It felt powerful, but not overwhelmingly so—it wouldn't turn villains into meat puree, or melt straight through them. It felt..it felt-

Lit by the chaotic white eruptions that bloomed from his palm, in possession of a Quirk that felt right to use, Izuku nearly burst into tears. He'd conquered his Quirk, he'd overcome Living Nightmare and found a power that would help him save others. It wasn't his final step, of course; there was so much more he had to learn, so much more he had to do. But it was so important, because-he'd finally found his way. He'd proven that he could use his Quirk, and the path beyond had been revealed. Izuku finally had the ability to find his light-to find a hero's light.

"Hm. Good to see you had it in you after all." Gran Torino pulled Izuku's focus away from his Quirk, the light show fizzling out as the retired pro smirked, something almost proud lingering in the flash of his teeth. "Let's see how well it holds up in a fight, shall we?"

Really, it shouldn't have been so surprising how quickly his confidence crumbled into nothing, considering how often it happened. But regardless, the sudden liquefaction of his insides and subsequent pooling of organ fluid in his feet made him feel slightly ill, and Izuku quickly attempted to dial things back a few notches.

"U-uhm, a-actually, I... I was h-hoping you could h-help me with applying my Q-Quirk more practically? I-um, I-mobility, t-that's-I need to relearn how to use it t-to be more mobile! B-before, I could... s-sort of launch myself, b-but since it was so debilitating it doesn't s-seem very practical to keep d-doing it that way. And I t-thought that, s-since your Quirk is so mobility based, m-maybe you could... g-give me some pointers?" Izuku resisted the urge to cringe at how messily his word vomit had spilled forth, but it was something that had to be said. Fighting Gran Torino right away was... a little daunting, considering he'd only just figured things out. Learning practical applications before fighting techniques made more sense too, right?

Gran Torino's challenging smirk softened with amusement, and Izuku only realized he'd been tensed for a fight as he watched him relax. "If that 'mobility' you're talkin' about looks anything like the travesty at the Sport's Festival, then you're right-using that method is a bad idea. One good jump isn't worth hobbling around with a broken leg afterwards."

Gran Torino suddenly about faced, turning to wander off in... the opposite direction of the front door. "But before that, let's have some breakfast! I've got a real cravin' for some taiyaki right about now!" His gleeful chuckles made Izuku's shoulders sag with relief (and a touch of disappointment), and he dutifully followed behind his temporary mentor. Maybe taiyaki wouldn't be so overbearingly sweet the second time around?

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There was something so much worse about containing his anger instead of acting upon it. It was almost a physical pain, to bolt down straining boiler plates so they might contain the meltdown, keep it from erupting if only for a few moments longer. To be filled with super heated nitrous, blue flames sparking and sputtering because he throttled the engines and locked the tires in place was an agony unlike simply letting go, being driven by rage and finally, finally being allowed to explode.

Tenya wasn't sure how much longer he could take it. It was a struggle to speak in an even tone when
Manual prompted him, a struggle to walk sedately instead of activating his Quirk in a burst of white hot pistons and steaming hot exhaust. It was a surreal nightmare to inhabit quiet places, Manual's hero agency a homey office so unlike the sleeker, less organic agency his family ran. Potted flowers on desks, framed photographs of loved ones, the quiet, harmless clutter of a location that had been worn in by frequent life—it made him want to scream.

It was ugly, the grimy, oil slick urge to upend the maddening peace he was surrounded with, to unload his internalized pain into a physical space. He didn't want to make things worse for himself, as expressing his anger so poisonously would surely do, but he could feel the steady tick of clock hands echo in his bones, gears turning and turning as that man, that man still walked the streets he'd spilled blood on.

Tenya nodded absently as Manual said... something, pulling off his helmet and exposing his face to open air once more. He'd made every excuse possible to keep it on at all possible opportunities. It made him feel... less human, in a way he'd never once considered could be comforting. Wrapping himself in steel and armor, skin hidden away underneath gleaming plates and face hidden behind a laser cut mask—it took some of the edge off his hurt. He could cease being Tenya Iida, at least in some small way. His costume made him a symbol of justice, and a symbol couldn't feel pain.

It was almost sickening to think, but.. perhaps that man felt similarly. Tensei had told him some of what he'd seen, still weak and half coherent from pain medications. Perhaps that terrible man felt less human too, when he hid his face and doused himself in blood. Perhaps it was the only thing that could give him the peace needed to stalk the streets, ruining and stealing lives so callously.

Sometimes it felt hopeless, chasing after what could barely even amount to a lead in search of a villain whom he knew not even the name of. The Hero Killer had wanted everyone to know who he was—but his killer was not so obvious. Maybe coming to Hosu was hopeless, in the end. Maybe he'd find nothing at all. But if there was even a chance—

If there was even a chance, Tenya would take it. He would find the man in the iron mask, and would unmake him with his own two hands.

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Izuku groaned and rolled over onto his side, sweat sliding down the back of his neck and combining with the dust that had caught in his hair to make it gritty and dark. He blinked blearily up at the sun soaked sky, afternoon light painting it a bright orange that was tinted pink by his visor. "What's wrong, kid? Are you gonna come up here or not? I don't have all day!" Gran Torino's voice echoed across the sun baked junkyard, one of many taunts he'd rained down on Izuku from the precarious stack of cars he was perched atop. Ever since he'd figured out his Quirk, Gran Torino had been running him ragged with mobility drills, and climbing up the vehicle tower was only the latest. In normal circumstances it might have been feasible, but the catch was that Izuku had to make it up using his Quirk, and without grabbing anything. Countless shoe-tip sized holes marked dusty hoods and sagging bumpers from his failed attempts to make it up.

Figuring out how to use the newest facet of his Quirk for mobility hadn't been quite as difficult as he'd been expecting; channeling through his legs worked fairly similarly to his arms (though slightly less precisely), and using his previous method of propulsion on a smaller scale had been mostly effective. Gran Torino had helped him figure out a technique to essentially 'cushion' himself on pockets of air by destroying the molecules, creating bursts of force that provide enough lift to stabilize him in the air. It was lucky that his boots were so durable, because he was fairly sure if he'd tried it with regular shoes, they'd have melted from the abundance of sparks.

He hadn't been able to achieve anything more than a single jump (somewhere between fifteen and eighteen feet high at his 'maximum' output) and some mid-air flailing without an actual foothold, but
his cushioning technique worked well for landing without hurting himself. Of course, having footholds was also a double edged sword, because if he wasn't careful his Quirk would burn right through them and send him falling, which was the problem he'd encountered with the cars. Figuring out the timing to jump up the sides of buildings was decently doable—having dozens of fragile footholds just barely big enough to fit a single foot that required pinpoint timing was slightly more challenging.

Izuku groaned and rolled over when Gran Torino called down to him again, smearing the front of his mask with dust that probably wasn't safe to breathe when he really thought about it. "C-can we take a b-break, Mr. Torino?!" His voice wobbled its way up to the top of the car pile almost as precariously as Izuku himself had, and moments later he heard the sharp rush of air that accompanied the use of Gran Torino's Quirk.

"Guess we've been at it a couple hours now, huh? Sure, we can shelve this until tomorrow." Izuku huffed out a sigh of relief, which quickly became a startled squeak when one of Gran Torino's boots lightly cuffed the side of his head. "But don't think that means training is over, ya slacker! We'll head back to eat and clean up, and then we're goin' on patrol to find some villains to fight."

Izuku sputtered and lurched up from the ground, scrambling to get his legs underneath him. "W-wait, f-fi-fighting v-villains? Already?! S-shouldn't we-you k-know, work on fun-fundamentals a little b-bit longer first?" Izuku's blood felt cold and sluggish at the thought of fighting actual villains again. The USJ had been horrifying, and thoughts of the events that had transpired still visited him when it was quiet and dark, and he had nothing to distract himself from them. Ms. Atsuko could only help him so much—trauma wasn't something he could expect her to fix for him. And in his completely unqualified and absolutely biased opinion, fighting more villains was a pretty poor recovery plan.

"If I had more time to train ya', I'd say you have a point, but we've got half a week and a lotta ground to cover." Gran Torino marched off towards the entrance of the junkyard, and Izuku scrambled to keep pace with him. "Besides, there's nothing better to prepare you than some on the job experience. I know you fought villains at the USJ, and we'll be huntin' for small fry, so you shouldn't have any problems."

Izuku bit his lip under his mask and stifled the urge to protest further; Gran Torino was the teacher with decades of experience under his belt, and if he thought it was best to go out and patrol for villains, than Izuku would defer to his instruction. The possibility of having to fight still made him feel queasy, but he pushed past the discomfort as best he could. At the very least, he'd get a break from nearly falling on his face over and over again.

And maybe he'd finally be able to get in contact with Iida again. Izuku had been trying to put it out of his mind, considering there wasn't much he could do, but the radio silence from Iida was still worrying. The three messages he'd sent since their internship began remained unanswered, and he was hesitant to send more for the fear that he'd push too much—would it be overbearing of him, to keep asking after Iida when he wasn't responding? Did his friend just need time to come to terms with things? Emotional boundaries were so different from physical ones; it wasn't as simple as merely asking outright what was or wasn't okay.

Izuku glanced up at the sun smeared horizon, cut into rectangular teeth by the silhouettes of towering buildings, and frowned behind his unmarked mask. He couldn't know for sure what to do, or what to say. He could only hope that by the end of their internships, everything would work out okay.

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The bullet train to Shibuya was a much longer ride than Izuku was used to, in comparison to the train he took every day to U.A. The sun had already been submerged beneath the horizon, giving way for countless street lamps and adverts to compete against the full moon. The seats they'd purchased
would have been fairly comfortable under normal circumstances, but the addition of his bulky costume made it a lot more cramped and awkward than he would have liked. At the very least, Gran Torino didn't take up much room beside him, and there was no threat of fumbling to conjure small talk.

But still, as they passed along the outskirts of Hosu, something just felt...

Izuku shook away the unease that cluttered his head like cobwebs, attempting to refocus. "A-are you sure it's okay f-for us to get there so late? We pr-probably won't get back until m-morning." The idea of training after another sleepless night seemed... less than ideal.

Gran Torino spared him half a glance, his loose posture and easy expression suggesting he was back to playing up his facade. Maybe because they were in public? "Eh? Sure, sure, it'll be fine. I sure don't mind sleeping in for once! Besides, the streets will be chock full of villains late at night! I'm sure we'll find more than a few to fight!"

Izuku blanched and laughed nervously, hunching over a little in his seat. "O-oh. Th-that's... good." He pulled out his phone in an effort to distract himself, flicking past his lock screen with the intent of parsing through his evening news feed for anything interesting. But like magnets, his thumbs were drawn to his contacts, his chest clenching a little when he saw that Iida still hadn't responded to him. Maybe he was just super busy? Hosu had a much higher population density than Gran Torino's district, and Iida was working at an actual agency instead of being run ragged by an eccentric old man. He was probably just taking things super seriously, and getting caught up in his internship. It made perfect sense.

"Whoa, did you see that? A building just exploded!"

"What's all the commotion about?" Gran Torino questioned, leaning over the arm of his chair.

Izuku's mouth went dry. Faintly, he could hear other exclamation from the opposite side of the train, their language horrific but their tones distant and detached. He sat up in his seat, twisting to try and see outside the far windows. Surely, surely it couldn't be what he thought it was-

["All passengers, please remain seated for this unscheduled stop."]

The sudden application of squealing breaks nearly threw Izuku out of his seat entirely, and he fumbled to use the seat in front of him as a handhold. Okay, okay so maybe there was an attack and he was completely right about something horrible happening, but at least they were on the train above it all-

In an ear splitting screech of twisted metal, the side of the train was wrenched open from the outside to send the whole compartment rocking back on the rails. Empty seats were tossed aside by the force of the violent entry, clearing enough space for a dazed pro hero in a white fur coat to fail to rise to his feet, his groan lost amidst screams of panic.

The newly made opening gave way to the force that had created it, metal crumpling like tinfoil to reveal sickly green flesh, glazed, rolling eyeballs, and a cranium of exposed gray matter. It bellowed out a gurgling screech, slamming the injured pro to the floor with a spidery palm. There was no mistaking what it was, the only other creature he'd ever seen that looked even remotely similar was-

"N-Noumu!" Izuku's cry blended seamlessly with the uproar from the other passengers, but before he could even push past the thunderous swelling of fear lodged in his chest to do something, Gran Torino had already launched himself from his seat in a burst of air pressure, planting a heavy sole in the creature's slack, drooling face. The hit was enough to stagger it, its spindly fingered grasp leaving
Before it could move again, Gran Torino ricocheted off its head, twisting through the air to land soles first on the overhead compartment on the opposite side of the train. "Stay put, kid!" His words left him in a gruff yell, half a moment before he launched himself towards the Noumu, his momentum carrying it clean off the side of the train.

"G-Gran Torino!" Izuku lurched out into the aisle, his nerves pulled wire tight as he heard the impact against the monorail's dividing wall, skidding to a stop in front of the hole just in time to witness pulverized concrete, and the rapidly disappearing figures of Gran Torino and the Noumu. He stalled just at the edge, his gloved palm pressed against the lip of bent metal, and struggled to think of what to do. Gran Torino had told him to stay in the train, but-but he couldn't just do nothing. That Noumu... if there were more of them, if it was anything like the one he'd fought at the USJ, then he couldn't afford to do nothing.

Deaf to the cries of one of the train's employees pleading for him to stay put, Izuku hauled himself out of the side of the train, landing with a thud of metal soles on the tracks below. The night air spilling in from the breach Gran Torino had created stank of acrid smoke, and he could only imagine the havoc being wreaked in Hosu. It was terrifying—of course it was—but Izuku wasn't shackled by his Quirk anymore. He had the power to make a difference.

Izuku sucked in a breath as he revved up for a running start, his boots a thundering accompaniment to the deafening pulse of blood in his ears. Living Nightmare spilled from his core at the behest of a single strummed wire, and Izuku leaped off the side of the monorail in a shower of bursting white sparks.

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It was almost dreamlike, the way carefully constructed order could be so quickly unmade by agents of destruction. Tenya had been in the heart of Hosu, shadowing Manual's patrol when disaster had struck. In what felt like only seconds, buildings had gone up in flames and waves of civilians had flooded the streets in an effort to outrun the creeping chaos. For a moment he'd forgotten his anger, swept up in a haze of orange flames and black smoke, stunned by screams echoing off concrete. His costume was stifling from the heat of the fires a few blocks over, sweat beading underneath to heighten his discomfort. Whatever he'd been expecting from his time in Hosu, it hadn't been such widespread pandemonium.

But the moment passed swiftly, and Tenya was once more ironclad in his determination. The disaster at hand—was it the work of the man in the iron mask? It seemed impossible for one man to cause such havoc alone, and Tensei's recounting of him didn't paint him as the type to revel in wanton violence. He couldn't be sure just yet, and it would be a waste to lose his head until he could know for certain. He could wait a little while longer.

The relative emptiness of the street he and Manual had taken was disarming, flashing billboards playing advertisements for an absent audience. He could hear distant screams and wailing sirens, and see patches of sky swallowed by smoke between the cutting architecture of skyscrapers. It was an unsettling reminder of how transient the moment of peace really was.

A more immediate reminder waited just around the corner, Tenya slowing to a halt as a grimly serious Manual held out a hand to stop him. The traffic circle ahead of them had been turned into a war zone, a squad of pro heroes circling warily around a titanic creature of rippling black flesh and exposed brain matter. It was surrounded by craters, the asphalt simply blown apart by its strength. "Iida, stay behind me. Don't get involved in the fight unless I say so, understand?"

Tenya was moments from responding when the creature turned to seethe a tortured, guttural noise at
the circle of heroes, revealing its inhuman profile in full. There was no doubt it was related to the Noumu creature from the USJ attack—a clear connection to the League of Villains. But something else, the thing that made his pistons grind to a halt and his engine stall was—

It was missing an arm. Its left shoulder was a mangled stump, the flesh broken and butchered so horrifically that he could scarcely believe it wasn't simply clay, molded and twisted by furious hands. For a moment, he was unable to exhale. All he could see was stark hospital whites, smell stinging antiseptics and nauseating medications, hear his brother's weak voice and feel the pounding of his heart in his throat as he beheld Tensei's missing arm.

It had to be him, there was no other explanation. None of the pros on the scene were capable of such brutal violence. The man in the iron mask... the man with the cleaver—for a moment, he wondered why, what connection did he have with the attack, what drove him to dismember the Noumu—but that wasn't important. Tenya did not need to know why; he needed to know where.

It was difficult to see in the dark, but the flashes of LED screens were enough to reveal the deep, burgundy puddles that shone slick and glistening on the asphalt. It pooled at its thickest underneath the Noumu, but there were other, smaller puddles leading off towards—

Tenya didn't take the time to hesitate. Before Manual could think to make sure he was following, he turned his back on the fight against the Noumu, his engines running white hot as he tore off towards a side street, streaks of moonlight revealing the trail of dark spatters of blood. He had him, Tenya finally had the man in the iron mask tracked down—he would not walk away without paying for his crimes.

The sounds of chaos filtered out as Tenya followed the trail's end down to a dingy side street, the buildings tightly packed together and the road itself too narrow for anything but foot traffic. Unlike the nocturnal lights of Hosu's commercial district, the shops on either side of him were darkened and in clear disrepair. But the scent of violence still hung thick in the air, plumes of smoke filling the sky like angry thunderheads.

And then that too drained away, the world narrowing into throbbing pinpricks as Tenya's anger shifted gears, his helmeted gaze burning holes into the back of a tall, broad figure, dragging a severed arm behind him. There would be no warning, he would offer no mercy for the heinous villain that had stolen everything from Tensei. His Quirk came to life in a roar of firing engines, his calves burning hot as his dead run became a furious blitz. Tenya lashed out mere feet away from the villain, his armored boot turned into a deadly projectile by the sheer speed offered by his Quirk—

A meaty hand wrapped around his ankle moments before he struck the villain between his shoulder blades, fingers locking in an iron grip that utilized his momentum against him. He was swung around in a brutal fling, crashing and skidding across the brick paved road. Tenya gasped and grit his teeth behind his helmet, the impact jarring him so badly it was a struggle to draw breath.

"Why are you here." The man in the iron mask, a shadowy specter that had lived only in Tenya's hateful imaginings had finally been revealed by the swollen breadth of the moon. He was staggeringly tall, easily head and shoulders above Tenya himself, even in his armor. The man was bulky as well, thick, broad shoulders hidden away under a bulky studded vest and a stained, thickly woven butcher's smock. His arms were bare, muscle bulging underneath twisted flesh that was more scar tissue than skin, one bare, meaty hand wrapped around the wrist that had belonged to the Noumu. A shoddy leather belt was tightly cinched around his waist, the loops bearing a wicked array of gleaming knives. His smock ended just above his knees, revealing slick, black, rubbery butcher's trousers and worn, steel toed boots.

And from his hip there hung a great knife—a thick, rectangular cleaving blade, so large that wielding it
would be surely impossible with only one hand. It was soaked with fresh blood, the syrupy, burgundy sludge that flowed inside of the Noumu. Tenya ripped his gaze away from the sight of the blade, and poured all his hatred upward, towards the villain's empty gaze. He wore a full iron face mask, crudely shaped into a distorted mockery of a human face, with squinting eye holes, a wedge nose, and an oblong opening fitted with a rectangular mouth guard, fashioned with iron bands to imitate teeth. It was fitted with a piece that covered the back of his head as well, combined together with thick iron rivets.

"You're him, aren't you? The man who killed the Hero Killer." Tenya shakily rose to his feet, his anger burning so hot that he almost expected to vomit steam instead of harshly gritted words. "You're the man that took my brother's arm, aren't you?!" He was trembling uncontrollably, his fury growing exponentially at the sight of the man's expressionless mask, his neutral posture, his uninterested tone. "You took everything from him!" Tenya nearly screamed it, and it didn't make him feel better to hear his fury echoing down the street. No, there was only one thing that could quench it now.

"...You speak of Ingenium." That emotionless, uncaring tone was like gasoline, giving him yet more fuel to burn. The man in the iron mask regarded him momentarily, one hand hanging loosely at his belt, on the same side as a hand length steak knife. "I told your brother after our lesson that I would take his arm instead of his life. I told him that if he wanted it back, he could take it himself, when he became strong enough to do so. So, Why are you here."

Tenya could only see red. The villain's dispassionate recounting of his brother's mutilation, as if he wasn't responsible for destroying his career, his life- "I am here because my brother can't be anymore! Because you took his Quirk from him, took away his ability to fight for others, to bring justice to scum like you!" Tenya could feel his engines sputtering, his control over his Quirk iron clad but his will to destroy the villain in front of him growing out of control. "I am here," he continued, words hissing between his clenched teeth as his engines heated up, prepared to unleash a Recipro Burst and cave in that horrible, leering mask, "TO MAKE YOU PAY FOR WHAT YOU DID TO HIM!"

"I see." Tenya's vision blurred into white hot fury, a yell boiling in his chest as he tensed to attack- "Then I will teach you the same lesson in his stead." And then the villain was moving, his cleaver snapping from its bonds as an arm carved with scar tissue whipped the flat of the blade towards him- And then Tenya could only see stars.

Chapter Notes

Some recommended listening for this chapter, in no particular order! Volume warning just in case.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmtAm3a5Mr8
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoGUgcI5kLM
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgo4yEKUiCg
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJoA3mPvIxU

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The overpowering flavor of blood was nauseating. Sickeningly hot gushes of it trickled down into his mouth, staining his tongue with the coppery bite of broken skin. Electric currents ran under the skin of his face, sparking with such heat and insistence that Tenya half expected his nerves to simply burst apart like overloaded circuits. He'd been struck, hadn't he? Struck by something that rattled his skull, something that made his thoughts thick and sluggish. He could vaguely recognize the pavement under his back, the solid weight of his armor and the leaden anchors of his bones. He struggled to draw in a shuddering breath, nerves clamoring in alarm as something sharp scraped against his teeth and gums, caressing the raw ravine that had been carved through his upper lip.

He choked on a globule of blood, autonomy returning in fits and spurts as he fumbled to do away with the thing cutting into him, hands shaking and clammy with sweat beneath his gloves as he fumbled for the lip of his helmet. His helmet was cutting into his face, a shard of metal broken and bent inwards. He ripped it from his head before it could do more damage, nicking his eyebrow before the dented metal clattered to the ground.

Awareness sparked into existence as he took his first gulping breath of the night air, tainted by the bitter flavor of soot, and he scrambled backwards on scraping asphalt as his wild gaze caught sight of the leering, emotionless mask that towered above him. His backward motion and the rage bubbling in his throat were both halted by a boot slamming down against his chest plate, an impact like an anvil falling from the sky.

"Stay still. That will make this easier for you." The man in the iron mask spoke like an automaton: slow, cold, and unfeeling. His statuesque posture broke for a moment, and Tenya's eyes caught on the flash of moonlight painting the length of the cleaver in his hand. His anger turned to something icy and primal when he saw it, hanging from a meaty grip like a guillotine blade. That damnable mask stared unflinchingly down at him as though he were nothing more than an irreverent insect, the boot against his chest pressing so hard he could feel the metal of his armor creak in protest.

"Let go of me," he hissed through his teeth, breathless and frantic in the wake of his extinguished fury. Cold fear had spread through his insides like cobwebs, his working parts gone still and silent. Tenya dug his fingers into the villain's leg, just above the lip of his boot, and failed to wrench it
away. A cry of shock tore from his throat when his chest plate was crunched inwards with a thunderous stomp, his grip weakening enough for the villain to wrench his arm aside with his boot. The sudden release of pressure resulted in a desperate gasp, and Tenya fumbled to crawl away and find his footing.

"I told you to stay still. If you struggle, I might cut at a poor angle." The words were inhumanly calm, accompanied by his own groan of pain when the villain snagged his askew arm by the elbow and forcibly flipped him over, the weight of his boot returning to crunch between Tenya's shoulder blades. "This is a lesson, not punishment. I have no need to cause you unnecessary pain." Tenya choked on his own breath when the villain wrenched his arm backwards, the socket protesting with sparks of pain. "Though you are yet young, and have room to grow, so perhaps I will show you some small mercy."

Tenya's heart rattled with instability, his panted breaths a hyperventilating klaxon as the reality of the danger he was in crashed through him. This wasn't a villain for him to battle, to beat bloody and broken so that he could extract justice for Tensei. He finally understood the haunted look in his brother's eyes, finally understood that it was not a man that had killed the Hero Killer-

"Y-you're a monster," he gasped out, breaths tight and thin as his efforts to escape were reduced to useless writhing. He struggled to twist his head around to try and look back, the invisible weight of the butcher's cleaver hanging over him like a headsman's axe. "Let go of me, let go of me!" Tenya huffed a single hot, hysterical breath against the stone before he could turn his head again, and then ceased to breathe at all as the moonlight dissolved the shadow of the Noumu's severed arm, its length (longer than his entire body) splayed across the stonework. Tenya's vision narrowed into pinpricks, his head swimming and breaths knotted into a noose as primal fear replaced every ounce of rationality left. The Noumu's fingers twitched, lengths of bruise black flesh tapping one by one against the stone like ticking clock hands.

"You are weak now, but you have much growing left to do," the man in the iron mask mused, empty and hollow as it echoed off the pavement. "There is potential in you, as there is in everyone. Perhaps this will help lead you to it."

And then the blade fell.

The world melted away in a noxious sea of fire, contracting and compressing until an agony that dwarfed every pain Tenya had ever felt combined into one fried him inside and out like a lighting bolt. The sickening slap of meat and crunch of bone parting under the force of sharpened steel was an afterthought, the 'CRACK' of blade against stone lost in turmoil as every nerve in his right shoulder imploded in the same moment. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't breathe the squelch of bloody flesh had replaced every molecule of oxygen in him and every joint in his body locked up, petrified into stone and every muscle contracted, twisting and pulling as if to tear themselves apart, and Tenya's mouth parted and dripped blood down his chin and his eyelids pulled apart until the night air stung his unseeing eyes-

And Tenya screamed.

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Izuuki's blood froze solid in his veins as an agonized howl rent the night air to tatters, a catastrophe locked in a single discordant note, stretched until the point of breaking. A pulse of static thrummed through him as the cry tapered out, summoned by his alarm and dismay. He stumbled towards the edge of the apartment building's roof, dodging around an air conditioning unit to catch himself on the concrete lip, desperate to find the source of the noise and dreading the thought of who it had come from.
Frantic in his pursuit of Gran Torino and the Noumu, Izuku had cut straight through the waves of people fleeing from the heart of the chaos, struggling to figure out what could have been the meaning behind the attack. He had no doubt that the League of Villains was behind it—there couldn't be a coincidence that monsters with exposed brains had shown up to wreak havoc again.

Gran Torino would be fine; Izuku had the utmost belief in his ability to take care of himself. But he wasn't the only one in Hosu. The thought of Iida getting caught up in the middle of the attack had pushed him to keep running, up until he'd found a group of pro heroes struggling to fend off two more of the hideous Noumus. His first instinct had been to aid in their efforts, but an offhand comment by the Normal Hero Manual had given him pause and confirmed his fears.

Iida was missing. More than missing, he had run off of his own will. It was nearly unthinkable—Izuku knew his friend wasn't the type of person to run off in the wake of a disaster instead of doing everything he could to help. He had to have been in danger. The thought struck Izuku like a hammer, nailed into the base of his skull and buzzing with urgency. Maybe there was another Noumu that had cut him off, or a villain associated with the League—

Either way, Izuku knew there was no choice but to find him. He'd taken to the rooftops, burning shallow divots in the brickwork with his Quirk and spitting sparks into the empty alleyways as he ascended, giving himself a better vantage point to begin his search. In less dire circumstances, it might have felt invigorating to leap between buildings in a shower of blinding sparks, the wind carding through his hair and the weightless pit in his stomach mollified as he found solid concrete beneath his boots, again and again.

But any ounce of levity he'd possessed had been boiled away by the scream, it's echo still ringing hauntingly in his ears. Izuku hauled himself up onto the lip of the roof, the concrete barrier barely thick enough for him to stand on without tipping over, and leaped across the narrow alley to the next building over. His heart pounded in his ears as panic eschewed even the nausea that came and went with each jump, deafening him with the echo of that unmistakable scream. It had to be Iida, Izuku had to find him.

The bright lights of the commercial district and the disastrous glow of the fires had already been left far behind him, and the milky glow of the moon did little to penetrate the dark streets below. For a moment he was lost in the oil slick shine of concrete and asphalt, eyes tracking uselessly down their shadowed edges—until he spotted it, a lone figure in the dark with something indistinct at its feet. The shape on the ground just barely moved, but it was enough for the moonlight to refract off something silvery-armor, Iida's armor—

Izuku dropped like a stone. The concrete beneath his boots was replaced by empty air as he jumped without the aid of his Quirk, conserving his power until a single moment before impact. Living Nightmare thrumming through his legs and twisting outwards in an explosive cloud, the air pushing up against him as overheated molecules were converted to pure energy. The impact of the thirty foot fall was negated almost entirely, the cushion of white hot detonations fanning around him like star stuff.

A bare instant after his boots had clicked against solid ground, a cry unearthed itself from Izuku's throat. "IIDA!" With the moon at his back, the scene before him had been cast into chilling relief. Slick splashes of blood marred the street, a violent spray quickly staunched. A lump of flesh lay limp and lifeless, the tar painted arm of a Noumu. A hunched, hulking figure in a blood stained smock and a ragged canvas vest crouched above a suit of armor, a solid mass of rippling muscle painted in thick lines of scar tissue. A belt of wicked knives hung around his waist, cruel implements with razor edges. A meaty fist bearing the same twisted scars wrapped around the hilt of a massive, bone splitting cleaver, the blade scraping against concrete. It was impossibly huge, the sort of thing to cut a
man in half-and the villain's thick, bulky arms made that seem like a guarantee.

The sight of him turned Izuku's breath to ash. He barely even looked like a villain-maybe a monster from a horror movie, the sort that made him flinch and close his eyes before his mother would change the channel. He was nearly twenty feet away, but Living Nightmare still went haywire in his presence, a prickling wash of static as he beheld the inhuman stillness of the villain's monstrous frame and the sheen of blood dripping steadily down the blade of his weapon.

And Iida was sprawled face down at his feet, his exposed countenance smeared with blood that trailed from his upper lip, flesh parted in a sickening tear to reveal a flash of reddened teeth behind it. His armor had practically been reduced to scrap metal, bent and dented and cracked apart along the back of his breastplate, visibly digging into the base of his spine. His eyes were glazed and wild behind his cracked glasses, navy blue stricken by animalistic terror and engorged pupils staring straight through Izuku.

Static jumped and crackled throughout every nerve in his body, spitting sparks and leaping between wires like electrical coils-because the inside of Iida's shoulder stared, too. A stump jutted out from underneath the lip of his breastplate's sleeve, a wet cylinder of flesh and viscera blooming outward from a core of off white bone, stained a grimy orange by blood.

It was no mystery where it had gone. Limp and scraping knuckle down against the concrete, Iida's severed arm rested within the villain's massive palm, fingers locked around the unarmored stretch between his shoulder and tricep. The villain turned to meet his gaze, face hidden behind a twisted iron mask, occluded eye sockets and barred, bolted teeth rattling a shiver down Izuku's spine. In the time it took Izuku to draw a startled breath, the villain had leaned further down, his knee pressing into the base of Iida's spine-

With a sickening squelch of raw meat, the villain crunched the severed end of Iida's arm back against his stump of a shoulder. Dark blood oozed from between the point of contact as the villain twisted, drawing a strangled cry of agony from Iida's throat.

It struck Izuku like a gunshot. The static howl crowing the base of his skull flooded forth to consume every inch of his waking consciousness. Living Nightmare wailed with the miasmatic breath of the tortured and broken. Wires twisted and knotted together with the undulating fury of cosmic serpents, a writhing cacophony of screeching metal that made the very shadows quail in its wake. His silhouette was birthed with a hideous crawl, oozing from his flesh like an oily geyser and staining the world with his presence like a black hole ink blot.

Izuku could taste his own fury and despair. That villain-that villain had held Iida down and cut him apart like an animal. Because Iida wasn't strong enough to fight him off. Because Iida was hurting and angry, lost in a dark place that Izuku hadn't done enough to draw him out of. And now it was too late—he could feel Living Nightmare's fingers squirming through his flesh, wires that burrowed into his muscle and drilled into his bone to raise his arm like a puppeted corpse. The ravenous discord was deafening, wires so tangled and twisted that he had no way of pulling the correct one, of undoing the septic surge of destruction yearning to engulf everything in front of his fingertips.

Izuku had only a single moment before he was consumed by amygdalan impulses, an instant to hold still as many wires as he could grasp and subvert their power. No matter what, no matter what-he wouldn't hurt Iida. With his last intention wading through dark waters to still the bulk of their crushing rage, Izuku's breath was stolen away by the rebirth of Living Nightmare. The power ejected from his open palm in a bone splintering detonation, howling with the mindless need to unmake. His arm locked up as if skewered by a spit, an infernal hellstorm of liquid white metal that sank into every crevice, charring him from the inside. A torrent of fumes darker than the night itself vented
from every pore on his arm, thick and choking and foul.

And the villain exploded.

Curtailed by the bulwark of Izuku's last vestiges of control, the true bite of Living Nightmare's fury was shaved down into a mere splinter, warped and curved like a scythe to limit the bulk of the destruction to the opposite side of the street. Half of the road had been reduced to chunks of rubble and tar, melted asphalt, nearly a foot deeper than the solid ground it had once been. Forty feet of windows had boiled and shattered, leaking molten glass down the charred, blackened frames of the buildings' faces. He'd avoided damaging their structural integrity, but they'd seemingly aged a hundred years in a split second.

Halfway between the opposite side of the street and the still prone Iida, the villain had not been so lucky. Living Nightmare was cruel-rather than take from Izuku his senses, it left him with ample awareness to behold the culmination of his efforts. He heard every gush of hot blood splattering onto concrete, every sickening slap of organs spilling to the ground, and the twin meaty thuds of two halves of a body succumbing to gravity.

The villain had been wrenched in two. His torso ended in a ragged split halfway down his abdomen, the remains of ropey intestines and the tissue sacks that were his stomach, gallbladder, spleen, and pancreas slopping out of him as their support structure was destroyed. One of his hands had been nearly obliterated as well, flaps of stringy flesh and chunks of muscle barely clinging to bones bared to the open air beneath his wrist. Flung nearly ten feet away, his lower abdomen had opened up like a wet flower, an unidentifiable mess of bloody meat fanning out above his limp, dismembered legs.

Izuku went limp in the same moment as a gout of blood splattered across his front, painting him in a jagged red streak from his hair to his chest. He crumpled to his knees, right arm nearly numb from overwhelming pain and left hand barely capable of unlocking and discarding the mouthpiece of his mask, and spilled the contents of his stomach onto the ground. His spine bowed under the weight of death, eyes wide and spilling tears behind his blood smeared visor.

"O-oh god," he croaked in moaning horror once vomit had ceased dribbling from his lips, "ohgodohgodohgodohgod-" Iida. He had to-he could barely think past the whine of static, a swarm of steel cicadas clouding his head, but-he had to make sure Iida was okay.

"M...Midoriya?" Iida's voice split the static like a lance, pained and wavering and gritted through clenched teeth. Iida had been-painted in blood, a syrupy puddle slowly forming underneath him from the oozing liquid rolling down his back. But he was alive, his eyes bloodshot and fingers twitching, and his arm- "Midoriya," he rasped with grave urgency, eyes widening as he beheld something that Izuku's tunneling vision could not discern, his focus narrowed into a pinprick as he realized that Iida's arm- "He's not dead."

It was attached. Izuku froze in place as the blood matting his hair and staining his front suddenly oozed out into the air in hellish red motes, collecting in a sanguine mist that followed a nonexistent breeze. The slosh of organs rolling and squirming brought another surge of nausea hurtling up his throat, and Izuku choked on stomach acid as his terror reached a crescendo.

"That," the villain intoned in a hollow, gravelly voice, his iron shrouded head snapping back up he lifted his torso from the ground. Scraps of flesh and chunks of organs and pints of blood oozed back together in the shape of a man, legs writhing like worms as they stitched themselves back to the meat of his torso, sinew knitting and fat stretching and muscle threading, "is strength to be admired."

Izuku nearly fell backwards when the villain turned fully towards him, the bare flesh of his abdomen exposed by the destruction of his clothing. He was more than just laden with scars-he barely had any
skin that wasn't scar tissue, raised white lines and deep burgundy gouges slotting together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. "You're the one from the photo. The boy he wanted dead."

Swallowing hard to avoid his heart lurching right up into his throat, Izuku placed his left hand behind his back to stay upright, his right arm trembling with pain and muscular spasms. It'd probably be useless for a while. "Y-you.. who-who a-are you? W-who wa-wanted m-me..?"

"The villain, Shigaraki. He seems to despise you." The villain slowly reached down to retrieve his discarded cleaver, the mere contact between his fingers and the hilt battering Izuku with static laced fear. The clatter and grind of steel on concrete echoed in the core of his bones, and he struggled to slide himself a few inches backwards while the villain's attention was momentarily turned away. He wasn't attacking yet-maybe, if he could keep the villain talking...

Izuku's fingers slowly crept towards his belt, and it took every ounce of his concentration to stop them from shaking. "I am Mincemeat. It is only fair to tell you, after your demonstration." He flinched when the villain-Mincemeat-returned that unfeeling gaze back to him. "What is your name, child." Izuku's eyes darted away from the hideous mask, flashing over Iida for a moment to assess his state. His arm was definitely still attached-or rather, reattached. Mincemeat had to have some sort of... organic manipulation Quirk. And judging by how quickly he had put himself together after being... struck by Living Nightmare, it was surely powerful.

Izuku locked eyes with Iida for a split second, taking in his engorged pupils and his pale, clammy face. He could only desperately hope that Iida hadn't gone into shock. "I-I'm. Izu-Izuku M-Midoriya.Y-you.." He struggled to think of something to say to stall for time, the majority of his focus eaten up by trying to navigate to his contacts by memory alone. "A-are you affi-affiliated with, t-the L-League of Villains?"

"Please, Midoriya..." Iida's voice left him in a pained groan, gouged raw by the sheer terror in his voice, "you have to run-you have to run away from here! He-he'll kill you!" Iida's plea became a choked cry when Mincemeat crunched one hand underneath his boot, grinding twitching fingers into the concrete.

"Quiet. I have given you more than ample mercy tonight. Show your gratitude and keep silent." Izuku trembled as something finally entered the villain's voice, something other than cold nonchalance-fury. "The League... no, I do not call them allies. Perhaps they might have had a chance, but I refuse to cavort with their abominations." Mincemeat ground the word out into a fine paste, hissing through the metal teeth of his mask. "Those twisted, mindless aberrations... that is not true strength! I will hunt them to the last, as well as their master." Meaty fingers tightened around the hilt of the monstrous cleaver, and Izuku remained hyper aware of its presence. Iida was much faster than he was-if he hadn't been able to outrun that blade, than Izuku didn't trust his own chances. He just needed to buy a little more time, and keep the villain talking.

"I-if-if you're n-not with the L-League, the-then.. w-why did you a-attack my f-friend?" Izuku carefully tracked the sequence of vibrations under his fingertips, struggling to line them up to the various menus of his phone. With a hitched breath, Izuku tapped his thumb against what he prayed was the prompt to share his location with all contacts.

"...You are mistaken." Mincemeat's fingers flexed along the handle of his cleaver, and for a moment Izuku was certain their rhythm had been mirrored by the sound of tapping. "It is your friend who attacked me. He is observant-able to track me down in the heat of chaos. But he was blind to everything else."

"Y-you-" Dread welled up in his chest, an oily pustule that swelled and desecrated his ribs with connecting strings. Iida shifted on the ground, struggling to rise to his feet despite the shards of his
armor digging into his flesh. "I-Iida... w-why w-would you-

"This has nothing to do with you, Midoriya." Izuku nearly flinched at the bite in his classmate's tone-his words were barbed and trembling with pain, stained with desperation. His eyes were dark and bloodshot, hardened into steel. "Get out of here-

Iida's voice broke when Mincemeat struck him in the ribs with a steel toed boot, striking a valley that had split straight through his armor. "It seems you haven't learned a thing. Your hunger for vengeance is what makes you weak. Perhaps you need a harsher lesson-

"S-stop!" Izuku's plea rang through the air, halting Mincemeat's boot where it hovered over Iida's back. "D-don't-don't h-hurt him a-anymore. Y-you-he l-learned his lesson, we-we'll lea-leave, I promise." It was a gamble-he had no idea what Mincemeat's motives even were, but he couldn't-he couldn't just sit idly by while he hurt Iida.

"Stop me." In an instant, Mincemeat's inhuman stillness was overloaded with fluid motion, carelessly kicking Iida to the side as he advanced in thundering footfalls. A flash of sliver marked the retrieval of a hand length butcher's knife, dwarfed both by the villain's massive palm and the sword length implement in his other hand. Izuku leaped to his feet as his heart crammed itself against the back of his teeth, white noise washing out the growing fervor in Mincemeat's voice. "You are a U.A. student. You wish to become a hero. Prove that your ideals have meaning-if you desire safety for your friend, then stop me."

Izu didn't have the luxury of time. He frantically backpedaled, the heel of his boot knocking aside the mouthpiece of his mask as he drew his shoulders together and raised his left arm. He reached for his thinnest wire, digging carefully through the jumping, agitated energy of Living Nightmare until he had it firmly in his grasp.

He was the one in control-and nobody was going to die tonight.

The air erupted in a plume of crackling star stuff as Mincemeat's arm fell like a guillotine, the handle of the knife flat against his palm and the blade pointed down, aimed to rip and stab. The blast-back of heat and force rocked Izuku back on his heels, hissing against the exposed flesh of Mincemeat's arm and heating the blade of his knife until it bore a dull orange glow. The outward force was just enough to throw his swing off kilter, the knife skittering uselessly across the front of Izuku's armor.

He ducked low and pushed forward, pumping a micro burst through his heels to give himself more momentum, and entrenched himself firmly within Mincemeat's guard. He was close enough that the massive cleaver would be cumbersome to use, giving him the split second it would take for Mincemeat to wind up another swing to strike first.

Izu's left arm was wreathed in a cloud of galactic starlight, a shining white beacon that burst through the air like a screaming comet. With all the strength he could muster, determination burning hot under his skin, he jabbed his fist straight under Mincemeat's ribs and emitted a second burst from his knuckles. It created a detonating blow that would force the villain back and give Izuku time to create more distance and formulate a plan to destroy his weapons-

"WEAK." Izuku choked on air as a steely forearm slammed into his sternum, his armor absorbing enough kinetic energy to prevent his chest from simply caving in. Before he could even be knocked off his feet, fingers like iron cables were suddenly around his throat, accompanied by the clatter of a knife falling to the concrete. Izuku kicked feebly as he was lifted off the ground, unable to focus beyond blind panic. His airways were constricted so tightly he could only wheeze, eyes bugging out behind his visor as his control over Living Nightmare fizzled away. He reached instinctively for the hand around his throat, scrabbling uselessly at Mincemeat's fingers.

His wide, terrified gaze darted forwards, catching a flash of the bubbling crater in Mincemeat's abdomen smoothing itself over like wet clay before he was subjected to a leering iron mask.
"Conviction means nothing if you do not offer your full strength. I will simply have to *force* you to release your true power."

Mincemeat lifted him even higher, his vision flashing with spots of static before he was tossed away like a rag-doll, crashing hard against the asphalt and clutching desperately at his surely bruised throat. He coughed and wheezed in a desperate bid to draw in air, his right arm twitching underneath him as he struggled to push himself back upright. He barely had time to flip over onto his back before Mincemeat barreled forwards again, his cleaver raised high over his head-

Until his advancement was halted by an engine boosted boot smashing into the side of his head, a streak of searing blue nitro that took Mincemeat completely off course. He staggered sideways, cleaver falling to shriek across concrete as he clutched at his iron mask. Iida skidded to a halt a moment later in a cloud of exhaust, wobbling unsteadily on his feet. His eyes burned as hot as his engines, filled with fury and despair. "Midoriya, you have to *run-*"

"I-I'm *not* running anymore!" Izuku's voice was raw and throaty, the raspy shout ripping painfully out of him. He forced himself back onto his feet, the establishing link to Living Nightmare reflected by the sparks swirling around his fingertips. "I w-won't I won't I-leave you here w-with him!"

"This has nothing to do with you!" Iida's voice cracked from the sheer volume he'd crammed into it, stripped apart into stringy strands that barely concealed the choking tears lurking behind them.

"Y-yes, it does! O-of course it d-does-you're m-my friend," Izuku croaked, his own tears trailing down to condense against the bottom of his visor. "Y-you're my fri-friend and you're in d-danger, a-and-that's my-my fault too! Be-because you were already h-hurting, and-and I d-didn't do enough to help y-you!" Izuku could barely bite back a sob, self flagellating sorrow wearing him down like water over stone. He had just enough strength to stay standing, and force his gaze to lock with Iida's. "I-I'm so-so-sorry."

"Midoriya..." Iida's eyes softened, regret filling their depths like clouds of ink as some of his fury drained away. His split lip and battered frame were suddenly his own again, as if he'd been released from the possession of a wrathful specter. He opened his mouth to say something else, but the words never came. The only thing that left his blood stained lips was a wheeze as the flat of Mincemeat's cleaver caught him below his breastplate, lifting him clear off his feet as though he were a mere scrap of paper caught in the breeze.

"So many useless words," the villain growled as Iida skidded across the concrete, the side of his metal mask dented inwards. He raised his cleaver again and Izuku didn't think, snapping up his left arm and filling the night with starlight. A streak of exploding molecules struck Mincemeat across the back, filling his skin with pockmark holes and making him lurch off balance. He recovered much more quickly than he had before, spinning around with the sickening ease of a machine made of flesh. "THAT IS NOT ENOUGH."

His roar made Izuku flinch, his heels burning hot as he prepared to leap out of the way of an oncoming attack. Mincemeat raised his wicked cleaver high-and brought it down on his own offered hand, parting the flesh between his wrist and forearm with practiced ease. Izuku's stomach lurched as he was exposed to glistening flesh, and he nearly lost the contents of his stomach again when he realized that no blood flowed forth. The stump of Mincemeat's arm closed over like folded dough, a lump of unmarred flesh.

And his severed hand stayed aloft, fingers flexing outwards. Horror crawled through Izuku with prickling legs as the meat of the villain's hand suddenly split apart, as if they'd all been wrenched in different directions simultaneously. He gagged as strings of viscera connected the separate sections,
creating a filmy web that held together the joints of his fingers and his separated metacarpals. In an instant, his severed hand had tripled in size and become a nightmarish parody of human anatomy, more akin to some unknown predator lurking in the ocean's deepest depths than anything belonging to a human being. With a sickening squelch of raw flesh, strings of meat darted out of what remained of the wrist to impale themselves into Mincemeat's arm stump.

"You are young, and naive. You do not yet understand the value of true strength, the sacrifices that must be made to become more than what you are." Mincemeat's voice had leveled back out into the passionless drone he'd spoken in before, cold and unfeeling. "Your friend thought himself strong enough to defeat me. I taught him that he was powerless. From that knowledge, he may grow." Fifteen feet away, Iida failed to rise to his feet. He was barely able to even get his legs underneath him. "You have great strength at your disposal, but you refuse to use it. If you do not push your limits, you will never become more." Izuku's stomach twisted at the sight of mangled appendages in motion, tendrils of flesh and bone reaching down to pluck multiple knives from Mincemeat's belt. "I have been cut and broken at my own hand and the hands of others, so that I could become more than myself. And I will do the same for you."

Mincemeat reared back the tendrils of his nightmarish hand, all five appendages twined around the handle of a knife. He lifted his cleaver in tandem, the blade slick and shining with blood. His occluded eyes bore down on Izuku, dark pits containing untold horrors. "You will learn the value of your strength, or you will die."

Living Nightmare rose once more to his call. Burning white motes sparked around the trembling fingers of his left hand, accompanied by wisps of dark, oily fumes that bled from his knuckles. It wouldn't be difficult to reach blindly, to pull at cutting wires and unmake the monster of a man in front of him. He couldn't kill Mincemeat, he couldn't-but he and Iida were alone and injured, and his call for help hadn't yet been answered. He just... he just needed to slow the villain down, and buy more time. He had to protect Iida. He had to protect himself. Living Nightmare's teeth gnashed against his tendons and gnawed into his bones, the power surging through his arm-

And Izuku gasped in shock as a gout of searing flames rushed past his fingertips, instinct driving him to duck away and clutch his arm against his chest. Mincemeat's knives clattered to the ground as his inhuman hand retracted back into a human shape, meat bubbling and popping from the heat of the flames lashing against it. That hadn't been Living Nightmare.

"Midoriya. Next time you're in danger, please send more information. There's such a thing as being too concise." Izuku sobbed in relief as Todoroki's dry tone cut through the night air, his knees trembling uncontrollably as Living Nightmare receded back into his chest. Todoroki was a beacon in the night, his left side painted in a living mural of fire. The flames licked through his hair and the fabric of his jumpsuit, combating the dark shadows that had choked out the street.

"T-Todoroki-y-you're h-here," Izuku choked out in something like disbelief, having been nearly certain that his message would have been for naught.

"You don't really seem the type to send ominous messages for no reason, so I figured you must have been in trouble. It's unfortunate that your luck hasn't improved." Todoroki's expression was stoic, back-lit by his flames to reveal the icy sheen of his eyes. His gaze was locked unerringly on the statuesque Mincemeat, who regarded him with equal intensity. "There are pro heroes on the way right now, so I'll help you and Iida keep this guy occupied until they get here."

Mincemeat remained absolutely still when the volume of Todoroki's fire nearly doubled, a clear threat meant to intimidate. "..Hell Flame." Todoroki's eyes widened by a fraction, his expression thawing with shock. He stepped forward with his right foot- "Unfortunate. It seems our lesson will
have to be postponed." Mincemeat mechanically returned his cleaver to its loop on his belt, the blade barely an inch away from scraping the pavement. He regarded Izuku and Todoroki in silence for a long moment, before tilting his mask to look back at Iida. "Tell Ingenium I'll be waiting for him."

Before Izuku could even think of moving, Mincemeat's detached hand rocketed through the air as if it'd been flung, all five fingers spreading apart before it suddenly ballooned outward in an impossibly large explosion of gore. The entire street was suddenly choked in a hazy fog of blood, limiting Izuku's vision to barely an inch past his visor. He cried out in shock as he felt a sudden spike in temperature, barely able to see the impression of Todoroki's flames lighting up the fog.

Izuku had only just begun to wipe fruitlessly at his visor when the blood fog dissipated, thinning out in seconds to leave the three of them alone on the street. Mincemeat had vanished, along with his knives and the severed arm of the Noumu.

Todoroki's flames burned for a moment longer before he released them, a sigh spilling past his lips. "Midoriya, are you injured-" His inquiry was cut short when Izuku desperately threw himself at his classmate, tears running hot down his face as he clung pathetically to Todoroki's jumpsuit. He shuddered with hitching breaths, sobs bubbling in the back of his throat but never quite spilling forth.

It was-it was going to be okay. They were going to be okay. It was over.

A handful of moments passed before Izuku could feel the cautious, unsure press of Todoroki's hand against his shoulder, fingers just barely applying pressure. "It's... okay. You're safe now." The awkward lilt in his voice made it clear that Todoroki was unsure of what to say, and Izuku only allowed himself another selfish second of physical comfort before he pulled away.

"I-I'm sorry," he mumbled, sniffling and dislodging his visor to wipe at his eyes with a gloved palm. "I-Iida is-he's h-hurt. W-we should g-get him s-somewhere safe." The emotional turmoil that Izuku had expected wasn't quite as overwhelming as he'd thought it would be, and he was coherent enough to at least scoop up his discarded mouth piece and lead Todoroki towards Iida's prone figure. He could break down later, when they were no longer in any danger.

"...Yeah," Todoroki replied agreeably, sticking close to Izuku's side-probably making sure he wouldn't fall. Iida's dented armor shone milk white in the moonlight, highlighting the damage it had taken. But he'd be okay. Izuku would make sure of it. "Let's get out of here."

Chapter End Notes

Some goretastic fanart for this chapter!
https://cricketmilk.tumblr.com/post/166575001154/daymare-chapter-38-i-wanted-to-draw-mincemeat
Chapter 39

The weight of Iida's dented armor, combined with that of his limp body, was significantly more difficult to carry than Izuku had been prepared for. His legs trembled underneath him as he struggled to maintain balance with Iida's arm slung over his shoulder, kept upright almost completely by Todoroki's stoic efforts on his other side. His right arm was mostly recovered from his use of Living Nightmare, in that it no longer felt as though he'd injected it with molten lead, but the muscles were still weak and slow to respond, making it less than ideal for bearing his friend's dead weight.

His breaths came in raspy wheezes, constricted by the phantom pressure of meaty fingers squeezing his throat. It was a constant ache that throbbed whenever he swallowed or breathed too deeply, and his throat would surely be painted with angry purple-black bruises. It was enough to twist his voice until his words were strangled and reedy, when he dared to break the silence.

"T-Todoroki.. y-you-sa-said other h-heroes were o-on th-the way, right?" Izuku earned a cool glance from his classmate, his expression unreadable.

"Yeah. I was out with my father when I got your message. I told him the street address before coming over here. At the very least, some of his sidekicks should be getting close by now." Todoroki grunted under his breath, and a moment later Izuku was relieved of some of Iida's weight. He opened his mouth to protest- "That villain you were fighting. Who was he?"

Fiendish thoughts rose unbidden from the dark well at the back of his mind, assaulting him with visceral flashes of exposed organs, melding flesh, and a cold iron mask. Izuku quailed against the shiver that wracked his spine, and focused on keeping Iida upright. "H..he-

"What the hell do you think you're doin' out here kid?! I told you to stay on the train, and I meant it!"

Izuku glanced up in shock as Gran Torino's yell ricocheted off the walls of the alleyway he emerged from, his egg white costume stained with soot and his expression contorted with annoyance. A knot of dread screwed deep into the depths of his stomach, steel threads slicing through his insides like butter. Izuku failed to muster up an immediate response, drawing a blank as panic crept into the corners of his mind. He'd been so wrapped up in everything, so tunnel visioned that he'd almost completely forgotten-

Before he had a chance to sputter out a plea for forgiveness, Gran Torino's scowl softened at the edges, and he sighed out a breath. "'Least you're still on your feet, so you can't be too banged up." The retired pro's gaze sharpened for a moment, his edges hardening back over. "Can't say the same for your friend though. What happened? What's his condition?"

"Iida and Midoriya were assaulted by a villain," Todoroki cut in before Izuku had a chance to open his mouth. "Iida was knocked unconscious before I arrived to help, but he doesn't seem to have any critical injuries. Did you happen to see any of Endeavor's sidekicks on your way here, sir?"

"Didn't see em' myself, but I ran into Todoroki on the way here. Told me there'd be trouble down this way, so I'd bet his sidekicks aren't too far behind." Gran Torino's shrewd gaze flickered over Todoroki's impassive visage, flickering with recognition before he once again subjected Izuku to the weight of his stare. "And once you and your friend get your injuries looked over, you're gonna tell me exactly what made you think it was a good idea to fight a villain by yourself."

"R-right, ye-yes s-sir. I-I'm sorry, M-Mr. Torino," Izuku stammered out in a raspy whisper, his legs wobbling as the last fumes of adrenaline keeping him going dissipated. He was left with a bone deep
weariness, which splintered out into a jagged spiderweb of aches and pains. Stronger still was the iron bite of regret on the back of his tongue, sour and accusing. It was his fault, after all, that Iida had been hurt. If he'd been more empathetic, more insistent, more aware of his friend's turmoil, maybe he could have prevented it. If he'd fought harder, if he'd hesitated less, if he hadn't been a coward-

Izuku's silent descent dragged him down into the briney depths of hissing static, a bulwark of sensory deprivation that snuffed out the world around him: he was still and silent as Endeavor's sidekicks came barreling down the street towards them, limp and compliant when Iida's weight was eased from him, fragile and buckling when Todoroki stood beside him, blind and unknowing of the hesitant concern flickering behind mismatched eyes. He didn't look up when a hand drenched in pale moonbeams struggled to reach towards him, fingertips outstretched.

Izuku was lost until the moment reality ripped him asunder, awareness gouging his flesh at the same moment a strangled cry of pain emerged from the body at his side. He had half an instant to be cooked alive by reigniting nerves (throat tightened by a wire noose, eyes squeezed out of his head by clawed thumbs something was wrongwrongwrong) and before he could even turn his head sensation crashed into him with the force of a wrecking ball, three points of pressure hooking against the back of the collar of his uniform and knocking him off his feet. Before he could even hit the ground a fourth entity blazed across his lower back, tearing fabric and skin alike before it caught against the lip of his armor, forming an anchor point to rip him straight off the ground and into the air. The street pulled away from under his feet and his stomach lurched as his armor pulled tight around his throat, pressing into his ribs like a harness.

It took a handful of seconds for awareness to come screaming in on the back of adrenaline, the red hot burn that brought Izuku kicking and screaming into action. He caught a glimpse of the fleeing concrete with a wild flick of his head, his retinas burning with the sight of blood trailing down Todoroki's hunched back and Gran Torino blitzing down the street in hot pursuit.

A garbled screech sounded from above him, and Izuku struggled to crane his neck against the rushing wind. He saw flashes of leathery skin and vaguely humanoid features, which combined with a pulsing chunk of grey matter to confirm his fear-he'd been grabbed by one of the Noumu. He could hear the powerful flapping of fleshy wings, a sound that occupied a single node of the overheating mainframe in his head.

It was-the Noumu belonged to Shigaraki, and-and Mincemeat had said, he had said that Shigaraki wanted him dead- Izuku didn't think. He tugged Living Nightmare to the surface with a single wire, drawing forth a mere echo of pure destruction. It poured into his arm in a torrent of malicious sludge, his influence bathing it in absolving fire until it burned pure white and erupted from his wildly swinging hand. Living Nightmare manifested as a corona of crackling brilliance that trailed through the air like the tail of a shooting star, a single mote of light combating the bleak darkness of the night.

With the wind whistling past his face and an adrenaline fueled bloodsong pulsing in his ears, Izuku was nearly deaf to his own hyperventilation as he desperately heaved his body side to side in the Noumu's grip, straining until his shoulder socket burned in an effort to angle an attack straight upwards. His gaze dropped to the tips of his boots, the mirror shine revealing a smear of dark sky along with the blurry outline of a fleshy, translucent wing, the closest thing he'd get to a clear shot. The Noumu screeched and violently jostled him with its single clawed foot, and for a split second Izuku nearly heaved up every organ stuffed into his abdomen as the fear of falling drowned out every other thought. But the talons clutched around his armor were rock solid, and he swung just far enough to unleash-

Without warning, Izuku's entire left side was exposed to a dizzying spike in temperature just as he released the output of Living Nightmare, a bolt of crackling yellow flames searing past his head and
slicing into the Noumu's underside, the impact raining embers down on Izuku's head. Half an instant later Living Nightmare poured forth in a spout of stardust from his gloved fingertips, popping and sparking like a barrage of firecrackers that ate away glowing holes in the Noumu's leathery wing.

The monster screeched in agony, the rain of embers replaced by drizzling blood that cut slick lines across Izuku's scalp, pooling momentarily at the top of his visor before running in currents down the sides of his face. His revulsion was a drop in the geyser of panic that exploded forth as the Noumu suddenly dipped in altitude, it's heavy injury bringing it down much more quickly than Izuku had been planning. Instead of bringing it down long enough to combat and escape from, they were both suddenly hurtling towards the concrete sea below.

The whistling wind became a howling shriek as Izuku plummeted like a stone, dragged and anchored by the Noumu's talons still digging into his armor. He could feel the end of the shredded wing slapping against his boots as the monster struggled to regain altitude, and strained to reach back to get a grip on its foot. His fingertips snagged against a seam of skin that broke into keratin claws, and sent a pulse of Living Nightmare through his fingers. He gagged at the sound of popping flesh and splintering keratin, able to feel a dull heat permeate his armor before one of the talons suddenly broke off. Izuku dangled for a heart stopping moment as clawed toes scraped against his armor, before the grip suddenly broke and sent him into a gentle roll.

The Noumu's screeches grew more distant as Izuku streaked towards the nauseatingly close concrete, so close that he had no way of righting himself for a safe landing in time. Izuku covered his head with one arm and threw the other out in a desperate swing, galactic sparks flowing in a panicked downpour from his fingertips in a last ditch effort to give himself a cushion-

Izuku's hand was the first thing to impact the concrete, his bones creaking for all of an instant before his fingers snapped like matchsticks and his forearm cracked in half. Izuku's vision went completely white as he was overcome by a typhoon of agony, straining to roll his battered body to the side and clutch instinctively at his arm. His damaged throat strangled his scream of pain into a hoarse whine, but the discomfort was a mere afterthought compared to the throbbing inferno raging under the skin of his arm. He could taste hot bile in the back of his throat, brewed by the sickening nausea of his overbearing pain, and struggled not to lose what little remained of his stomach contents.

"Shit," came a hissed exclamation from what Izuku dazedly imagined to be a few paces away, accompanied by the sound of boots on concrete. "You still with us, kid? Didn't hit your head, right?"

Izuku sluggishly blinked through the haze of static that had muddled his vision, inclining his head to spy the swimming image of Gran Torino, his concern clear as day even through his domino mask.

"I...just m-m-my a-arm," Izuku lied through gritted teeth-his road rash and bruises weren't important compared to shattered bones, and even if they were he doubted he could have explained them without being sick.

"Could'a been worse. Just stick it out for now kid, we've got an ambulance on the way." Gran Torino's voice almost sounded gentle, but Izuku chalked that up to his own delusions when the retired pro suddenly barked in agitation over his shoulder. "Todoroki, the hell are you standin' around for?! Get the kid back to safety. I'll handle that winged freak."

Rather than the fear of vomiting, Izuku was overcome with the thought that he might just faint altogether when the suited up form of Endeavor stepped into his field of view, his furious scowl wreathed by snapping flames. Izuku froze up under the bone deep freeze of his glare, before thickly muscled arms lifted him from the ground as though he were nothing but a rag doll. He bit down on a yelp when the motion jostled his broken arm, cradling it close to his chest.

"Better be careful, old man," Endeavor bit out at Gran Torino's retreating back, and seemed to
visibly restrain himself from spitting anything with any significant vitriol. "Is your arm the only thing that's broken?" It took half a second for Izuku to realize the number two hero was addressing him, and he sputtered out a jumble of syllables before giving up and nodding.

He was roughly deposited on his feet without a word of warning, Endeavor practically dumping him back onto the concrete. "Then get moving. A hero that can't pick themself up after a fight is more trouble than they're worth. Better for you to learn that now." Izuku's shaking legs barely kept him upright, but he wasn't exactly given much time to orient himself. Endeavor stalked back towards where his sidekicks were huddled so quickly that Izuku could barely keep up, the space in his chest that might normally be filled with offense and upset instead overflowing with a mire of misery.

With his earthbound perspective restored, a dazed part of him realized the Noumu hadn't made it very far at all before being taken down. The perpetual echo of agony still made every step resonate far longer than the modest distance required, however, and it felt like an eternity of his broken bones grinding together with teeth rattling shrieks before he'd finally caught up. The blare of an ambulance echoed down to the empty street, and a handful of Endeavor's sidekicks jogged past him, sparing looks of sympathy that he hardly registered.

Izuku stood on the fringe of activity, watching numbly as Endeavor spoke to one of his subordinates, who sat with Todoroki splayed face down across their legs. His back was a ragged mess of blood, his jumpsuit torn like tissue paper and his skin shredded in three distinct gouges. The Noumu's talons had cut streaks that marred his back from shoulder to hip, a trio of ugly wounds oozing rivulets of blood. The sidekick was struggling to staunch the blood flow with a piece of their own costume, looking increasingly pale as Endeavor's wreath of flames momentarily flared up. Todoroki's eyes were half lidded, his lips pulled into a tight line of pain and irritation. His father's presence clearly wasn't alleviating him of his pain, and the cold sneer on Endeavor's face made his displeasure with and disregard for Todoroki obvious. It made him angry, but Izuku was so exhausted that it was merely a sputter of disgust compared to the molten toxins Endeavor had conjured in him previously.

Todoroki's mouth finally parted to offer something clipped and quiet to his demanding father, a brief utterance to relieve himself of the scrutiny. For a moment, Izuku locked gazes with him, and a deluge of remorse poured into the pit of his stomach. ..It was his fault. Just like-Iida. Izuku pulled himself from the icy depths of Todoroki's eyes, scanning the rest of the street until his eyes caught on a flash of sliver.

Iida had apparently awoken in the meantime, but he looked dazed and half aware of his surroundings. His head lolled slightly to the side as one of Endeavor's sidekicks firmly pried away some of the more damaged sections of his costume, the twisted hunks of metal making bile surge in Izuku's gut. That villain-Mincemeat could have killed Iida whenever he wanted to. Iida hadn't survived by Izuku's intervention—it was all due to the deluded whims of a murderer. Dumb luck was the only thing that kept him breathing.

Izuku had only just obeyed the impulse that implored him to walk over and grovel at Iida's feet in remorse when a body stood in his way, navy fabric stretched over a hardened physique and crackling flames rimmed around a frosted scowl. "You. Midoriya, correct? Tell me everything you know about the villain that attacked you and your classmates." Endeavor's voice spiked with impatience, a jagged frequency that grew only sharper with every moment that served to prod at his limited tolerance.

Offering a slow, dull blink in response, because all his nervous energy had been drained in the effort of just keeping his balance, Izuku struggled to untangle the knot of his tongue. "H-h-he.. he s-said his name wa-was M-Mincemeat. I-I think-h-he's the one th-that.. k-killed the Hero Killer. H-he wore a m-mask-a metal one. W-we couldn't see hi-his face. A-and his Quirk w-was... s-some form of o-organic m-manipulation, t-that he activated b-by cutting with a blade." Dazed and
exhausted, Izuku was slow to recognize the subtle shift in Endeavor's expression, and by the time he had it had already been wiped away.

"Hm. Thank you for your cooperation," Endeavor muttered, his tone so slightly off that Izuku couldn't muster the energy to analyze it any further. He didn't even watch the pro hero stalk off to presumably reconvene with his sidekicks. His head was swimming, the constant throb of his broken arm drowning out every other thought until they could barely murmur beneath the choppy surface.

The piercing drone of ambulance sirens suddenly came into focus, trailed by a squadron of police cruisers. The strobing red and blue light that flooded the street made Izuku sick to his stomach, but he managed to shove it down with the weight of his relief. He was pliant and acquiescing when one of the paramedics was directed his way, looking over his injuries with professional aptitude.

There was a node of bleeding empathy that demanded he cast aside the weight of his injuries and apologize to his friends, but he was unable to find the energy. He was dull eyed and hazy minded as he was loaded into the back of the ambulance with Iida and Todoroki, too weak to even lift his head in an effort to make eye contact. Soaked by blood and painted in bruises, his right arm shattered and useless and his throat as raw as broken glass, Izuku couldn't muster any more strength; all he wanted was for the night to finally end.

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"-yeah, I-I'm s-sure m-mom. I-I'll be fine." Izuku Midoriya put a hundred and ten percent effort into offering his mother a reassuring smile, and managed to convert it to roughly sixty percent actual effectiveness. It was more of a struggle than usual, when it came to putting on a brave face and acting like everything was alright. He shifted uncomfortably on the stiff hospital mattress, stark white sheets thrown over his legs and buzzing fluorescent lights throwing the already sickly green walls into nauseating relief.

He'd been... somewhat incoherent, after the events of the night in Hosu. He'd passed out in the back of the ambulance, only to wake up after extensive surgery on his shattered hand from a drug fogged slumber to find himself swaddled in starched, medicinally scented sheets with Iida and Todoroki populating the other two beds. He'd been informed that he needed at least a bare minimum of one week mandatory rest for his injuries to heal up before he could be treated further by Recovery Girl, which meant the heavy fiberglass cast and sling his right arm had been constrained in wouldn't be coming off for a while.

In the meantime, he'd been infested with a strain of malaise that crept into every nook and cranny that had been vacated by mortal terror. If not for the cocktail of drugs he'd been given, Izuku doubted his sleep would have been even remotely restful. Every hideous moment of that night wormed its way behind his retinas, flashing in sickening splatters of visceral horror for the few brief moments he allowed his mind to wander. It was for that reason alone that he almost welcomed his mother's over-protectiveness, trading embarrassment and guilt for a taste of warm familiarity.

His mother's eyes softened, green pools that wavered and rippled with concern at their shores. "Alright sweetie, if you're sure. Just remember to call me if you need anything-I'll bring some lunch by for you and your friends tomorrow." Izuku's cheek burned with embarrassment when his mother stooped over the side of his bed to kiss the top of his head, and bit back a whine of protest. "I love you Izuku, I'll see you soon!"

"I-love you t-too mom, b-bye," he mumbled in return, pretending not to notice his mother wave goodbye at Iida and Todoroki as well, before she let the door click shut behind her. He sagged back into his stiff pillows a moment later, rubbing at his face with his uninjured hand. He'd only been awake for around... four hours, but he was already yearning for the call of sleep again.
"...S-sorry about th-that," he offered to the room at large, his voice soft and raspy, "s-she c-can be a
little o-overbearing s-sometimes." Each word increased the pace of Izuku's violently thumping heart,
hyper aware of being the first words he'd spoken to his friends since the night before.

"It's no problem at all, Midoriya. Your mother seems like a very kind person." Iida sounded.. cordial,
with no particular inflection or emotion present in his voice. It sent a pang through Izuku's chest, a
slow twist that snapped cardiovascular vessels like old rope fibers. It made him want to cry out, to
make right what had broken between them, but.. Izuku was afraid. Just like he always was.

Todoroki hummed in something that could have been construed as agreement from his own bed,
forced to lie on his side to avoid agitating the wounds on his back. He looked... dull. Despite his
vibrant coloration, everything about him seemed slightly muted when he was stranded amongst stark
whites. His expression was as disinterested as it usually was, but the shadows under his eyes made it
clear that the night had affected him as well. Izuku was at a loss for how to even begin reaching out
to him-to either of them.

"H..h-how, uhm... i-is your arm-i-is it okay, Iida?" Izuku hadn't been able to see the aftermath of the
severance and reattachment-the cutting point was hidden underneath Iida's hospital gown, along with
the numerous puncture wounds and deep bruises that had been caused by his dented armor.

"As okay as it can be, I suppose." Iida mechanically removed his glasses rubbing at the space
between his eyes. for a brief moment, his gown shifted, and Izuku caught a glimpse of molted scar
tissue marring his shoulder, twisted and angry like barbed wire. His expression turned grave, and
Izuku's heart plummeted along with it. "The doctors said I might have.. permanent nerve damage.
Some numbness in my fingers, a detriment to fine motor control..." Iida's arm laid limply across his
legs, digits half curled. He stared down at them with something so close to hopelessness that Izuku
could hardly breathe.

"I-I'm s-sorry," he uttered before he could think better of it, drawing his legs against his chest to
combat the murky coldness spreading throughout his chest. Tears oozed down his cheeks like pearl
slugs, warmed through by sickly heat. "I-if I'd-i-if I was f-faster, I could h-have.. y-you wouldn't-
His voice hitched and cracked, broken through by a spiderweb of fractures that just barely held
together.

"Midoriya..." Iida's expression faltered in stability for all of a moment before he broke eye contact,
lips tightening and gaze firmly locked in his sheets. "I don't blame you for anything that happened. It
isn't your fault. You don't... you don't need to make it your fault, either. So please, let's not talk about
it, alright?"

"H-how can you say it i-isn't my f-fault? Y-you-I.." Izuku wiped fruitlessly at his face with his
uninjured hand, and failed to cease crying. "I-I don't un-understand why-why you c-couldn't just t-
talk to me. I-if you w-were so upset, s-so angry- I w-would have listened."

"Midoriya-" Todoroki sat up, attempting to cut in, but Iida spoke up over him.

"I know that I can confide in you, Midoriya. I know that I can tell you anything, and you would
listen. And that's exactly why I didn't." Iida's expression closed even further, a wall of stone that,
nonetheless, would not look directly at Izuku. "You have your own issues to worry about without
trying to fix everyone else's. It would be unbecoming of me to bog you down further. So, as my
friend, I hope you will respect my request not to talk about it." Izuku couldn't see-he couldn't see
what expression Iida wore, if there was sincerity in his eyes, if he was hurting, if he was angry-

He couldn't see anything through his own tears, and the clanging echo that reverberated inside his
head, that screamed 'You are not wanted'. Izuku muffled a sob in the palm of his hand, turning away
in a vain effort to hide his tears. Shame and worthlessness twined like serpents in his stomach, twisting and churning until he thought he might be sick. He was—he had to say something, but...

Izuku couldn't find the words. He sat and cried in his hospital bed, choking on his misery, and silently wished for the pain in his arm to worsen a hundred-fold, just to feel something stronger than the ache in his chest.
Tenya Iida, by way of grief and anger fueling the flames of catastrophic regret, had lost himself. It hadn’t been slow, or gradual; the moment he’d seen his brother, confined to a hospital bed with one arm and the light in his eyes snuffed out, he’d snapped. The weight he bared had been too much, and the resulting fractures had ground incessantly together with every passing moment. It was an ache he could not soothe, a wound he could not staunch, and it had driven him further and further into rage. He had strayed further and further away from what he was working so hard to become.

What sort of hero could he ever hope to be? What sort of hero would behave so irrationally, crippling his own academic prospects to hunt what might as well have been a ghost? What sort of hero abandoned his duty, turning his back on those in need to satiate his own thirst for revenge? What sort of hero assailed an unknown threat by himself, so blinded by rage that he could not see his own folly? ..What sort of hero was so callous and inconsiderate that he made his own friend cry?

Tenya failed to swallow the chain link knot in his throat, the rusted thing that wound throughout his moving parts and locked them into agonizing stillness. The sight of Midoriya's unconcealed tears multiplied the links exponentially, until he felt as if he might choke on them. Had he not known better, Tenya might have believed that Midoriya's frequent crying was merely a result of sensitivity; but he knew better. He knew that his friend was mere inches from the edge at all times, trembling to stand under the crushing weight anchored to his shoulders.

It was cruel of him to add to that weight. It was cruel to hurt him, to hurt someone that tried as hard as they could just to put on a smile for others. Tenya parted his lips to say—something, anything—but the tingle of raw nerves and fresh stitches holding together his upper lip brought with them a waterfall of dread, draped in crimson by the sanguineous blade of a butcher.

And then the moment slipped through his fingers, his nerves too damaged to grasp it. The door to their room slid open, and Iida struggled to swallow his guilt at the sight of Midoriya frantically wiping at his face with his one uninjured hand. That shame only redoubled at the sight of Manual stepping through the door, alongside a... much shorter man, also in full hero garb.

Shame flooded his insides like spilled coolant, icy and clinging to every crevice of his internal structures when Manual looked his way. He felt like a child that had done wrong, cowed and sick with guilt and fear to be chastised by a disappointed authority figure—

"The hell were you thinkin', you knucklehead! I could yell at you for hours over that stunt you pulled!" Tenya's disparaging thought process was interrupted by a raised, gruff voice, belonging to the aged hero clad in cream and yellow. He looked steamed enough to jump onto the side of Midoriya's bed and berate him from inches away, eyes narrowed at the shrinking teenager swamped in hospital sheets.

Before any escalation had a chance to occur, the hero's voice softened, and it occurred to Tenya that he must be the hero Midoriya had interned with, Gran Torino. "But you're still in one piece I guess, so I can't be too mad at you. Or at least, as close to one piece as you can be." Tenya could just barely make out the tail end of Midoriya's whispered apology, and Gran Torino's gaze lingered on the molted ring of bruises splashed across his throat. "How's your arm holdin' up, then? Still got all your fingers?"

"Tenya.." The sound of Midoriya and Gran Torino's conversation faded into the background at the behest of Manual's address, his voice lilted with uncertainty and something that bordered on disappointment. Tenya resisted the urge to cringe, the pangs of guilt in his chest ringing like wind
chimes.

"I apologize, sir," he blurted out, a windfall of words rushing to soften the blow he knew was coming, "There is no excuse for my behavior, and I can never make up the harm I've done by acting so rashly and disobeying you. I'm sorry for disrespecting your authority." Tenya failed to maintain eye contact for more than a few seconds, which had the consequence of revealing how tired and worn Manual appeared, his eyes dulled and marked with bags. Manual had likely worked through the night, to clean up his mess.

Manual's lips quirked into a half smile, the humor lost in the gesture. "You're not the only one at fault, but I hope you understand how serious your mistake was. I'm sorry for my negligence as your supervisor, as well as.. your internship is being cancelled. You'll receive partial marks for your time with my agency, but I'm afraid that's where it ends. You have a lot of potential, Tenya. I hope you learn from this."

With his breath frozen to solid ice in his throat, Tenya stared blankly forward as he struggled to process the weight of Manual's words. Distantly, he was aware of Gran Torino announcing their departure, and the mention of other visitors. How... how could he have ever been so stupid, so blind?

He'd ruined everything in the name of his brother, and had ended up with nothing in return.

Izuku Midoriya didn't know what to do anymore. Thrashed and battered in the wake of a single night that had brought with it more horror and turmoil than he'd thought possible, he was left with only heartache, and not a single clue of how to fix everything that had gone so terribly wrong. But he had no choice in the matter, did he? Izuku had to fix things—even if he couldn't make things go back to how they had been, he couldn't stand to watch Iida silently crumble and close himself off. He.. they were friends, weren't they? Why couldn't Iida just talk to him? ...Did he not trust him anymore?

Izuku bit the inside of his cheek in a feeble effort to combat the poisonous thought, aware that the only chance he had of functioning whatsoever required him to operate under the assertion that Iida still considered him a friend. The alternative was too awful to consider.

Before he could speak up in an effort to dismiss the awful blankness that had crowded every inch of Iida's face, the moment of silence left in Gran Torino and Manual's wake was broken by the hospital door sliding open with enough force to rattle the frame. It allowed just enough room for Kirishima and Uraraka to burst through in an uncoordinated mess of limbs, followed momentarily by a monumentally more sedate Tokoyami. Flabbergasted by their sudden appearance (didn't they have internships surely they had gotten permission right were they even allowed to be here-), Izuku was unable to find words before Iida voiced his own confusion.

"Wha-what are you three doing here?" The confusion in his voice was palpable, and for good reason—how did they even know anything was wrong?

"We're here to check on you guys, since you apparently can't stay out of trouble without us around!" Uraraka's tone was fiercer than Izuku had been prepared for, loaded with admonishment between layers of concern and relief.

"There was a piece about the attack on the news this morning," Kirishima explained more clearly, settling on the edge of Izuku's bed in complete ignorance to how the pace of Izuku's heart quickened in his chest, "and they mentioned that three U.A. students had been involved. They didn't mention you guys by name, but since Iida was in Hosu and he and Midoriya weren't answering the group
chat, it made it pretty obvious."

"He forgot to mention the part where he called the rest of our classmates as well, just to make sure." Tokoyami dragged over one of the chairs set against the far wall, settling primly into the space between Izuku and Todoroki's beds. He looked as sleek and unruffled as ever, but his movements were slightly sluggish, and he seemed to be blinking more frequently.

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Kirishima retorted, the slightest hint of embarrassment peeking through his worried expression. Izuku's breath caught in his throat when blood orange eyes turned his way, light refracting through crimson soaked prisms. "How badly did you guys get hurt?" A series of knots deep in his chest began slowly unwinding as he soaked in the warmth of their physical proximity, barbed ends smoothing down in contentment. In return they were replaced by a knot of tears, as an inkling of the importance he attributed to Kirishima's mere presence revealed itself.

He was so overwhelmed that he completely forgot to speak, and realized so only when Todoroki took up the initiative. "Iida and Midoriya received the worst injuries. Mostly breaks and fractures, as well as heavy bruising and moderate lacerations. Most of it will heal without complications."

Todoroki spoke with a dry casualness, as if he didn't have three massive gashes (that would surely be debilitatingly painful without medication) down the entire length of his back. His eyes shifted so minutely that Izuku would have believed it a trick of the light, if he hadn't been looking in Iida's direction.

Lips tightening into a thin line, Iida picked up the thread of conversation without faltering. "Yes, nothing serious to worry about, though your concern is appreciated. However, I hope you all received explicit permission to take time off from your internships to come here! It would be shameful to-" Iida paused for half a moment, stumbling over his words before steamrolling right back through the interruption, "-to disobey instructions not only from U.A., but your chosen agencies as well!"

"Don't worry, we made extra sure to get permission, cuz' we knew you'd throw a fit if we didn't!" Uraraka grinned sweetly when Iida sputtered in response, sliding over to sit smoothly at the edge of his bed. "Gunhead was totally understanding, and gave me the whole day off!"

"Yeah, Mr. Fourth Kind was cool with letting me off the hook for a bit. Hopefully he's not too hard on Tetsutetsu while I'm gone." The second half of Kirishima's statement was more to himself than anything, and it was followed by a few moments of every head gradually turning toward Tokoyami.

Despite the lack of eyebrows, he was more than capable of expressing his exasperation with only his eyes and a drawn out sigh. "Grave Keeper is harsh, but she did not offer much resistance to my request."

"You know, speaking of internships, we ran into you guys' instructors on our way in-Manual, and that old dude." Kirishima gestured at Iida and Izuku with either hand, springs squeaking under him as he shifted to better face everyone.

"G-Gran Torino," Izuku supplied, his heart skipping a beat as he frantically attempted to unravel whatever point his classmate was working towards. If they'd talked about-

"Yeah, that guy! He uh.. well, we kinda asked about what had happened to you guys?" Kirishima flashed an already apologetic grin, showing only a sliver of teeth. "He didn't tell us, and neither did Manual, but the Torino guy said that it was kinda... under wraps? Like, not to spread it around or whatever? And that sounded kinda suspect, cuz' everyone already knows it was an attack by the League.. right?"
Izuku crumbled under the open worry in Kirishima's eyes, his smile slipping in increments for every moment that no answer was forthcoming. He didn't—what was he supposed to say? Gran Torino hadn't mentioned anything to them, the visit had been so quick was he not supposed to talk about it would there be ramifications if he did speak about it—

"Iida and Midoriya were attacked by an unknown villain during the incident," Todoroki supplied when it was clear nobody else would speak up, his tone carefully flat. "Midoriya sent out a message for help—" realization flashed through blood orange eyes and Izuku's heart twisted—"and I was close enough to assist. The villain managed to escape, which is, I assume, the reason Gran Torino requested you not spread it around. The authorities likely want to avoid a repeat of the sensationalism that cropped up with the Hero Killer—"

"Todoroki, it's alright. They deserve to know." Unease poured into Izuku's stomach in a river of tar-thick ichor, putrid and roiling as he watched Iida's facade splinter into yawning fractures. His right hand trembled where it lay upon the pristine sheets, fingers strained to form a tight fist. "The events of the other night were entirely my own fault. The villain I attacked—" Iida swallowed visibly, his expression twisting with turmoil, "the man who killed the Hero Killer.. the monster that hurt my brother—I attacked him, blinded by my own hatred. I'm the one responsible, it's my fault that Midoriya and Todoroki were injured! Because I was so caught up in revenge, so selfish that I—that I—"

Izuku burned with the need to interject, to say something, anything that could even come close to absolving Iida of his instability, of his mistake—but Iida didn't want that. Iida didn't want to talk to him, refused to confide in him because.. because—"W—why couldn't you just ta-talk to us?!" Izuku shot up as his desperation ignited, unwilling to let him keep still. He ignored Kirishima's concerned utterance of his name, words tumbling from his mouth in a tearful cacophony.

"Wh—why w-wouldn't you l-let me h-help you? I-I t-thought—" Izuku paused for a sliver of a moment, struggling to wipe his vision clear of frustrated tears. "D-did I-did I d-do something wr-wrong? D-do-I—w-were fr-friends, a-aren't we?" His voice cracked like glass, still raw and aching, but he forced the words out, too weak to bite them back and lock them away. He stared imploringly across the room, his tears making the shine of Iida's glasses stretch and distort. "D-do you n-not trust m-me?"

Kirishima's voice attempted to cut through, a warm hand squeezing around Izuku's trembling shoulder. "Midoriya, it's okay—"

"That's not what this is about!" Iida's volume had risen to a near shout, pitched by a dissonant echo of Izuku's own frustration. "How could you even ask that?! Of course I trust you—"

"Uh, guys—" Todoroki's soft interruption was completely buried, nothing more than background noise.

"T—that's not wh-what it ffeels like!" Panic gnawed at the rotten base of his anger and helplessness, twining together like serpent carcasses. Everything was going wrong, everything was fucked up again because of him—"I do-don't u-understand why—why yo-you won't t-talk to m-me! I j-just want t-to h-help you—"

"This is getting out of hand, both of you need to take some time to calm down—" Even as he rose from his seat, Tokoyami's warning went unheeded.

"You're doing it again, you're making everything your own fault!" Iida's jaw clenched tight, but the sheen of tears behind his glasses was unmistakable. "I won't allow you. This is my mistake, and nothing you say will undo it, or make it any less my own! I know it was stupid, I know I should have come to you sooner, but this isn't helping! Midoriya, you—"
Iida's torrent was diminished by the weight of Uraraka's arms gently wrapping around his shoulders, her cheek pressed up against the top of his head. "I'm sorry you felt like you couldn't talk to us, Iida. I'm sorry you feel like you can't talk to us now." Despite the soft, almost mournful tone of her voice, her shoulders were set with determination. "But you're safe, and I'm really glad you're okay, and I want you to know that you can talk to us, whenever you change your mind, okay?"

She eased out of the hug a moment later, planting her feet on the ground and taking one of Iida's hands in two of her own. "C'mon, let's go grab something from the cafeteria. I think everyone needs a little bit to cool off." She tugged with enough force that he had no choice but to slowly slide out of the hospital bed, his gaze averted to the floor.

Izuku's heart sank into inky depths as Iida avoided even looking in his direction, instead following Uraraka's lead. "Yes, I... think that's a good idea." He didn't look back as she slid open the door, flashing a small, reassuring smile back through the doorway before it slid shut again.

Stunned into stillness, fragments of thoughts whirled in a chaotic storm for dragging moments before a single unit was aligned. Beyond the faded echo of Iida and Uraraka's footsteps, Izuku suddenly jerked into action, boiling with the need to do something, to follow, to say anything he could possibly think of. He slipped out from under Kirishima's hand before he had time to react, stumbling slightly from the unfamiliar weight of his cast before he rushed to exit the room, bare feet slapping against tile. Reflexive apologies spilled from his lips in hoarse whispers as he fumbled to slide the door open again, the frame shuddering as he threw it open with one hand.

"Crap. Midoriya, hey, wait!" The sound of Kirishima's shoes clacking against the floor was unmistakable, his hurried pursuit marked by the door opening once more, before it slammed into place a third and final time. Left in the wake, Tokoyami and Todoroki were mired in an awkward stillness, alone after a whirlwind of activity.

"...I always thought you were supposed to fill the angsty archetype of the group," Todoroki stated flatly, struggling to sit up without bothering his wounds.

Tokoyami huffed a single note of laughter, and managed a wry smirk. "A tragic day indeed, to see my dynamic so soundly stolen away."

Todoroki hummed in response, pleased that someone had actually laughed at one of his jokes for once. "You're not going after them, I take it?"

"No. At least, not today. Iida and Midoriya are both currently unable to see past their preconceived biases. I will certainly speak with them when the time is right, but for now, I leave them in more capable hands." Tokoyami settled back into his chair, one leg crossed over the other. "After all, illumination is hardly my specialty."

The corner of Todoroki's lip twitched upward, and he finally settled into a somewhat comfortable position. A comfortable silence descended on them, a thing that seemed prone to frequent returns. He wasn't in any particular hurry to break it, but there were some things that needed saying. "...I hope they actually bring back lunch. I'm hungry."

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Izuku's frame shook with stuttering breaths, inhales so hungry to hitch and exhales slavering to crumple into sobs. But he couldn't let them, he had to hold on to his last unraveling strings of composure before he completely fell apart. He had to make things right with Iida, he had to help his friend, he had to fix things, he had to-

"Midoriya, wait!" A smooth, warm hand caught him around the wrist, gentle despite the thick fingers and corded muscle just below the palm. The familiarity was enough to make Izuku falter, if only for
a moment.

But that moment was long enough for Kirishima to envelop him from behind, an arm wrapping over his torso and pulling him flush against a solid, comforting chest. Izuku made a feeble effort to pull away, his will waning for every moment that Kirishima held him close, and the sensation of familiar fingers carefully (always so careful) threading with his own was enough to sever it entirely. Izuku sagged back into him as if all his wires had been loosened, tears spilling freely down his face in defeated globs.

Cautious of the cast slung against Izuku's side, Kirishima gently turned him so that they could properly face one another, his arm migrating to provide a comforting pressure against Izuku's back. Eroded and exhausted, Izuku took advantage of the opportunity he was given, hiding his face against the fabric of Kirishima's jacket, his tears pouring in unrelenting rivers as hiccuping breaths shook him from head to toe. For the first time in days, Izuku was finally able to let go.

But despite the part of him that pleaded to stay wrapped in Kirishima's arms forever, content to soak in his warmth and forget the world, he had to force himself to act. "I-I'm sorry," he croaked, squeezing Kirishima's fingers in the hopes to make his apology feel impactful, instead of it being merely another of the dozens he gave regularly.

"Don't be, man. I know things are tough right now; I don't blame you for needing some stress relief." Kirishima's embrace regretfully ended a moment later, but the sight of his grin, soaked in sunshine and razor edges softened by affection was enough to assuage Izuku's grieving heart. "C'mon, let's find a place to sit."

Izuku's cheeks warmed with a heat unrelated to his crying as Kirishima's fingers remained linked with his own, a comfort and a tether both. He trailed after his classmate, opposite the way Iida and Uraraka had gone, and realized quickly that Kirishima's pace was slowed on purpose. Perhaps he might normally feel bad for being such a dead weight, but, tired as he was, he merely felt relief that he wouldn't have to struggle to keep up.

Kirishima led him out into an auxiliary sitting room, positioned near a set of elevators as well as a row of telephones. The padded chairs were turned to overlook Hosu, nearby buildings shining white from the midday sun. They possessed a faint, lingering warmth when he and Kirishima settled down, and Izuku spent a few moments merely staring out over the city as he organized his thoughts.

"I guess you feel responsible, right? For what happened with Iida?" Kirishima rested their linked hands over the arm rest separating them, his gaze momentarily pinning Izuku in place. It was so deep, so warm -like molten honey. He felt like he could simply sink into it and rest forever.

"I-I... y-yeah. Of c-course I do," he murmured, hesitant to raise his voice again. His throat was exceptionally sore, and the doctors had warned him against speaking too much. Not that he could avoid that anymore. "He w-was hurting, and... and I k-knew something was wrong, b-but I just l-let him go. I d-didn't push hard enough. I s-should have done m-more."

"Do you think it would'a helped?" Izuku glanced up from where his gaze had drifted, and found a measured, thoughtful expression on Kirishima's face. Before he could answer, the opportunity was taken from him. "If you'd asked him one more time-if you'd asked him five more times if everything was okay, do you think it would've made a difference? Or would he have just gotten more closed off?"

"I-...I d-don't know."

"I...I d-don't know." Izuku shook his head, something stubborn welling up in him. "B-but even if it might n-not have helped, I still s-should have done more. I s-should have tried harder."
"Honestly Midoriya, I dunno if there was anything else you could'a done at all. Even if you.. told Mr. Aizawa or something, Iida would have just told him the same thing, and been on his way. The bottom line is, you can't control a situation like that. Iida made his choice." Kirishima stroked a thumb against the back of his hand, and it did little to soothe his internal ache.

"I.." Izuku blinked hard to dissuade any further tears, sniffing and leveling out his breathing. "I just h-hate seeing him l-like this. A-nd I d-don't know h-how to fix it." He attempted to shift his broken arm in a reflex to wipe at his eyes, before remembering a moment later that the cast was still on.

Kirishima's sympathetic smile dimmed into something sadder, more fragile. "I know. I know you're worried, and upset. I am too-we all are. It's just..." Kirishima mulled over his words for a moment, thumb stroking over Izuku's hand in slow, repetitive patterns. "Blaming yourself isn't going to make him feel better. Okay?"

Izuku went still, gears clicking and clicking as he processed Kirishima's words, running them through with a fine toothed comb. He.. of course, of course that made sense. He hadn't-he'd just wanted to somehow relieve Iida's burden, and taking it on himself had seemed like the right thing to do, but... but that wasn't the help he needed.

Kirishima's voice penetrated his realization, all soft syllables and warm undertones. "And hey, no matter what happens, I know Iida isn't mad at you or anything. He'll talk to you when he's ready, I promise. You just gotta give him time."

"Y..yeah. Okay. Y-you're right," Izuku finally relented, his lips twitching to offer Kirishima a reassuring smile. The redhead grinned liquid sunlight back at him, and squeezed his hand tightly.

"Good. Now c'mon, let's see if that cafeteria food is worth eatin' or not. And if it's gross, I'll pick something up for everyone, my treat." Kirishima practically jumped out of his chair, resplendent when he was once again imbued with his natural enthusiasm. Izuku couldn't believe he hadn't noticed its absence before.

He flashed another smile, a small, crooked thing that he hoped could represent even an inkling of the relief that surged through his heart. "Y-yeah, that s-sounds good." Everything would be okay-he just needed to give it time.

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"-nly days after the shocking death of the Hero Killer Stain, perpetrated by the League of Villains, is speculated as a response to the Hero Killer's murder-

The television fuzzed and blinked as Tomura Shigaraki hammered his thumb onto the remote, his rigid pinkie the only digit not wrapped furiously around the hunk of plastic. It was warmed through by the heat of his palm, and the casing creaked warningly from how tightly he squeezed it.

"-arned that a potential rise in Hero Killer copycats could be headed our way, emboldened by the League of Villains' attack in Hosu City-

The plastic casing of the remote snapped along one seam as Tomura Shigaraki hammered his thumb onto the remote, his rigid pinkie the only digit not wrapped furiously around the hunk of plastic. It was warmed through by the heat of his palm, and the casing creaked warningly from how tightly he squeezed it.

"-armed that a potential rise in Hero Killer copycats could be headed our way, emboldened by the League of Villains' attack in Hosu City-"

The plastic casing of the remote snapped along one seam as Tomura violently cut power to the television set, the device slipping from his fingers as they began trembling uncontrollably. How, how how HOW could he be IGNORED- "What a fucking circus," he hissed through his teeth, jaw wired tight and teeth grinding together. Uncaring of the remote clattering against the hardwood floor, Tomura knotted four fingers through his hair, pulling and yanking until the burn in his scalp could eclipse the caustic sizzling in his veins.

He was unsuccessful. Tomura ripped the hand out of his hair in favor of slamming it onto the bar top, hard enough to make his empty glass rattle. He could half see Kurogiri standing dourly from his
peripheral vision, and the sight of empty yellow eyes made his skin itch. "The Hero Killer," he
sneered, barely paying mind to not rot a hole through the bar, "what a mess he left us." Everything
itched without Father's embrace, and his neck was still wet with blood from his own fingernails. He'd
been incessant, unable to focus on anything but his own anger and that damnable itch. "Even his
corpse makes the news, and we're treated like fanboys."

It made him so angry-everything was making him angry lately. Everything was too bright, too dark,
too loud, too quiet, too hard, too soft-he couldn't stand it any longer. Even the sight of Kurogiri just
standing there, like nothing MATTERED like it wasn't IMPORTANT like he had BETTER
THINGS TO DO-

Tomura's paper thin reign on his impulses disintegrated, and before he could think past the
malignant, growing rage crowding his skull, he had already wrapped his hand around his glass and
hurled it at the wall. He'd barely managed to decay half of it, the remaining chunks shattering into
shards from the violent impact. "WHERE IS HE?!!" He screamed, and it made his raw throat ache.
Frustration had been clawing and gnawing and scratching and biting, and his only way of fighting
back had been screaming until his throat was as bloody on the inside as it was on the outside.

"Patience, Shigaraki," that fucking condescending shadow hummed, his yellow eyes narrowed into
slits. His leather shoes clicked against hardwood as he stepped out from behind the bar, likely to
fetch a broom and dustpan to sweep up the detritus caused by Tomura's rage. The nonchalant
chastisement was infuriating-he wasn't an idiot child to be patronized by some-some keeper.

Tomura hardly had anything left to snap, but an echo of such things was felt nonetheless. "You don't
seem to be getting how this works. You listen to me, got it...? Otherwise... otherwise..." Without any
thought, without any acknowledgement, Tomura's fingernails dug into the skin of his throat, peeling
apart scabs and dried skin alike to unleash another deluge of sluggish, trickling blood. In any other
circumstances, he might not have been able to control himself-his wild impulse to leap forward and
turn Kurogiri to dust would have become reality.

But the stump of his missing hand was useless, bound in layers of bandages that caused constant
irritation and left him with nothing to do but seethe. He kicked off his bar stool in an abrupt
movement, wood clattering to the floor as Kurogiri's practiced motions halted. His henchman
(that's what he was just a pawn he had no right to speak to Tomura that way) stared him down with
unreadable streaks of yellow smoke, no trace of fear wafting off of him. The only time Tomura had
ever seen him afraid had been...

Tomura's outburst was halted by the sound of a warp gate forming behind him, near the bar's
entrance. He ripped his hand away from his throat after a single moment longer of sneering at
Kurogiri, before he turned with twitching impatience towards their expected.. guest.

"Shigaraki." That voice scraped against the inside of his ears like fish hooks, tinny and hollow and
echoing off the inside of that hideous mask. Mincemeat. The Butcher. The fucking ingrate that had
taken two hands from him. Normally, Tomura might find vicious delight in the dent that caved the
side of that mask inwards, curving the side of a false mouth down into a sneering frown. But the
presence of an inky black arm clutched in one leathery hand reminded him of his loathing, a spitting,
frothing hate that he could barely contain.

"Where. Is. It?" Tomura ground out through his teeth, trembling with the urge to disintegrate that
mask along with the head underneath, to make Mincemeat pay for daring to attack one of his
Noumus-

The meaty thud of his Noumu's arm slapping against the floor made him twitch with fury, but he
didn't dare to unmake the ingrate in front of him, not while he still had something Tomura needed.
He watched with growing impatience as the hulking villain dug into a pouch on his belt, extracting a much smaller lump, wrapped in cloth. "Step closer, so that I may reattach your hand." Tomura glared at the emotionless mask, stepping around the severed arm that had clearly been placed in his path. He thrust out his stump once he was as close as he was willing to get, just outside the range where he would be most tempted to start disintegrating.

"Make it quick-" Tomura nearly bit his tongue when Mincemeat wrapped iron band fingers around his wrist, yanking him forward another two steps. Before his rage had a chance to truly unearth itself, he'd been released, and a knife had replaced his arm in the maniac's grip. He deftly sliced away the bandages keeping Tomura's stump protected, revealing the angry, puckered flesh to the bar's dingy lights. With more grace than Tomura had expected of Mincemeat's brutish hands, he slid away his knife and unwrapped the severed left hand, which showed no signs of decay or necrosis—it almost looked healthier than the hand that was still attached.

With a flick of his wrist, Mincemeat almost screwed Tomura's severed hand back on to his stump, a process that would have been fascinating if not for the reigniting of every nerve above his left forearm into searing agony. Flesh unraveled in petals of glistening meat, a core of bone peeking at open air before it met his stump. A single sheet of blood flow oozed from the combining flesh to spatter on the floor, before the seal was finished. The shock lasted just long enough for Tomura to strangle a scream into a growl of pain, and then he was left with nothing but the aftershocks and the return of his left hand.

Backpedaling away from the other villain, Tomura critically inspected his hand, flexing his fingers and tracing the ring of scars around his wrist—they were twisted and gnarled, akin to a shackle of thorns. "The process is not perfect. You may experience minor loss of sensation, and trouble moving your fingers."

Oh. Right. He was still there. "Thanks for nothing," Tomura snapped at the stoic butcher, his patience thinning into nonexistence. "Kurogiri, get rid of him. If I ever see you again, I'll kill you."

Mincemeat stared down at him impassively, only serving to further fuel the fire of his anger, before a warp gate opened up behind him. At the sight of the villain's turned back, a thought occurred to him, and he voiced it before it could be filtered. "Did you at least kill the brat, you useless fuck?"

There was a pause, less like a mind mulling in thought and more like a machine processing a request. That damnable mask turned over a bulky shoulder, and Mincemeat's flat, hollow voice rang out through the bar for the last time. "No. Izuku Midoriya has incredible potential. It is no wonder you feel so threatened by him."

Mincemeat vanished through the warp gate, deaf to Tomura's scream of rage, and the partially disintegrated bar stool hurled at his back was left to splinter against the floor.
Chapter 41

Izuku lingered nervously on the front steps of Gran Torino's apartment, his left arm shaking with the effort to keep his costume case from pulling him to the ground and his right still confined within its cast. A portion of his nervousness stemmed from the knowledge that, at any moment, a piece of debris could fall off the building and land on his head, but the majority came from seeing Gran Torino for the first time since he'd visited the hospital. He'd been the furthest thing possible from an exemplary pupil, and knew that any displeasure or criticism Gran Torino might have would be entirely warranted. Though that certainly wasn't to say he was looking forward to it.

The seconds that slipped by as he waited for Gran Torino to return with the rest of his things (he'd insisted on carrying them himself with enough finality that Izuku's protests had fizzled out before he could even open his mouth) only further facilitated the buzzing, agitated thoughts swarming in his head, reminding him of all the little things that had gone wrong beneath the surface, things that couldn't be fixed by a few nights in the hospital.

Iida had been discharged on the third day of their stay, late in the afternoon. His wounds, while not exactly minor, had at least not required any form of surgery (save the minor stitching in his lip), and he'd been cleared to head home for the rest of his recovery. They hadn't spoken much, but he'd made sure to say goodbye and had promised to see Izuku and Todoroki both back at school, which was at least a little progress.

Todoroki had left a day later, having been kept only long enough to be sure he was in the clear of developing an infection. Izuku had managed to coax a promise of getting lunch out of him once they were back in class, and then he'd been left achingly alone until the very end of the weekend. His mother had picked him up and fussed over him until he was afraid he might miss the train to Gran Torino's prefecture, soothing her with promises that he'd be back before dark.

"Well, here's the rest of it kid." Gran Torino's voice snapped Izuku from his thoughts, and he glanced up just in time to have his backpack flung over his head. He yelped in shock, carefully setting down his costume case to remove it, struggling to untangle a strap that had caught painfully on his ear.

"Better make sure everything's in there; it'd be a real pain to have to send you missin' socks in the mail, or somethin'."

"A-h, t-thanks, I w-will." Izuku fumbled with the zipper for a moment before managing to open his bag, carefully thumbing through the contents to make sure everything was present. He kept his gaze carefully adhered to it, too anxious to meet Gran Torino's gaze directly. "T-thank you a-again for having me, Mr. T-Torino. A-and thank you fo-for everything you've t-taught me." In the moment where Izuku should have simply bowed his head and let his temporary mentor say his piece, the swarm of insecurities nesting within him spilled through his lips. "An-and, uhm... I-I'm so sorry for all the t-trouble I caused y-you as well. I-I should ha-have listened to you, and n-not been so r-reckless-"

"Alright, that's enough of that," Gran Torino interrupted gruffly, his mask creasing from his narrowed expression. It wasn't quite exasperated, but it was certainly enough to dissuade Izuku from speaking further. "We've already been through this, so how about we skip the song and dance?"

Izuku's shoulders slumped, and he bit his tongue to stifle an apology as he nodded in understanding, eyes locked on the ground. Gran Torino sighed, his previously clipped tone smoothing out a little. "Listen kid, we both know you made a mistake, but you're also in a much better position than you were a week ago. You're getting a handle on your Quirk, and you understand what you did wrong. So quit apologizin'; the longer you spend feelin' sorry, the less time you'll have to learn from it. Got
Izuku swallowed (alleviated, finally, from the bulk of the pain he'd been in) and nodded again, fighting to calm the nervous puttering of his heart. He raised his head in a marked effort to meet Gran Torino's gaze, offering up a shaky smile. "Y-yes sir. T-thank y-you again Mr. T-Torino!"

The retired pro waved a dismissive hand, though he didn't look displeased. "Yeah, yeah. Get on your way kid, I'm sure you got more important things to do than chattin' up an old curmudgeon."

Izuku froze for a second, unsure if he was supposed to agree or not, before he decided to simply bow at the waist to avoid the chance of being scolded. He swallowed the urge to thank Gran Torino again, knowing he'd be there all day if he kept that sort of thing up, and instead attempted to sling his backpack on without jostling his cast. He offered an awkward looking wave with his arm still tangled in the straps, scooping his costume case off the ground and stumbling as it nearly toppled him over.

"T-take care, Mr. Torino!" He called over his shoulder, already attempting to plot the most time effective route possible back to the train station, hyper aware of the position of the sun in the sky. He probably could get back home before dark, but he'd undoubtedly be cutting it close considering his slowed pace due to his unusable arm and excess of possessions which also kept his only open hand occupied and if he ever had need of it he'd have to wrestle further with his already too-heavy costume case maybe he could call in and get a lighter case honestly it was a little unnecessary-

"Hey, kid!" Izuku turned his head in confusion, only to blanch at the wide, empty grin Gran Torino was wearing. Before he could even stop to figure out why the old man was playing senile again, he was interrupted. "What was your name again?"

Izuku balked in shock and sinking despair-was Gran Torino just making fun of him again? Was that his way of expressing how disappointed he was in having such a useless under study? "I-it's I-Izuku Midoriya s-sir-" Tongue looped into knots, he had no chance to voice his stark confusion-

"No, that's not it.." Gran Torino trailed off with a peculiar lilt to his voice, his smile vacant but his shrewd gaze glittering with mirth and anticipation. He.. did he mean-?

Realization washed over him in a shower of shooting stars, his chest filling with iridescent baubles of relief until it felt like he might simply burst apart. Shame and despair burned away in solar brilliance, and Izuku's trembling lips were crafted into his most earnest grin. "I-I'm Starburst!" Izuku grinned so wide he could barely keep his eyes open, the nebula of his heart twinkling in cosmic radiance.

Gran Torino smirked proudly as the afternoon sun caressed the blossoming peaks of the city skyline, and Izuku Midoriya set off into the world with the cosmos trapped in his eyes, and his chest bursting with stars.

"It's good to see you again, Izuku. How was your internship?" Ms. Atsuko smiled pleasantly, her dark painted lips contrasting against the stark white of her teeth. While she had been slightly intimidating at first, her relaxed demeanor and frank manner of speaking had done quite a lot to make Izuku feel more comfortable in her presence over the last few months. Her Quirk had also worked wonderfully to help ease some of the pressure of sharing his thoughts, more of a gentle coaxing that he could relax into than anything as terrifying as a power that forced him to tell the truth.

"T-terrifying. Invigorating. I-Illuminating. ..M-more complex than I c-can properly describe in only a few adjectives because there were a number of very starkly different events that occurred very quickly, and I'm still trying to come to terms with everything." Izuku sighed in serene contentment, fingers drowsily running along the edge of a throw pillow. It hadn't ever been mentioned outright,
but he knew Ms. Atsuko changed her pillows every few visits for his own sake. He hugged the beaded throw pillow to his chest, the moody atmosphere of the office combining with the side effects of Recovery Girl's Quirk to the point that he was about ready to fall asleep.

His arm was still very tender and sore, and she'd warned him repeatedly against overusing it as well as giving him a brace to wear at night. He'd only have to wear it for a few more weeks, as long as he was careful. Hopefully he'd have the chance to give it time to recover; he could only pray that All Might went easy on them in class.

"It must have been quite eventful, then." Ms. Atsuko crossed one leg over the other, her clipboard set off on a low, petite coffee table. She only ever used it for bi-weekly mood assessments, at least after the first few visits. Having his feelings tallied up and measured was still a little disconcerting, but he supposed even something as nebulous as emotions were just hard science and numbers at their core.

Izuku uttered a huff of laughter, gently testing the limits of his freshly healed fingers. They twinged a little every time he formed a full fist, but otherwise felt mostly okay. "T-that's one word f-for it, I guess. B-but, uhm... B-before we g-get into that..." A thorn of anxiety attempted to puncture the fragile skin of his tranquility, and Izuku stubbornly pushed it back. "I-I wanted to t-talk to you a-about.. getting on m-medicine." He cast his eyes across the room, staring intently at a piece of art that would probably take him several long minutes to even begin to decipher. "I-I don't think I can k-keep going w-without.. without something. I-I keep having b-bad mood swings, a-and it's been harder t-to, uhm... pr-prevent panic attacks."

Ms. Atsuko pursed her lips, and Izuku attempted not to cringe at the realization that he hadn't been able to keep a current of shame out of his voice. "You've mentioned your mood swings before. 'Sudden dread, increased depressive symptoms, a strong sinking feeling'?!" Izuku nodded hesitantly, and she crossed her legs again. "I'm very happy you're willing to try medication, Izuku. Improvements won't happen overnight, but if we find the right combinations of medications and adjust dosages as needed, I promise you'll feel much better."

Izuku sagged into the couch a little when he was presented with a proud smile, the tips of his ears burning as he pressed his face into the pillow. "Y-yeah. I-I, uhm, t-talked to my mom about it t-this morning, and, uhm-t-told her you'd c-call."

"I'll be sure to do so the moment our session ends. I'm proud of you for taking this step, Izuku." Ignoring the flush that persisted on his face, she shifted a little in her recliner, fingers steepled over one knee. "But before you head off to class, I'm curious to know the events that lead to you making the morning news." Her lips quirked into a painted smile, concern and amusement both glittering in her eyes.

Izuku tittered out a nervous laugh, organs slithering into the pit of his stomach as he was doomed to recount the events of the last week. Well, the relaxing had been nice while it lasted. "A-ah, well, a-about that..."

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Izuku's first steps back into the 1-A classroom were almost surreal; the sight of his classmates laughing and chatting about their internships in light hearted camaraderie felt like a separate realm from the pit of burning blood and frigid moonlight he'd crawled his way out of. It was as if the events of the last week hadn't even taken place, left even without dreams to haunt. He wasn't naive enough to think himself past it, of course, but to have it done and gone was enough for the moment.

He caught a snippet of Asui, Ashido, and Jirou's conversation about drug smuggling(?!?)on his way in, and waved shyly when Ashido's striking eyes met his. Her returning grin was all teeth, but before she could greet him Asui had turned her head to inquire something. "How was your internship,
Izuku almost jumped at the sight of Uraraka, throwing quick, controlled punches at the open air as her entire being seemed to glow with an inner fire. "A new world is within my grasp," she intoned with crushing gravitas, and Izuku was torn between being either terrified or mortifyingly awestruck.

She'd seemed a little more sure of herself when she visited, but seeing her like that.. Flustered, he scanned the rest of the room, eyes catching on a shock of purple hair. Shinsou was boldly perched on top of Kacchan's desk, who looked (unsurprisingly) furious. What was surprising was that Shinsou (who looked half dead-if Izuku had thought he looked tired before, post-internship Shinsou appeared to lack all knowledge of sleep whatsoever) didn't appear to be the object of his ire.

It was, more than likely, the state of his hair that was pushing all his buttons, considering it looked almost glued to his head instead of the usual wild spikes.

Izuku almost considered going over to say hello, but Shinsou wore a scowl that could have stood up against one of Kacchan's on a good day, and Kacchan looked like he might combust if someone spoke to him. Maybe he could speak to them later.

Near the back of the room, the rest of his friends were gathered around Todoroki's desk, chairs pulled up so that they could sit closer. Kirishima spoke animatedly with one hand thrown around Iida's stiff but not unwelcoming shoulders, and Todoroki looked vaguely concerned whenever the redhead's one gesticulating hand came too close to his face. Tokoyami sat just close enough to be lumped in with them, his head tilted forward and his eyes firmly shut. Apparently, Shinsou wasn't the only one that hadn't been getting much sleep.

Before he could work his way through the room to join them, a flash of blond hair caught his eye, and he was beholden to the sight of Sero practically pushing Kaminari out of his chair. The blond gave him a pouty glare in return, but Sero merely raised an eyebrow and kicked at his leg.

"Ow, okay okay I'm going!" Kaminari put a safe distance between himself and Sero, and were it not for her ear jacks whipping through the air, Izuku would have missed the way Jirou's head snapped in his directions, staring firmly at the blond. Kaminari's annoyance was replaced by visible jitters, and he faltered on his next step before quickening his pace.

"Uhh.. hey, Midoriya, can I talk to you for a sec?" He flashed a grin like he was being held at gunpoint, eyes darting in Jirou's direction in a way that made Izuku nervous by association.

"..Y-yeah, sure." He and Kaminari hadn't spoken much, since the incident at the USJ. It wasn't for any grudge on his part—he could understand the other boy's incredulity, even if he was hurt by the thoughtlessness—but seeing Kaminari grow more bitter and belittling in his treatment of Kacchan as his childhood friend closed himself off in an effort to recover had made it difficult to want to talk to him. Kacchan didn't deserve that. Two wrongs didn't make a right.

Kaminari's moments-from-death smile relaxed a few notches, remorse creeping in to cozy up in the cracks. "So.. listen, man, about... you know, what I said at the USJ..." He faltered for a moment, and Izuku attempted to construct a careful smile, in hopes of reassuring him. Kaminari looked vaguely ill. "I didn't really... give you a very good apology, did I? So like, I wanted to say that I really am sorry, man. I never meant to hurt your feelings, but that-" His eyes flickered to the side for a moment, like he was searching for help. "-It doesn't excuse me being an idiot. So... yeah. I'm really sorry, and I totally understand if you're still pissed off at me."

"N-no, it's..." Izuku cut himself off before he could rush to assure Kaminari that everything was fine and no apology was needed. He.. he did deserve one. So instead he carefully tweaked his smile, hopefully conveying his sincerity. "Th-thank you. I accept your apology. I know you d-didn't really
m-mean anything by it. B-but, uhm... I t-think the person you s-should really be a-apologizing to is Kacchan. Y-you don't have to like him, b-but making f-fun of him doesn't h-help anyone. I-I'd really a-appreciate if you... d-didn't do that anymore. O-okay?"

Kaminari stared, wide eyed, as if he'd suddenly been confronted with an oncoming train. His stupor lasted only a moment, before he visibly attempted to compose himself. "Ye-yeah, no problem man! I.. you're totally right. I've been a huge tool lately. I'll apologize to him." Kaminari glanced not-very discreetly over his shoulder, and Izuku followed his gaze to where Kacchan was glaring with the heat of a nuclear reactor. "U-uh, but maybe later."

"L-later is good," Izuku agreed, the tension in his chest loosening in smooth increments. That was-a very promising start to the day. Maybe things would go well for once.

"Oh hey, by the way," Kaminari continued, his voice raising slightly as he focus expanded to include everyone in earshot, "did you guys see that creepy video going around online? It's from the night everything went down in Hosu, but it's really weird."

A few pairs of eyes shifted towards Iida, who remained stoically still in his seat. "Oh yeah, weren't you in Hosu for your internship, Iida? Did you see what happened?" Ashido's curiosity was uncontested by her typical zeal, perhaps in an attempt to remain respectful.

Izuku stiffened, his injured fingers twitching in a half-realized effort to clench into a fist. The news report, what Gran Torino had said... it might be bad news if it got out that they were involved.

Unfazed, Iida merely adjusted his glasses, the snag in his lip from his removed stitches only visible if you knew to look for it. "I was present in Hosu at the time, yes, but I had no real involvement in the incident. I don't know anything about a video, but I doubt strange things floating around online are very trustworthy."

"It's dated on the same night," Kaminari defended, pulling out his phone and swiping past his lock screen. Several bodies curiously drifted over to him, and Izuku hurried over with dread welling in his gut. Had someone been present to record footage of what happened? Could it incriminate them?

"Here, check it out. But uh, fair warning, it's pretty brutal."

Kaminari's screen went black for a split second, before the video snapped to life in a crackle of static. Shaky footage of an empty street came into focus, lit only by the moon and neon signs on storefronts. The camera was pointed at a blank wall for several long moments, but a voice was audible from off screen. "-isgusting abomination. It would be a mercy to cleanse you from this earth."

The voice was seething with fury, echoing off the asphalt with a metallic tinge present in each trembling word. The camera shook as a shrieking, inhuman screech clamped to fill every inch of empty air, and the feed was a blur before it was readjusted.

Izuku's throat constricted with primal fear. The noose of his esophagus strangled every fiber of organic tissue that allowed him to draw breath, his own shocked inhale ringing in his ears. Mincemeat became centered in frame, cast in silhouette by a buzzing advertisement across the street. He was still for only a moment, before he was engulfed in a dark mass of shrieking rage. Pulsating gray matter peeked between mangled yellow teeth from its resting place in the floor of the Noumu's broken mouth, visible for only a few moments before its reckless charge was answered.

The tarry body slid backwards, bare feet peeling up concrete like paper, and a blur of motion followed too quickly for the camera to pick up. The sounds of wet, slopping flesh pulsed through the speakers, and the camera dipped for a moment before shakily refocusing. The Noumu's arm had been nearly cleaved apart, hanging by mere threads at the elbow. It shrieked in upset as the tarry
flesh boiled and bubbled, surging forth in a wet slosh to snap its arm back into place.

"Annoying." Mincemeat's cleaver rose into the air, dark with the Noumu's blood. The camera caught the instant he brought it down on his own hand, splitting the silhouette of his arm from palm to elbow in a gush of dark fluid before the feed abruptly cut out. A few seconds of black silence followed, before a replay icon blinked to the forefront.

"Dude, what the hell?!" Sero's voice was the first to break the dim, disturbed silence that had settled over the handful of students gathered around Kaminari. "Why would you show us something that messed up, man?"

"Without sufficient warning, at that," Ojirou muttered, his gaze averted to the wall in clear discomfort.

"Where did you even find this video?" Jirou's question was almost accusatory, and Kaminari bristled defensively.

"You guys are missing the point! This guy-whoever he is-he was there that night, but there's no mention of him on the news, and this is the only video of him! And there's other rumors too, about an 'unknown villain' that showed up. So like, why wouldn't anyone be talking about it on the news? Why haven't the pro heroes said anything?" A few murmurs followed Kaminari's speculation, and he began looking more self assured.

"Maybe there's a good reason for that." A few heads turned, Izuku's own lagging slightly as he struggled to overcome what he had seen, to find Todoroki had risen from his seat. His expression was perfectly blank, neither cold nor incensed. "I doubt that the pros would be unaware of another element to the attack, especially one that could simply be posted online. There's likely a very good explanation for why it hasn't been reported on. A reason that the pros would want to keep it under wraps."

Kaminari's eyes widened, stricken, and he glanced back down at his phone. "Oh, man... so like, you're saying that maybe this guy is a super dangerous villain or something?" Todoroki shrugged mildly, and it did little to ease Kaminari's discontent.

"Whatever the case, we should at least bring it to the attention of Mr. Aizawa. If this is supposed to be a secret, then he needs to know about the existence of this video." Yaoyorozu, having smoothed out her previously sickened expression, spoke with an air of forced calm.

"Th-that's a good i-idea," Izuku forced out, his voice cracking with the effort it took merely to form words. "If th-the pros don't w-want this information get-getting out, th-then letting t-them know about t-this vi-video is p-probably for the b-best." Izuku swallowed hard, trying to stamp out the surge of bile rising in his gut, only to flinch when a hand wrapped around his own. He glanced quickly over his shoulder, heart stuttering at the sight of warm, vermilion eyes. Kirishima smiled reassuringly, and some of the tension drained out of Izuku's wire-taut frame.

"Yeah, alright." Kaminari sounded mostly convinced, glancing momentarily down at the dark screen of his phone before looking back up. "Sorry for uh... you know, not really saying how gross it was-"

The sound of the classroom door sliding open cut off Kaminari's apology, and eighteen heads turned to watch Mr. Aizawa shuffle into the classroom. It took about three steps for him to visibly realize that it was not only silent in his classroom, but everyone was staring at him. He glanced up over the folds of his scarf, one eyebrow rising to be lost under his fringe. "...What happened?"

Izuku's eyes flickered towards Kaminari, and he noticed a few others turn their attention to the blond
as well. He looked stricken, and silence resumed for a moment too long before Jirou's ear jack zipped through the air to jab him in the back of the head. "Ow, okay, okay!" He turned back to meet the humorless gaze of their teacher, and Izuku shivered in secondhand intimidation as he watched Kaminari wilt. "Uhh.. sir, I found a video online that I think you need to see-"

"No," Mr. Aizawa stonewalled before Kaminari could finish speaking, his expression souring with a clear lack of amusement. "I'm not looking at whatever joke is on your phone. Everyone sit down, we have important things to cover today."

"Sir! It isn't a joke-Kaminari found footage from the attack in Hosu, video of a villain that wasn't covered on the news." Yaoyorozu spoke up, giving Kaminari a chance to crumple in relief. "We thought it important that you know about it."

"...Show me," Mr. Aizawa quickly stalked the length of the classroom, Mina and Aoyama hastily moving out of his way. Kaminari handed his phone over without resistance, and Mr. Aizawa stared down at the screen with a hard sheen in his eyes. Izuku shivered and squeezed Kirishima's hand as he was subjected to the sound of that voice again, and relaxed a little when smooth fingers curled around his own.

The video finished playing half a minute later, and Mr. Aizawa spent a moment studying the blank darkness on Kaminari's phone before handing it back over. "Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Now all of you find your seats; I'm going to make a quick call, and then we'll be covering the results of your field training."

Izuku's shoulders loosened a little, breaths coming a bit easier as their teacher headed back for the door. If the heroes already knew about Mincemeat, then things would be taken care of, wouldn't they? There was no way professionals couldn't handle him. He released Kirishima's hand, cheek heating up and a bashful smile crooking at his lips when razor teeth were flashed his way. Halfway back to his own desk Mr. Aizawa paused and turned his head, eyes collapsing into a darkness that wracked Izuku with shivers.

"This should go without saying, but none of you are authorized to speak of this. Any mention of this video will be met with severe repercussions." He slipped through the door in a flutter of scarves, and Izuku's stomach twisted into a mobius strip.

It was all under control.. wasn't it?
Chapter Notes

Here's some amazing fanart I've gotten recently. Be sure to check out the artists!

https://captain-artblog.tumblr.com/post/167592384454/after-reading-introspectiveinquisitor-s-fanfic  
https://rip-aizawa.tumblr.com/post/168602172841/so-i-read-daymare-by  
http://purutsukid.tumblr.com/post/168573592024/yes-hello-hi-this-fic-brutally-murders-me  

Sequestered away in the corner of the boy's locker room with his costume case in hand, Izuku decided to take a few moments just to breathe. Following the incident with the video Kaminari had found, he'd been left frazzled and shaken by Mr. Aizawa's grave warning and the implications of the volatile footage. His concentration had suffered as a result, and he'd been caught in a bit of a self-perpetuating cycle of being too distracted by his own anxiety to pay full attention to his classes, followed by struggling to catch up with whatever he'd missed being said and having to beg notes off of his friends during lunch. Thankfully Todoroki had been very forthcoming with his notes, even if he'd barely spoken and spent most of the time at lunch eating more food than Izuku could put away in a week.

At least during class with All Might, he wouldn't be expected to memorize how best to solve quadratic equations, or the incredibly particular and fickle grammar rules present in the English language. He'd just have to exercise his body and his Quirk, and practice quick and creative thinking under pressure. Hopefully it'd be enough to take his mind off of everything; being sore and ready to fall asleep after class was a preferable state of being.

Careful to avoid straining his healing fingers, Izuku undid the lock on his costume case, propping it open against the bench closest to him and nervously beginning to disrobe. It wasn't that he was ashamed of his body (even though all his classmates were trim and fit and he was all awkward bony bits and stubborn baby fat), but Kacchan was still the only person he'd shown the scars on his torso to, and he'd really prefer to keep it that way, at least for the time being. He didn't really expect anyone to look, either-he'd already embarrassed himself almost to the point of tears by pleading to be left alone while changing when the school year began, though everyone had at least been understanding and agreeable about it.

Honestly, Izuku was simply unable to pinpoint the exact source of his nerves, and decided to simply chalk it up to a large number of contributing factors and get dressed as quickly as possible. Divesting himself of his school uniform, he carefully unpacked his Starburst costume and laid it out in order of adornment, adjusting zippers and slipping into his boots and meticulously securing every piece over the jumpsuit underneath. He swapped out the clips in his hair for the glittering star shaped ones, and frowned critically down at his blank mask. He really didn't need anything fancy-and so the simple addition of a curving black smile and yellow stars as dimples was more than enough to suffice-
"Whoa, Midoriya, is that really your new costume?" Kirishima's voice rang out through the locker room, a cut above the buzz of chatter that normally bounced off the tile walls. Oh, Izuku realized faintly, that was the source of his nerves. Kirishma's crow of astonishment caught the attention of several more of their classmates, and Izuku shrank from the scrutiny until he was sure his armor would slip off.

"A-ah, yeah, it-uhm, c-came in d-during the internship," he mumbled into his mask, busying himself with securing it over his face to give his hands something to do other than fidget.

"Huh. I never would'a took you for the flashy type, Midoriya," Kaminari commented idly, his demeanor still a bit unsure after their talk earlier.

"Not as flashy as moi, of course~!" Aoyama struck a glamorous pose that went unseen by anyone else in the locker room.

Izuku nearly dropped his visor, hunching his shoulders and staring intently at the floor. "B-being flashy w-wasn't really th-the intention, i-it just k-kinda ended up th-that way."

"Having a costume that's both practical and visually appealing isn't anything to be embarrassed about." Todoroki closed his locker quietly, not looking up from where he was adjusting the canisters on his belt. "It's important to foster a positive image as a hero."

"A-ah... t-thanks Todoroki-" Izuku's stumbling attempt to accept the compliment(?) was foiled by the sudden weight of Kirishima's arm slinging around his neck, shaking him with such exuberance that Izuku was afraid of his eyeballs falling out of his head.

"You look so fricken' awesome, man! Totally manly!" Kirishima's enthusiasm was almost a tangible emission, so whole and blinding that Izuku could have believed he'd been swept into the sky by solid sunlight. He felt flickers of it deep in his stomach, the urge to simply be in Kirishima's presence and let the hours trickle away in a wash of liquid light. "Uraraka is gonna flip when she sees you. Oh dude, you should pose for a picture and I can send it to her!"

Izuku came back to himself a moment later, feeling almost dizzy with embarrassment as he ducked out from under Kirishima's arm so that he could flip the shiny, star shaped clasps on his mask shut. "W-w-we probably d-don't really have the t-time for that b-besides she'll be-be outside a-anyway so we should j-j-just f-finish getting ready f-for class.."

"Yeah, that's probably true." Kirishima didn't sound the least bit disappointed; his knife pointed grin remained firmly in place to pump out waves of exuberance. "Just promise that I get to be the first to selfie with the hero Starburst, okay?" Izuku's heart thump-thump-thumped nearly out of his chest as Kirishima flashed him a teasing grin, his cheeks dimpled and his eyes gleaming as though polished stones had been set into his head.

"Y-yeah," Izuku promised faintly, struggling to swallow down the lump of his heart and remember how to breathe at the same time, "p-promise."

"Welcome, all of you, back to Hero Basic Training! Feels like I haven't seen you all in months!" All Might laughed boisterously, the sun gleaming over his chiseled features and his fists planted heroically on his hips. He was the picture of heroism, a symbol of eternal pride and justice that helped take the edge off of Izuku's nerves. "Now, without further ado, let's get right into it! Today you'll all be running a little race, and I expect you all to apply everything you've learned from your internships in today's rescue exercise!"

"Sir!" Iida's hand shot up like a bullet-his left, Izuku couldn't help but notice. "Judging by the fact we
aren't at the USJ facility, can it be assumed that this will be a different sort of rescue exercise?" He was the odd one out in just his gym uniform; his armor had been mangled well past the point of repair, and it would likely take a few weeks for him to get a new suit. But he still looked as stern and serious as he always had, and Izuku had to take it as a positive thing.

"Indeed you can! The USJ is specifically for disaster rescue, but this is a race!" All Might gestured widely at the massive set of steel plated doors behind him, leading into one of the city-block sized training grounds. "And Field Gamma is your race track! Within is a labyrinth of factories that will require all your cunning and agility to navigate! I'll separate you into groups of five, and each group will compete against one another! You'll begin on the outskirts of the field, and race to the middle, to see who can rescue me first!" All Might's words hung in the air for a moment, before he coughed into his fist. "And while I'm sure this goes without saying, I'd appreciate if you all did your best to keep property damage at a minimum." His eyes swept very deliberately over Bakugou (who snapped his teeth in annoyance) and Todoroki (who stared impassively), and Izuku nearly combusted from shock and shame when the hero's gaze landed on him as well.

"Well, that's all! Let's divide you all up, and I'll send the first group to the starting area!"

It made sense, of course, that All Might would be concerned about his Quirk causing damage—the only person at U.A. who had seen his new ability in action was Iida, and he'd probably only seen glimpses of it. Pushing down his irrational shame (his Quirk had been overwhelmingly destructive, there was no mistaking that) was easier than he'd expected, which only left him with the resurgence of nerves.

From what he could see of Field Gamma on his walk to the starting zone, it was broken up into different 'tiers' of varying heights using the different catwalks, piping, rooftops, and silos. It created an intricate network of narrow but usable footholds, large but jump-able gaps, and steep but climbable obstacles to provide an ingeniously designed test of mobility and flexibility. Izuku almost wanted to find out if the plans for it were available upon request in the school's database or not.

But a more immediate concern came with the still not inconsiderable amount of collateral his Quirk was capable of, even with his thinnest wire. It would easily melt through some of the more fragile pipes if he took too long to jump from them, which meant he'd have to time the uses of his Quirk more appropriately. He'd only been able to practice a little while with Gran Torino, but getting to actually use his hands opened up a world of possibilities, including micro-corrections in mid-air and giving him the safety net necessary to try creating air cushions to push himself even further without footholds-

"Everyone ready? On your marks, BEGIN!" The starting buzzer sounded and all of Izuku's jumbled thoughts zapped together into a lightning bolt that flashed under his skin, Living Nightmare surging to life in a great howling whirlpool of teeth. Izuku burst into a running start, focusing on keeping his breaths measured and even the way Iida had shown him as he neared the edge. Errant sparks swirled around his gloved fingertips, a system of nano-stars snapping to life as the raw, jagged power of his Quirk was smoothed and soothed and refined. Izuku took hold of the roaring darkness within him, and Starburst emerged in a rebirth of blinding brilliance.

A micro burst surged through his heels the moment after Izuku leaped, creating a cushion of cosmic burn off that clouded his armored boots in radiance. It thrust him up and forwards, an extension of strength beyond use of his muscles, and he caught a set of narrow pipes underneath him as if he were merely gliding overhead. Another jump, another burst through his soles, and Izuku was soaring. The wind ripped past him on his way, tousling his loose hair and providing little resistance against his unstoppable momentum.
Izuku sprinted across a catwalk for several long meters, thoughts flitting to remember exactly how Bakugou would angle his hands when using his explosions for mobility, and leapt with his legs already kicking as he pushed himself up, up, up. He wobbled in midair from bursting with only a single foot, but his palms lit up in crackling explosions as though he were bleeding firecrackers, angled to keep him steady and rising through the air. He forced his other leg up, channeled another burst through, and ignored the leaking of his eyes underneath his mask. Izuku was winning, he was so close to All Might, just a few more jumps and he could actually come in first. He vaulted over the guard rail of a silo, rattling its hollow interior with meteoric footsteps before he leaped again, clearing five body lengths as he pumped one leg and then the other in a makeshift double jump. Gravity tried to pull him down and the crosswind tried to push him off balance, but Izuku Midoriya ascended on a staircase of shooting stars, nebulae trailing in his wake—Until his boot seared straight through a flimsy catwalk that was meant to be his next leg up, pitching him forward in a losing battle with gravity. He cracked his visor against the hand rail before sprawling over with a yelp of shock, his leg plunged clear through the catwalk throbbing from where the jagged grating had practically chewed his jumpsuit. "Ow, ow, ow," he bit out, rolling over to extract himself and scrambling to stand back up. He was pretty sure it hadn't broken fabric or skin, but his leg still ached badly enough that he had no way of winning anymore.

He heard the buzzer go off to announce a winner, and completed the rest of the race without the use of his Quirk. With all his fire and bravado snuffed out, Izuku carefully hauled himself up the side of the silo All Might was stood atop of, the fingers on his right hand twinging from the effort. His shoulders drooped when he saw Sero, Ashido, Ojirou, and Iida had managed to beat him there, though it really didn't come as much of a surprise after his blunder.

"And there we go, race complete! Thanks for the rescue, brave hero!" All Might flashed a thumbs up at the victorious Sero, who whooped and hefted his victor's sash above his head. "Despite young Sero coming in first, you're all winners in my book! It's incredible to see how much you've all improved since the start of the year! Keep giving it your all, and you'll be prepared for your final exams in no time!" Izuku managed a half smile under his mask, unable to find it in him to be too disappointed in losing—after all, it just meant his classmates had improved, too.

"All right, time to clear out group one! Group two, you're up!" All Might's magnified voice rang out again, and everyone began filing towards the incredibly convenient ladder on the side of the silo. Izuku waved a bit weakly at Ashido's grin and nodded back at Iida's cordial acknowledgement, limping over to the ladder. "Be sure to head to the nurse's office to get your leg looked at after class, young Midoriya." Izuku jumped a bit, glancing back at All Might to meet his teacher's gaze. All Might's grin was softer around the edges, less the permanent fixture of the Symbol of Peace and more a genuine expression. "And, more than that.. I'm very proud of how far you've come, young man. Both in the use of your Quirk, and your confidence in your own abilities. You're doing very well, young Midoriya."

Stunned by his teacher's smile, Izuku struggled to hold back a deluge of looping thoughts (ohmygodohmygodAllMightsaidhe'sproudofme) and instead ducked his head, face so hot he was surprised his visor didn't fog up. "T-thank you, s-sir. Th-that means-means a l-lot." Proud.. All Might was proud.

Izuku only hoped his visor could hide his teary eyes as well as his mask hid the grin on his face.

"Y-you don't have to worry a-about walking to t-the station with me, Tokoyami. I-I can tell you're still t-tired from your internship." Izuku glanced up from where he was carefully shoving textbooks into his backpack, and offered a crooked smile to his stoic friend. The afternoon sunlight streamed into the classroom from the open door, painting a rich orange rectangle that several of his classmates
dipped in and out of as they prepared to leave for the day.

Tokoyami blinked down at him (though he honestly didn't have that much of a height advantage, even when Izuku was sitting) and offered a short hum, his arms crossed over his chest. He might not have had easily visible bags under his eyes to judge his level of exhaustion, but seeing him practically asleep in the morning and clearly flagging after lunch had been obvious enough. "Alone, a man will crumble to the emptiness of his stomach and the weight in his bones. Among friends, he may fight a hundred battles, and walk a thousand leagues." Tokoyami's words might have held the gravitas needed to sway Izuku's opinion on the matter, if he hadn't slipped into a yawn at the very end.

"T-that's really n-nice of you, but r-really, I'll be fine. Y-you should head home a-and get some sleep. W-we can meet up at the b-beach later this week." Izuku zipped his bag closed with some measure of finality, and watched the conflict play out in Tokoyami's dark, frequently blinking eyes.

Tokoyami looked like he was prepared to argue, but no words came. Eventually he released a relenting sigh, arms returning to his sides. "..Very well. I'll see you tomorrow, Midoriya. Please, stay out of traffic while I'm away." Tokoyami offered nothing more than a curt nod when Izuku sputtered in response, but he could swear his friend looked almost amused as he headed for the classroom's door, slipping out into the hall.

Izuku sighed and slumped into his seat, resigned to Tokoyami's rare but always flustering teasing, and began toying with the All Might key chain on his backpack. He didn't normally make a point of lingering after class-he usually had an appointment with Ms. Atsuko, or otherwise left with his friends the moment they were ready. But for once he didn't really have anyone to walk home with; Uraraka's parents were visiting, which meant she'd left early, Kirishima was going to a gym that Izuku didn't have a membership at, and he didn't feel it wise to confront Iida with anything more than safe school talk just yet. Normally he would have been a little disheartened to walk home alone, but he'd honestly been hoping to talk to-

"Not scuttling home just yet, Midoriya?" A deep, exhaustion-addled voice broke him from his thoughts, and Izuku glanced up in half surprise and half relief to find Shinsou's deep, half lidded eyes lazily sweeping over him. Up close, he looked even worse than he had earlier that morning; he looked wrecked, as though he could barely even keep his eyes open, the dark bruises under his eyes so stark he looked like he'd been sucker punched twice over. Hero Training had clearly worn him out, even though he'd actually looked interested in participating for once. "That's a surprise."

"A-ah, h-hey Shinsou! Y-yeah, I uhm... a-actually kinda w-wanted to-well, I mean, I-I was hoping I c-could, uhm-" Izuku floundered a little under his classmate's leaden gaze, failing to carefully order his words in a manner that would waste as little of Shinsou's time as possible.

"It's lucky that you stayed late, actually," Shinsou continued as if Izuku hadn't even bothered speaking, which was oddly something of a relief. The less time he had to embarrass himself in front of Shinsou, the better. "I've been meaning to talk to you. And so has the poster child for anger management," the general studies transfer gestured with a lackadaisical hand towards Kacchan's desk, and Izuku balked as Shinsou's comment clearly carried far enough for him to hear it.

"Fuck off," Kacchan barked, kicking his backpack to the side as he stood from his desk. The desks near him had all been vacated by that point, so there was at least little chance of collateral damage. "The fuck you call me? At least I don't look like I use cough syrup in place of conditioner, you fucking purple scarecrow."

Shinsou's previously dull expression lit up with a crawling smirk, amusement dancing in his eyes. He turned to face Kacchan directly, casually pulling his phone out of his pocket, and Izuku briefly
wondered if U.A. had a fallout shelter in case of emergencies. "Oh no, how unfortunate-I seem to be about to send those pictures of your super embarrassing hairstyle to the entire class, instead of deleting them like I said I would. Wouldn't that just be so tragic, Kacchan?"

Kacchan went very quiet, his face screwed up in a vicious scowl and his eyes smoldering with caustic heat. But instead of the explosion Izuku was half expecting, the blond's mouth remained firmly shut. He very deliberately raised one hand to run through his chaotically spiked hair, and his roughly raking fingers came out as a single raised middle finger that he very specifically directed at Shinsou.

And, more bewildering than any other part of the already confusing interaction, Shinsou laughed. A low, satisfied chuckle spilled out of him, the smirk on his lips twisted into something more of a smile. "Well, if you're done being dramatic, get your crap and let's go-I'm not letting you waste the hard work I put in to capture green bean over here."

"Ca-capture?" Izuku sputtered, only to whip his head around at the sound of the bell to realize that it was definitely late enough that hanging around school was a bad idea without an appointment.

"Don't pay attention to a word that shithead says," Kacchan's voice cut through his alarm, and instead replaced it with a completely different sort of panic. Crimson eyes met with his own, and Kacchan's brows furrowed more in frustration than anger. "Just the first time you're actually alone. Can't ever fucking penetrate the wall of morons orbiting around you." Before Izuku could even produce a response, Kacchan hurriedly tore his gaze away and stalked back across the classroom to snatch up his bag, dangling the strap off one shoulder. "Let's fucking go already, I have shit to do that doesn't involve fuckin' loitering."

"Finally talking some sense, huh?" Shinsou snickered at the furious glare sent his way, languidly grabbing his own things and pushing off from where he'd been leaning against Izuku's desk. "Well, you heard him, Midoriya. It'd be wise not to keep the princess waiting."

"YOU WANNA FUCKING DIE TODAY, CUZ' I'LL BE HAPPY TO OBLIGE YOU SHITTY RACCOON EYE LOSER!"

Izuku nearly fell out of his seat in his haste to gather his backpack and make a break for the door, unwilling to test Kacchan's extremely thin patience. "Y-yeah sure, I-I'd hate to miss my t-train!" He slid out the door with a nervous laugh, not unaware of Shinsou's loping strides and Kacchan's aggressive stomps behind him. He wouldn't say he was scared, per-se, simply aware of the extreme volatility present in the situation. Izuku knew Kacchan wouldn't do anything to hurt him ever again.

But, getting caught in the crossfire between him and Shinsou wouldn't be too much better. "S-so, uh, y-you said you wanted to t-talk to me?" Izuku brought up gently a few minutes after they'd left the classroom, the length of the hall passing under their feet as they neared the front entrance.

"Yeah, I did." Shinsou fell off into silence a moment later, only the lingering echo of their footsteps punctuating the awkward pause. Izuku dared to turn his head at the bare minimum angle required to catch a glimpse of Shinsou's face, and found that the smirk on his face had long vacated. "It's probably a bit late to be honest, but.. about the Sport's Festival-I was kind of a dick to you."

"'Kind of'?, Kacchan mocked under his breath, snorting when Shinsou's head whipped around to level a dead stare at him.

"Okay, I was definitely a dick to you," Shinsou stressed pointedly, a note of the hesitance that had been present in his tone replaced with something dry and scathing. It left as soon as it had arrived, however, and was replaced with an awkward sort of contrition. "So.. sorry for that. You were just
trying to be nice to me, and I used that against you because I'm a sore loser."

"I-it's-" Izuku stopped himself short, taking a quick breath to swallow the instinctive attempt at reassurance. He took a moment to really absorb what Shinsou was saying, and offered him a kind, sincere smile in return. "Th-thank you for a-apologizing. It means a-a lot. B-but I didn't h-hold anything you said a-against me. It w-was... kind of i-inspiring, actually."

"You're a weird guy, Midoriya," Shinsou deadpanned, before the corner of his lips twitched upward, "but it's good to know there's no hard feelings."

Izuku squeaked out a laugh and ducked his head as they pushed through U.A.'s front doors, the afternoon sunlight casting the three of them in a warm orange glow. "S-so, uhm... I-I was actually a little c-curious about... w-who you guys interned with?"

"Nobody," Kacchan grit out immediately, his scowl from that morning returning with enough heat that Izuku could practically feel his uniform start to smoke.

Shinsou, on the other hand, wore the sort of grin that Izuku would imagine a bank robber would have after getting away with a heist. "I managed to snag an internship with our incredibly humorless, overbearing, and unforgiving homeroom teacher, who wrung me out like a dishrag for an entire week and also taught me a few neat tricks between berating me. But as I'm sure you're more curious about, our dear pal Bakugou interned with-"

"SHUT YOUR FUCKIN' MOUTH YOU FUCKING HUMAN EGGPLANT I'LL BURY YOU-" Kacchan's explosive protests did nothing to cease the flow of words from the grinning Shinsou, and his murderous lunge towards the other boy netted him nothing more than a handful of empty air and a squeak of fright from Izuku.

"Bakugou interned with Best Jeanist, who saw fit to turn him into a polite, fashionable, and well behaved hero with hair gelled down to resemble ancient pottery-" Shinsou ducked away when Bakugou lunged for him again, laughing as he jogged a few extra feet down the walkway, backing through the front gates with laughter dancing in his eyes. "I'll be sure to send you pictures, Midoriya!"

Kacchan trembled with barely bottled fury as Shinsou jogged off down the sidewalk, in the opposite direction of where Izuku knew Kacchan had to go to get home. Shinsou's distance gave Izuku time to notice something about his childhood friend that almost made him want to cry with pride; not once had Kacchan activated his Quirk, throughout the entirety of Shinsou's goading.

Overwhelmed by the level of restraint he was witnessing, Izuku only managed to catch the last part of Kacchan's screamed threats ("-AND I HOPE YOUR FUCKING CAT EATS YOUR TONGUE IN YOUR SLEEP YOU SHITTY LOSER, FUCK YOU!") , before they tapered off into sharp, heavy breaths. Izuku waited patiently for them to even out, unable to keep a smile off his face.

"S-so, you and S-Shinsou, huh? I-I'm glad you're m-making friends, Kacchan!" Izuku exclaimed once he was sure Kacchan had returned to DEFCON 5, a proud giddiness rising in his chest and coloring his tone.

"Shut up, Izuku," his classmate muttered, hefting his backpack and stomping off down the sidewalk towards the station. Izuku hurried to catch up to him, awash in the sensation of barely being able to keep his feet on the ground from how lightening his elation was. Kacchan was talking to him again!

"U-uuhm, Shinsou m-mentioned you w-wanted to talk to me t-too. S-so uhm, w-what about?" Careful to trim any unrealistic expectations or hopes away from the bubble rising in his chest, Izuku simply
let his curiosity simmer. Had he done something to change the dynamic between them, or had Kacchan had some sort of epiphany or realization?

Kacchan glanced over his shoulder for a moment, his molten metal gaze lingering over Izuku's face for a long moment before he turned away, hunching his shoulders. "...It's about fucking time you figured out that shitty Quirk of yours. Maybe now you can use it without fuckin' puking everywhere and flinging yourself around like a goddamn lawn dart."

Oh. That was... unexpected. Izuku hesitated a moment to organize his thoughts before responding. "A-ah, yeah... I-I was lucky e-enough to intern with s-someone who could h-help me fi-figure things out."

"You're damn right you're lucky, you fuckin' moron. I dunno what kinda dipshit you were playin' at being before, but it's fuckin' over, you got that?" Kacchan's voice rose in volume and intensity, his even heat spraying and hissing from frustration. "You'll take this shit seriously, and you'll work hard, and you'll be the best fuckin' hero you can be. No more fuckin' around. Get it through your thick-ass head already." Kacchan's shoulders hunched even more, and he quickened his pace enough that Izuku had to jog to keep up.

"I-I will, K-Kacchan! I p-promise!" His words came a little breathlessly, his chest so warm and tight that it almost hurt. "I-I'll be more c-careful, and I'll work harder, a-and... and we'll b-both be great heroes!" Izuku's exuberant exclamation burst forth almost without his say-so, carrying with it the last intact pieces of his childish dreams, years of vying and yearning for the day that he and Kacchan could be the world's greatest heroes, standing side by side. Maybe that dream wouldn't ever come true, the way he'd imagined it as a kid...

But he'd work hard to achieve as much as he possibly could.

"And by the way you dipshit, when you use your fuckin' hands for propulsion, use your goddamn brain and think about angles for more than one fuckin' second!" With stunning abruptness, Kacchan ceased his forward momentum to snatch one of Izuku's hands, bending and twisting it to point behind him. "Like this, you fuckhead. And don't just fuckin' fling them around when you wanna change directions, think about the degrees of rotation necessary to adjust your vector. If you do that shit you pulled in training today again, I'll bury you. Got it?"

Almost as soon as it had happened, Kacchan roughly released his hand, turning to stalk off back towards the station with his shoulders pulled almost up to his ears. Izuku stared dumbly at his own hand, before his brain snapped back into focus and he scrambled to catch up. "T-thank you, K-Kacchan!"

"And wipe that fuckin' smile off your face, Izuku!" his classmate barked, sounding more annoyed than Izuku knew he was. "Don't think this walking home together shit is gonna be a usual occurence, because it fuckin' won't! I don't have time to wait around for your dumb ass every day after class anyway."

"S-sure thing, Kacchan!" Izuku replied with barely contained cheer, wiping at his wet eyes with a sleeve. For the first time in a very long time, he wasn't consumed with thoughts of what might go wrong, of what terrible thing might be waiting for him next; at least for the afternoon, Izuku could only imagine how bright the future might be.
"-Principal Nedzu wanted me to make it clear that any students caught making outlandish dessert requests from Lunch Rush will be given three days detention. So for anyone that has already participated in this unacceptable behavior," Mr. Aizawa's gaze cut through the classroom, and Izuku shivered in sympathy at the sight of Ashido and Kaminari both withering in their seats, "keep that in mind. He's not here for your entertainment, so try to restrain yourselves from taking advantage of his generosity." Mr. Aizawa's exasperation was palpable, and Izuku was fairly sure that the pause he took to shuffle his papers was for the sole purpose of regenerating his patience.

Mr. Aizawa sighed heavily, glancing back up from his desk to address them with less annoyance. "Your Final Exams are coming up soon, and I expect all of you to be prepared for them. I'll reiterate that anyone who doesn't pass will be attending summer school during your vacation, instead of coming to the training camp. Be sure to manage your study time; the written exam is only half of your finals. Oh, one more thing: Principal Nedzu has also said that the school library and gym will both be open until eight P.M. on week nights, leading up to your exams. I'd recommend taking advantage of that."

Mr. Aizawa began heading for the door as the bell signaled the end of the school day, looking marginally more exhausted than he had that morning. Izuku was almost worried; was he getting enough sleep? "Good luck on your exams," he offered as a dry parting, slipping into the hall and letting the door slide shut behind him.

The silence was broken immediately by Kaminari's pitiful screech, something of a signal that everyone could begin drifting into their preferred groups before the end of the day. "Oh goooood I'm gonna faillllll," he groaned, nearly sliding out of his seat as Mina burst into laughter, slipping out of her own desk to sit on top of Kaminari's and pat his head in camaraderie.

"Practical exercises have certainly left us without much free-time," Tokoyami uttered in a tone that wasn't quite annoyed, and Izuku was reminded of his... not quite stellar mid-term results. He felt a sudden surge of guilt relating to their nighttime beach ventures, but squashed the reflexive urge to apologize for infringing on Tokoyami's study time. Maybe instead..

"U-uhm, if you're h-having trouble keeping up with the m-material, m-maybe we can start s-studying in the library together, a-after school?" Izuku mustered up his brightest smile, and was stricken half a second later by the realization that his offer could be misconstrued as an open invitation for anyone that needed help with studying and while he wasn't against helping his classmates he wasn't really much of a tutor he'd probably just ramble and mumble too much and have trouble explaining things and having multiple people rely on him for direction and teaching was kinda absolutely terrifying-

"Got room for one more, Midoriya?" Kirishima's voice put an end to Izuku's internalized spiral into panic, and he was forced to dodge the redhead's swinging leg as he hauled himself up to sit on Izuku's desk. "Algebra has really been kickin' my ass," he admitted in a slightly sheepish tone, one hand carving a path through the rigid spikes of his hair. Idly, Izuku wondered how long it took him every morning to get them to stay up like that.

Izuku was startled out of his reverie by Tokoyami turning a curious look his way, and his face burned as he realized he'd been quiet for a few beats too many. "U-uhm-sure, of course! That's cool with m-me!" Satisfied that his voice hadn't broken (more than usual, at least), he felt comfortable enough to continue speaking. "S-should we invite e-everyone else, t-too?"

"A group effort is not unwelcome. Doubtless we'd be too crowded anywhere but the library,
besides." Tokoyami's gaze drifted to the back of the room, where Todoroki was quietly gathering his things, and listening patiently to Iida and Uraraka hold a conversation beside him. He looked better than he had on their first day back at school; despite repeated reassurances that his injuries were healing and he wasn't in any serious pain, he'd been stiff and slightly hunched over during the duration of class, and had come in second during his own race despite being more than capable of winning. Izuku's heart twisted at the thought of him stoically bearing his pain, and decided that inviting him along was the least he could do to look after his friend.

The group invite was twofold as well, in that it would give him the opportunity for a more direct conversation with Iida. Things hadn't been... unfriendly; the stiff, unsure coldness Iida had shown after Izuku's scarring injury wasn't present, but their conversations never proceeded past anything surface level. Maybe it wasn't time to push quite yet, but surely it would be good to at least make some progress in repairing things between them.

And it wasn't like he needed a specific reason to hang out with his friends, right? Studying was just a convenient and productive means of enjoying their company. It was better to just-not overthink things, and focus on what was important. Having sufficiently convinced himself of his motivations despite the fact that he'd most likely have followed through regardless, Izuku worked his way to the back of the classroom, a smile rising unbidden to his face when Uraraka waved in his direction.

"Hey Izuku," she chirped, releasing the hold she had on Todoroki's floating notebook and allowing it to drift into Iida's orbit, "what's up? Worried about exams too?" Oddly enough, despite Uraraka's tone being steeped in a warm, honeyed coating of concern and sympathy, the glint in her eyes was almost anticipating.

"Ki-kinda. I mean I d-doubt the w-written portion will b-be anything unexpected, i-it's most likely to b-be a comprehensive o-overview of everything we've l-learned this year as w-well as a means of t-testing our comprehension t-through use of taught c-concepts in p-problem solving to m-make sure we a-actually understand their u-uses beyond st-standardized testing as w-well as outside th-the boundaries of our n-normal test prep q-questions to ensure w-we have mastered th-their use both c-creatively and academically." Izuku blinked as his friends' wordless stares stretched into an awkward silence, and felt a flush crawl up his neck. "I-I mean, t-that's what M-Mr. Yamada told m-me when I asked, at l-least," he mumbled, gaze averting to the floor.

"Well, that's certainly a thorough recounting," Iida spoke up, his eyes not quite meeting Izuku's own. It didn't quite sting, since Izuku had been expecting it, but his chest still panged for a return to how things had been before. "I'm sure someone as studious as you will have little trouble with the written exam."

Ducking his head and attempting to ignore how his ears burned at the sound of praise, Izuku stuttered to find his voice. "W-well, t-tt-that's t-there's s-still a few things I'm u-un sure about, actually, w-which is why I wanted to a-ask you guys if y-you wanted to st-study in the library a-after school? Tokoyami and Kirishima a-are already going to come."

It took until the moment Uraraka's face broke out into a brilliant smile for Izuku to realize she'd been almost morose during his rambling. Before he could think of questioning that, she closed the distance between them and took both his hands in her own, eyes sparkling as they centered on his stammering, blush-heavy visage. With her so close, he was almost sure he could smell her shampoo—considering how nice her hair always looked, he might have to ask what brand she used.

"That's an awesome idea!" Her voice broke Izuku from his embarrassing musings. "And much cheaper than hanging out at the movies every week. And maybe we'll even have enough time after studying to train for practicals, too!"
For a moment, Uraraka's eye glittered with mischief, and Izuku was struck with a sense of impending doom before she turned to flash a sweet, doe eyed look at Iida. Her puppy-dog look was strong enough to make Izuku's heart squeeze in his chest like it was caught in a bear trap, and he was only seeing the fringes of it.

"You'll study with us too, won't you Iida? It wouldn't be the same without the whole gang there!" A bead of sweat trickled down the side of Iida's face, and his expression quivered with the titanic effort it took to not immediately give into Uraraka's demands. "Besides, you get the best grades out of all of us! Who else could teach us how to be as dedicated and academically inclined as you are?" The humor in her voice was clear as day, but Iida seemed too off-balance to pick up on it.

"Of course! I'd be happy to help all of you study for your exams!" Iida seemed to glow with a new light, his exuberance shining through the quiet melancholy lurking under his surface. "As your friend and class president, it's both my duty and my privilege to aid my fellow classmates in their academic endeavors! I won't let you down!" His arms chopped through the air with equal parts enthusiasm and determination, and Todoroki had to sink back in his seat to avoid becoming collateral damage.

Izuku's gaze drifted towards him, and he was met with a neutral, two toned gaze. "D-did you... w-want to study with us too, T-Todoroki?" He was a little unsure—not in having Todoroki around, but if the other boy would even have the opportunity to join them, with Endeavor breathing down his neck.

"...I should be able to come," Todoroki stated after a few moments of quiet contemplation, his expression unmoving. "I just need to pick up something from home, first. I'll meet you there."

"S-sure, no problem! W-we'll see you there!" Izuku beamed in a manner he hoped wasn't unbearably awkward, chest abuzz with the fluttering excitement of getting to spend more time with his friends after school. It wasn't often they were all able to meet up outside of class, and being able to help one another study for their exams was a massive weight off his back. He'd been worried (of course he'd been worried) despite his grades, that familiar doubt weighing in his chest and hanging in his flesh with barbed hooks, but he found it a little easier to breathe, now.

The internship was over, his friends were safe, and they could work together to make it through any challenge that faced them. Maybe it was time to finally stop worrying.

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For the fifth time in as many minutes, Shouto Todoroki's gaze fell to the unadorned phone in his hand, an almost unconscious action that he had taken on only a short while ago. It was... unusual, for him to view his phone as a means of more than convenient communication or a source of dread and annoyance. He mostly ignored the apps it had come pre-loaded with, and had, at most, used it to accept calls and set timers or alarms. His phone had always been a mild convenience, and nothing else.

Until it wasn't. Shouto could safely say that, of all the things he'd expected from his time at U.A., making friends hadn't made the list. He'd envisioned a solitary and unfulfilling means of improving himself and the right side of his Quirk, before he was invariably scooped up by an agency after graduation, and then he would rub his own success in his father's face.

And now he had friends who invited him to things, who didn't get upset or hurt when he sometimes refused, who left the conversation open for him to join without forcing him to participate or ignoring his unsure silence. It was new, and unpredictable, and he still felt slightly out of place in the group, but..

Shouto finally slid his phone away in his pocket, convincing himself there would likely be no
notifications before he arrived back at U.A.'s campus on his return trip. He'd only sent a few messages in the group chat Midoriya had invited him to, but he was unable to quash the curiosity that rose up in him whenever he saw unread messages. Even if he didn't participate overly much, he found some unrecognizable enjoyment in reading over conversations. It was, comforting, to lie in bed at night, and drown out the cold silence of his house by imagining the voices of his friends when he read their conversations. Embers of pleasure swirled in his stomach when he sent a message that garnered amusement, or interest. It was nice-nicer than he could have imagined it would be.

The brakes of the tram hissed and squealed as it gently slid to a stop, and Shouto lurched a little in his seat before he caught the handrail. A foggy sheen radiated from his left hand before he removed his grip, and he quietly exited through the parting doors, keeping pace with the flow of commuters leaving the tram.

The walk to his house was fairly short, and it would likely take him only a few minutes to slip into his room and grab his extra notes. He could be back to the station in ten minutes, easy. The cold, roiling lump in his stomach suggested otherwise, but he shoved it down with practiced ease. There was an incredibly low chance that Endeavor would be home-Fuyumi would have texted him if that was the case. He wouldn't have to talk to him, or hear his voice, or look at his face. Shouto could return to the bubble of U.A., where Endeavor was nothing more than a distant irritation.

Shouto tensed the moment he set foot on the property, his stiffening shoulders pulling on the still-sensitive skin of his healing back. The wounds were shiny and pink in the mirror when he'd checked that morning, and the doctors had told him it would likely leave some moderate scarring. He'd take that over having his lungs and kidneys shredded. The train of thought led him to an unpleasant mental image, of his hand reaching futilely, of Midoriya's dull misery slowly dawning with terror-

His front door swung open harder than he'd intended, and Shouto was forced to catch it with his right hand, brittle flecks of ice forming on the aged wood as he forcibly puffed out a sigh of chilled air. He lowered his own temperature until the wounds on his back were blessedly cool, and scanned the interior of the house. The lights were still out, and he didn't see Endeavor's work boots anywhere. He quickly slipped out of his own shoes before it slipped his mind, entirely aware of how pointless it was considering he'd be leaving again in a few minutes. The potential headache wasn't worth it.

Shouto trudged through the foyer and down the hallway that bore his and his sister's rooms, wondering if he should knock on Fuyumi's door to see if she was in or not. He'd already texted her about his study-plan earlier, but he was sure she'd at least appreciate seeing him for a minute or two. But the light under her door was out, and he couldn't hear her in the kitchen either. Maybe she was out as well. Striding quickly down the hallway, he turned to enter his own room without flourish, the spartan living space making it easy to find the notes he'd organized atop his desk. He tucked them into his backpack, unconcerned with making them look neat, and considered grabbing a snack before he left. Class with All Might had left him peckish.

The sound of a door slamming into frame cracked through the air like a whip, and Shouto's nerves spiked in response. He went very still, hand locked in place on his doorknob, and strained his ears to listen for any further sounds.

Heavy, thudding footsteps began snaking rhythmically through the house, the sheer output of noise barely impacted by the removal of Endeavor's boots. Rather than fading off into his father's wing of the house, they grew closer, bypassing the sitting room he usually brooded in after work, and came to a halt somewhere in the kitchen. Shouto wouldn't be able to sneak by without detection.

Steeling himself for a surely unpleasant exchange of words, Shouto took a deep, even breath and slung the strap of his bag over his shoulder as he slipped into the hall. His door clicked shut, and he
was immediately accosted by cold, piercing eyes. Figuring it would be best to try and get into the bastard's good graces (what little he had, at least), Shouto uttered a quiet "Hello, father," as he entered the kitchen.

"Shouto," Endeavor acknowledged, the weight of his attention unrelenting. His presence filled the room with a sickening frigidness, every aspect, every tiny facet of the man that was his father making Shouto feel nauseous with anger. Every moment spent in the same room as him reminded him of his hatred, his regret, his guilt and longing. Endeavor was a miasma of negativity, his flames cold and putrescent. He was everything Shouto despised, and everything he vowed to never become.

"Where do you think you're going?" Even without his Quirk giving him the menacing (and stupidly unnecessary) flaming facial hair he wore during work hours, heat still poured from his furnace of a mouth.

"Back to school. They're allowing us to stay later for studying and training, for our upcoming exams." Shouto took care that his tone of voice wasn't too clipped or irritated—he couldn't afford to have Endeavor bar him from leaving because he was unable to keep a lid on his temper.

"You already have a training regimen to follow, Shouto." Endeavor's tone was stern and dismissive, but Shouto wasn't deterred. After all, that hadn't been a 'no'.

"The practical exams will emphasize teamwork over individual skill," Shouto lied, though he couldn't be sure that that wasn't the actual focus of the exams. "I'd be at a disadvantage if I didn't take advantage of the chance to train with my classmates." Shouto looked his father full in the face, maintaining steady eye contact. Endeavor wasn't really the best at picking up on his lies, but he needed to take full precautions.

He remained cool and stoic when his father's nuclear fission gaze narrowed, searching his face. The bastard crossed his arms over his chest like he was granting some great honor, a huff spilling from his mouth. "Very well. Be back before dinner. And you'll be holding a training session with me tomorrow morning. I'll wake you early for it."

Teeth gritted behind his neatly lined lips, Shouto nodded once and turned to swiftly exit the kitchen, reminding himself that it was worth it to put up with the bastard's bullshit as long as he was able to spend time with his friends. Endeavor didn't matter.

Shouto was halfway out the door when a thought occurred, unbidden. He rarely ever initiated conversation with Endeavor for obvious reasons, but he often endured the man speaking about work in an effort to impart his 'wisdom', which manifested in the form of ranting and seething when it wasn't condescending and self absorbed. But ever since the night of the Hosu incident, his father hadn't once mentioned anything about his work at the agency. Not a single word about his accomplishments or grievances, or even a hint of what was going on. Shouto couldn't help but wonder if that villain they'd encountered was the reason. Surely Endeavor would have bragged about tracking him down, or at least the progress he'd made in doing so.

Normally, Shouto couldn't care less what the bastard did, but the impact of that villain couldn't be ignored, especially after the video, and Eraserhead's reaction to it. Maybe his father would indulge his curiosity. "Before I leave," he called back, just loudly enough that he could see his father look up from inside the fridge with a furrowed brow, "I wanted to ask you something. Is there any new information about that villain from Hosu?" Shouto was careful to word it in a manner that didn't indirectly imply that Endeavor hadn't already caught him, knowing his father would immediately take it as a slight like the narcissistic bastard he was.

The moment the words left his lips, he could almost feel the temperature plummet. His father went
very still, and the distance made it hard to read the look on his face. He didn't move, or speak, or
even appear to breathe for several long moments, and Shouto's felt his nerves cluster at the nape of
his neck, wriggling and agitated.

Then Endeavor's lips curled with displeasure, and Shouto could draw breath once more. "That's
classified information. Get to your training, before I rescind my generosity."

Shouto pulled the front door shut behind him, leaving his father behind as he stared calmly forward,
towards the gates of their property. Trying to ignore the curling unease in his stomach, he focused
only on thoughts of his friends. He needed to hurry back, before he missed valuable study time. He
briefly entertained the thought of stopping for something to eat on the way, but dismissed the idea.

He didn't feel very hungry anymore.

Shouta Aizawa was a tired man. He imagined that might be engraved on his tombstone, and couldn't
find himself willing to argue against it. He'd only just dismissed his class a few minutes ago, but the
urge to simply lie down on the floor and sleep was becoming slightly difficult to manage.
Unfortunately, he had many long hours ahead of him, and would likely be up most of the night.
Again. Not like that was anything new, he mused with bitter amusement. Sleep was a luxury, and he
had too much work to tackle for indulgence.

Keen to tackle his first task before it could slip out of his grasp, Shouta slid open the door to the
teacher's lounge, which was oft-unoccupied during after school hours, save for his quarry. "All
Might," he spoke dryly, and zeroed his attention in on the blond skeleton making tea (in the
microwave, what a waste) that turned to focus bright, deeply set eyes on him.

"Oh, hey Aizawa." Shouta barely refrained from rolling his eyes at the pleased note in All Might's
threadbare voice. He was always so unfailingly friendly. "I don't usually see you in here. Classes just
let out, right?"

"I want to get your opinion on something," Shouta spoke, steamrolling his coworker's attempt at
small talk. It may have come to light that All Might wasn't quite the walking, talking embodiment of
a product mascot that Shouta had initially pegged him to be, but he didn't want to complicate
anything by having the Symbol of Peace try to get buddy-buddy with him. He'd keep as far from that
spotlight as he could manage.

Carefully considering his words, Shouta decided to breach the topic a little more cautiously than
laying everything out at once. "It's been a few months since the training incident. What's your take
on the progress that Bakugou and Midoriya have made since then?" His inquiry prompted a pair of
raised eyebrows, and Shouta idly wondered how a guy whose entire shtick was his ridiculous grin
managed to look so expressive.

"Oh, well.. honestly, they both appear to be doing quite well. Bakugou seems to be making an effort
to control his temper and remain on good terms with his classmates, and young Midoriya has been
much more confident in both his abilities and his relationships. I'm proud of them both for making so
much progress towards self improvement." Despite All Might's overly sappy tone, Shouta was
pleased that they'd both landed at a similar conclusion.

"I've noticed that as well. Nedzu has received nothing but positive news from the boys' psychiatrists,
and despite a few backslides they've both made marked improvements. Which is why I wanted to
ask you if you think they're both ready to work together." Shouta carefully gauged his fellow
teacher's reactions, the widening eyes and slightly parted jaw. He'd surprised him.

"I'd already planned to bring this up at the next teacher's meeting," Shouta continued, aiming to
provide enough explanation to wipe the irritatingly shocked look off All Might' face, "but I suppose there's no harm in informing you early. The practical exams we have in place aren't sufficient, considering the rising crime rates, emboldened villains, and increasingly cohesive efforts to destabilize society. We can't prepare them with feel-good robot destroying, we need to emphasize the value of teamwork, strategy, and technique instead of reinforcing the negative notion of dogged competition to be number one and might making right. These kids won't be able to coast on flashy Quirks against villains that intend to kill them. We have to prepare them for the day when heroes return to the mantle of public defenders over celebrities competing in a never ending popularity contest."

Silence hung between them for a moment, following Shouta's blunt and critical assessment of U.A.'s (currently) lacking efforts. "...You're right," All Might breathed, his face lacking both annoyance at Shouta's unsubtle slight at his reputation or resignation at the truth of how vapid and shallow the hero generation left in his wake truly was. Instead he was... melancholic, resigned—for a moment, Shouta thought he even looked as though he felt guilty.

"You're right," he repeated, a willowy fist clenched at his side. "Things are changing, and quickly. This fragile peace won't last forever. We have to do everything we can to help our students prepare for the hardships ahead of them, to overcome the bleakness of the future. But, what do you propose we do to overhaul the exams?"

There was the question he'd been waiting for. Shouta leaned against the doorway, silently pleased that All Might seemed on-board with everything so far. "As young heroes, they will be facing opponents that can outmatch them in both power and experience. So logically, the best way to prepare them for such an event is to simulate that in a controlled environment. And who better to teach them how to engage a more powerful and experienced opponent than their teachers?"

Shouta's smirk was one hundred percent a result of the dumbfounded look on the Symbol of Peace's face, and he was almost disappointed that the response came so quickly. "You're suggesting the students fight us? Are you sure—"

"Save your grievances for the meeting tomorrow," Shouta interrupted, uninterested in hearing any reservations about his idea before he even had a chance to properly present it. "I want to know if you think Bakugou and Midoriya are capable of working together during the exam."

All Might's mouth opened for a moment, before clicking shut. He rubbed his chin in obvious thought while Shouta patiently endured his unneeded theatrics. "...I can't say for sure. Despite their progress, the core issues are still unresolved. I feel like it's a little early to pair them up in a high stress environment. Not to mention the issue of parental permission, and consulting with their therapists. It's too soon."

"Good to know we're on the same page." Shouta removed his weight from the door frame, adjusting his scarf idly as he prepared to leave and start on his paperwork. "Well, that's all. Try not to slack too much on your paperwork."

"Aizawa, I—that is, Ken and Nemuri invited me out for drinks tonight, and wanted me to extend the invitation. If you're not busy, of course." The hopeful smile on All Might's gaunt face was so far removed from the blinding, overbearing grin he wore in his hero form that Shouta had to stop himself from doing a double take.

"Thanks but no thanks," he declined, blinking for slightly longer than he probably should. "I have a lot of work to do. And I'm sure you do, too." Ignoring the slightly sheepish expression that his coworker now wore, he slipped out of the break room and sighed through his nose. If only preparation for exams and mountains of paperwork were the only responsibilities on his plate that
Even drinking with his overly loud coworkers would be more bearable than working on the Mincemeat case.
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

Here's some cool fanart I've gotten since the last chapter! Be sure to check out the artists!

http://shuratart.tumblr.com/post/172093459212/i-really-wanted-to-draw-this-one-scene-from
https://retrowolfdog.tumblr.com/post/171831056855/hello-i-would-like-to-let-you-know-i-can-not-draw

Izuku Midoriya gasped, twitching and shuddering under the constricting heat of his blankets. His thoughts swam feverishly through his skull, fractured chunks of coherence slowing his cognitive processes to an agonizing crawl. Every layer of his flesh squirmed and throbbed as if integral to some great, pulsating organ. He was too hot, everything was too hot, sticking to his skin like steaming blood and forcing sweat to bleed into his sheets.

He moaned in distress, eyelids twitching and sizzling tears leaking as he struggled merely to see, his senses betraying him as they were swallowed in the grinding, pulsing static that puppeted him from beneath his very flesh. The liquid dark jumped within his veins, howling with sinister need and locking his fingers in stiff, trembling claws. He felt it twist under his skin, pulling itself into knots that bulged his flesh until they grew dark and shiny in the swaying scope of his mind's eye.

One of Izuku's eyes fluttered open, wide and luminous, and beheld the ocean of shadows lapping at his four walls. They swelled and surged with the fetid heat of bile, swirling in a rhythm that mocked the maddening beat of the force beneath his putrefied exterior. Terror was a distant thing, a klaxon removed that could not pierce the bloated pustule that contained him, body and mind, in its tumorous hollow.

Without warning, lost in the forever aether of unquenched darkness, a spark was lit within him. Izuku choked on air, thick as lead, as the shadowy tide raged and the static roared with echoed fury, spiraling upward towards an awe-some and terrible peak as the spark beneath his skin hurtled towards instability. His lips parted in a soundless scream, face pressed unfeeling into his mattress as malice writhed in the fragile meat of his gums. White noise collapsed inward in a shrieking crescendo. The shadows climbed to consume his ceiling in frothing fervor. Izuku's consciousness was lost, scattered between forlorn stars as his humanity was immolated by fires that stole breath and light alike. His facade crumbled into white ash, and from within his charred remains emerged a terrible pillar of shrieking wires-

Izuku sucked in a lungful of air with painful desperation, eyes wild and shimmering with tears dragged forth by the vacuumous pull of his lungs. He was wracked with chest-deep coughs, and struggled to tamp down his unseated panic. He didn't understand-what happened? Had that been his first nightmare? Izuku couldn't say for sure-the particulars of Living Nightmare were numerous and enigmatic, but he was sure it was the cause of his suspended dreaming. Maybe it had caused that episode, as well.
Shaken and unsettled, Izuku reigned in his unstable breathing until it approached an even baseline, and glanced around his dim bedroom. There were certainly no shadows churning and brewing, but the static remained a dull hiss in the back of his head, a sure sign of Living Nightmare's impatience.

All his free time had been eaten up by studying the week before, and actually taking his academic finals had left him so drained that he'd done little else besides eat dinner and sleep after class. Maybe that was it—he was just stressed, was all; he was stressed and pent up.

And, if the time on his hastily retrieved phone was to be believed, he was late. Izuku groaned and rolled out of bed, sloppily kicking off his pajamas while attempting to simultaneously dress in his uniform. He credited his increased balance and level of hand-eye coordination to months of hero training, well aware of how many times he'd have fallen on his face attempting the same feat pre-U.A.

Izuku carefully removed his medical brace before actually leaving his room, undoing velcro straps and absentmindedly flexing his fingers in the exercises Recovery Girl had taught him. They still twinged a little when he did anything complex, like tying his tie or typing on a keyboard, but thankfully his injury seemed to be healing up nicely. He could sometimes see a slight discoloration where his bones had (nauseatingly) pierced skin, though that was generally only if his hands were warmed from heat or exertion.

Fumbling through the long-accepted butchering of his tie, Izuku almost hit himself in the face with the All Might ornament hanging from his door when he noticed the post-it attached to the wood. He plucked it off and quickly scanned the neatly scribbled contents.

'Izuku, I had to leave for work + errands early this morning. I left breakfast for you on the counter, be sure to eat it before you leave for school! Good luck with your exams!! <3 Mom'

A surge of nausea rose in Izuku's stomach at the thought of even attempting to ingest anything heavier than water, and he grimaced down at his abdomen as if it could answer for the roiling underneath it. Though, the unfortunate truth was that even if he had been in a state to feel hungry, he didn't have time to sit down and eat anyway. Judging by the damning clock spread across the face of his phone, even the time he took to quickly scrub his face in the sink and shove his (equal parts tempting and nauseating) breakfast in the fridge was cutting things incredibly close.

The sound of a steady rainfall wormed its way into Izuku's ear canals the moment he rushed out of his apartment and fumbled to lock the door behind him, and the natural white noise made his own static flare up with the crackling distress of a poorly tuned radio. A groan of frustration slipped from his lips as he doubled back to retrieve an umbrella, struggling to snap it open to avoid getting soaked before even making it to the station.

Resorting to tugging at the wire supports that had somehow managed to snag the mechanism, Izuku yelped as it suddenly flared outward, one of the metal nubs scraping along the side of his hand and leaving an angry red scratch in its wake. Pinpricks of blood bubbled up and blotted together to leak down the side of his thumb and drip over the heel of his hand. It was too late to go back for a bandage; Izuku would just have to suck it up until he got to school.

Trudging along at a half-jog, half-desperate sprint through a reality reduced to nothing an oozing grey mural, soaked in rain, Izuku took stock of himself. His stomach was cramping from hunger and nausea both, he was bleary eyed from a night of restless sleep and waking nightmares, his head was stuffed with static, he had been caught in enough rain to be damp for a few hours, he was running late, and he'd injured himself to the point of bleeding.

And, he mused with the sort of hysterical humor that only cropped up when he was trying not to cry,
it had only taken about twenty minutes. Hopefully, it would only take that long to miserably fail his practical exam, too.

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The re-birthed afternoon sun, having burned away the rains that plagued Izuku's morning, heralded a brutal summer. Dwindling puddles of rainwater practically steamed as they evaporated, and the sudden heat and lingering humidity made standing outside completely miserable. Sweat beaded on his forehead, due in part to the heat of the day, as well as the combined body heat of the rest of his classmates, stood around him in their own costumes.

But even with the dreadful temperature cooking him underneath the polymer of his armor Izuku's insides refused to thaw, flash frozen at the sight of all his teachers gathered before them, chief among them Mr. Aizawa, whom had led them to their testing grounds. It wasn't specifically the presence of their teachers that had his insides crawling with frost-burn—it was the fact that Mr. Aizawa had his goggles around his neck.

"Alright everyone, I hope you're ready for your practicals," their homeroom teacher uttered without any particular inflection, his eyes lidded as if he were still lecturing them in class. "Keep in mind that this is a test, not a training exercise. Your summer camping trip isn't a guarantee. So try to take things seriously."

"Is there a reason all the teachers are here?" Jirou voiced the question that was surely on everyone's minds, though Izuku could owe the scale of sinking hope and rising horror in his chest to his own, privately realized conclusion.

"I'll get to that in a moment." Mr. Aizawa's non-answer was accompanied by the barest hint of a smirk, and from the corner of his eye Izuku could spot Iida going (even more) rigid in his armor. Had he entertained the same suspicion? "Assuming any of you bothered to ask around as to the conditions of your final exams, I'm sure a few of you believe you know what you'll be up against—"

"We'll be fryin' up those dumb robots!" Kaminari interrupted with unrestrained overconfidence, completely unaware of Shinsou's stifled snickering a few feet away from him.

"And then we'll be cooking s'mores over the campfire!" Ashido continued with more zeal in a single yell than Izuku could possibly muster in his entire lifetime, nearly knocking Kaminari over as she threw an arm around him.

"Not quite!" The atmosphere became one of confusion as a muffled voice emanated from... underneath Mr. Aizawa's scarf? The folds of fabric suddenly shifted, a shape underneath rising and displacing the loops. A furry paw emerged from the top of the scarf, pushing Mr. Aizawa's head aside to make way for Principal Nedzu, who looked as chipper as any other time Izuku had actually seen him. "Things will be a little different this time around!"

Completely ignoring Mr. Aizawa's long-suffering expression, the principal hopped up onto his shoulder, gesturing grandly with his paws. "In fact, this will be a U.A. first! You're all very lucky to make history with us today! Rather than a test of singular strength and flexibility ala the entrance exam, we've decided to emphasize teamwork, strategy, and combat against experienced opponents! Which is why I'm excited to announce that you'll be working in teams of two, and you'll be fighting one of U.A.'s esteemed educators—isn't that wonderful!"

A chorus of confusion, shock, and dread rang out from Izuku's gathered classmates, which fit very poorly with the principal's jovial tone of voice. At least his mask wasn't on yet, Izuku considered with a single twinge of optimism, so it wouldn't get in the way if he just lost his stomach contents all over the concrete.
"You can't seriously expect us to fight-you guys! That's crazy!" Hagakure's protest was equally loud and disruptive, and Izuku found himself impressed by her ability to make a scene when only her gloves and shoes were actually visible.

"That's exactly what we expect from you," Mr. Aizawa picked up where the principal had left off, still as a statue while Principal Nedzu crawled down the side of his body. "I've arranged you all into teams based on a number of carefully considered factors, including grades, practical performances, etcetera, and pitted you against a fitting opponent. The first pair, Yaoyorozu and Bakugou, will be fighting me."

Izuku whipped his head around in shock, and found a similar expression of unguarded surprise on Kacchan's face. Yaoyorozu appeared revolted enough to almost jump out of her skin entirely, and in his haste to look away Izuku was exposed to the truly unsettling amusement crawling over Mr. Aizawa's face. When hope-inspiring heroes like All Might were plastered all over the place, it was easy to forget how frightening a pro could really be.

"Next team is Todoroki and Midoriya. Your opponent is..." Izuku's eyes flickered rapidly over the faces (and masks) before him, heart thundering with bruising force as he visualized fighting each and every one of his teachers. It was impossible, it was *laughable* to think he could hold his own against a pro hero-but outside his depressive realism, he couldn't help but think something was off with the lineup of teachers. He didn't see-

An errant gust of wind slipped past the end of Izuku's nose, tousling the loose strands of hair not held up by his clips. The wind picked up, and the brief, gentle symphony of swaying branches and rustling leaves was overwhelmed by a shrieking whistle from above, like a steam engine fired from a cannon. Izuku's widening eyes could only perceive a streak of blue and red and yellow, a paint palette sling-shotted with supersonic force. It met the concrete with an earth rumbling *crack*, dust rising and swirling in a whirlwind that could not hope to conceal the unmistakable silhouette, the raw power, the indomitable presence-

"I AM HERE!" All Might stood tall, a monument carved of muscle and bone, untouched by the cloud of dust he had disturbed in his landing. His grin was affixed as it always was, a shining strip of teeth that had come to mean safety, and peace. Izuku had never been so terrified of it in his life.

"C-could I just take a f-failing grade?" Izuku whimpered, feeling sickeningly dizzy, but his plea was lost in the timber of All Might's voice.

"Be sure to give it your all, boys! I won't be holding back!" All Might's grin widened, and he struck an unnecessary pose that made his biceps bulge dramatically. Faintly, Izuku was struck with the imagining of an artillery shell turning a person into red paste. "I'm sure you must be daunted at the thought, but fret not! In the interest of a fair and surmountable challenge, we've all been outfitted with handicaps!"

"Correct!" Principal Nedzu piped up, his cheerful, pitchy voice doing little to stop Izuku's head from lurching, less swimming and more being forcefully thrashed about in the unforgiving maw of the sea. "And now, here's the list of every pair, as well as their opponents, in order!"

It took him several moments to realize it, but Izuku's own name had been pushed forth, oozing into his consciousness as if forced through a permeable barrier of sludge and fog. He...he was first, he and Todoroki were first to fight. They were going to fight *All Might*. His hands trembled minutely, his healing fingers *ached*, raw from the sudden lurching fear in his chest. That was all it could be, really-abject terror, stoking the tarry shores of Living Nightmare so that it might rise from still depths and stick to the underside of his flesh, a balloon filled with scum that *fumed*, pushing the barrier bit by bit as the fury swelled, yearning to burst free in a violent spray and subsume all it touched.
Izuku's waking mind did not register as his classmates dutifully paired up, but his subconscious dutifully ticked down each tidbit of information: Kirishima flashed him a discreet smile from Satou's side, Tokoyami offered a slight nod with Asui trailing behind him, Iida stood stoic and faceless in his armor, askance from Ojirou, Bakugou twitched with repressed anger while Yaoyorozu stood several feet away, her disgust thinly veiled, Uraraka determined but optimistic with a preening Aoyama, Ashido and Kaminari stood looking less than confident, Kouda had almost hid behind Jirou, Hagakure's gloves were barely visible within Shouji's quiet shadow, and Shinsou's slick grin paired with Sero's smirk before he hid it behind a cloth mask that covered the lower half of his face. All his classmates were ready to try their hardest, for better or worse. They were all prepared. They were prepared, and Izuku was drowning.

A hand gently pressed against Izuku's shoulder, the pressure so minimal that he wouldn't have felt it at all if not for the shock of cold that radiated from it. He jumped, eyes about spinning in his head as he whipped it around and his corneas realigned with the nerve paths to his ocular cortex.

Todoroki stared back, his expression minimal save for a slight pursing of his lips, and his hand abruptly fell away. "Our match is starting soon. We need to head to the training grounds, and come up with a strategy." He eyed Izuku for a moment longer, which gave him just enough time to settle back in his own skin. His eyes flickered over Todoroki, the navy blue of his jumpsuit and the pair of handcuffs clipped to his belt. "Are you feeling alright?"

"J-just nervous," he half-lied almost without a second thought, too frightened to bother with being ashamed of his own instinctual reaction. It wasn't even untrue, technically; his nerves were the main reason for his addled state of being. Feeling guilty under his classmate's gaze, he made a show of adjusting his gloves and clicking his mask and visor into place, and followed in step with Todoroki on their approach towards the bus All Might was waiting in front of.

It was only once they'd started moving that he realized everyone else was gone, likely preparing for their own matches. His guts churned, acids boiling until he was sure he'd turned pitted and porous. He followed dutifully behind his classmate (and teammate, now) and attempted to recall the particulars of the exam. His jumbled thoughts were more merciful than usual, and he was able to extract the relevant information. They could either handcuff All Might, or escape from him through the exit gate. Both were impossible tasks, but Izuku wasn't given much time to think on the Sisyphean tragedy that was his life before they had reached their destination.

"Hop aboard, you two!" All Might greeted them, all boisterous vim and vigor. "The drive to the training grounds should be quick, and then you'll have another few minutes to plan before the exam! Be sure to make the most of it!" His tone was almost teasing, but whatever reaction he expected was not provided. Todoroki nodded mildly at their teached before stepping aboard the bus, and Izuku wilted under his gaze like a daffodil under the fury of a flamethrower.

He secured a seat near the back with Todoroki, the bus creaking and shifting as All Might stepped aboard to actually drive it. There was a moment of quiet where Izuku merely stared at his gloved hands as the bus rumbled to life, tires slowly rolling them into motion before the engine became simple background noise.

"W-we can't fight him." Izuku's whisper was hushed, though not from a purposeful attempt to conceal. It dripped from between his lips, pallid and soaked in the surety of defeat. He felt Todoroki shift at his side, staring down at him with something almost careful coating his neutral expression.

"Likely not to the point of defeat, no," Todoroki murmured, raspy and soft without the reverberation of his normal speaking voice. "At least, I can't. I could slow him down, but not incapacitate him. I doubt ice would be a suitably strong prison for All Might. Evasion and distraction would be a better
use of my Quirk."

Izuku's shoulder's sagged a few increments, relieved that at least he wouldn't have to talk Todoroki out of butting heads with the most powerful man on the planet. He opened his mouth-

"Though maybe you could." Izuku flinched and shot up in his seat from shock, eyes darting up to catch a flash of steely, neon blue in the bus' rear-view mirror. He quickly ducked his head, eyes a little wild as he turned to Todoroki.

"W-w-what a-are you t-talking about-

"Your Quirk is very powerful, Midoriya," Todoroki continued, as if he hadn't heard Izuku speak at all. "Back during the Sport's Festival... I could feel it in the air. It was... unbelievable. It felt like him-like All Might."

Stunned was not a word that Izuku could continue to use to describe his state of being; it was as if every molecule in the universe had split apart for an instant, before recombining to make everything wrong. "Y-y-you-" he sputtered, struggling to speak through the lurching of his thoughts. "Y-you ca-can't be s-serious. I-I'm not- t-there's no way I c-could-"

"I was at the USJ, you know," Todoroki interrupted, not unkind but dogged in his quiet drive, eyes as solid as polished stones. "I saw you, both of you. Your powers aren't the same, of course, just... alike. They're overwhelming, unimaginable. You could have beaten me in one hit, if you'd wanted to. But you didn't want to hurt me, right?"

Izuku fumbled to stamp out the wild static of his thoughts, biting his lip under his mask and allowing himself to be dragged along by Todoroki's words. "Y-y-yeah... It-I w-was r-really worried, a-about hurting you. M-my Quirk is t-too dangerous to be used d-directly on someone." Izuku very pointedly did not squeeze his eyes shut, unwilling to allow the gruesome flashes of spraying blood and severed limbs his words conjured a backdrop to vividly paint itself upon. "A-and it's dangerous f-for me, too. I-I could hurt myself i-if I overuse it. T-that's-that's why I'm u-using it differently, n-now. So I c-can't hurt myself o-or anyone else."

Todoroki was quiet for a long moment, his expression not quite softening, but seemingly less carefully constructed than it had been previously. "I wouldn't ask you to overuse your Quirk. All I'm suggesting is that it has multiple, useful applications. We'll focus on evasion and distraction, but if we need to make a quick escape, you could use it to... slow All Might down. Stop him in his tracks, even. Besides, he's more durable than any normal person—I don't think you could seriously hurt him."

Izuku geared up to try to cobble together another weak argument in favor of not using his incredibly dangerous and unstable Quirk directly on his lifelong idol and the first teacher that ever actually believed in him, but the words never had a chance to leave his mouth.

"All good back there?" All Might called over the steady grumble of the bus engine, sounding a touch awkward. It was the kind of thing that would have cemented how truly human (and oddly endearing) Izuku's hero was, if not for the fact that said hero would likely be slugging him in the face with a punch that could topple city blocks in a few minutes.

"We're fine," Todoroki called back in a slightly-louder-than-speaking tone, once Izuku apparently made it clear that he was only capable of trembling in his seat.

He almost fell out of said seat when he suddenly felt stiff fingers rest over-top his own, heart lurching as it was subjected to intense whiplash. He tilted his head up to hopefully express his confusion through eye contact alone, and flushed up to the roots of his hair when he was subjected to the
careful, unsure set of Todoroki's features. He patted Izuku's hand once, in the way one might pet a venomous snake, and cleared his throat.

"...I can tell you're nervous. But it's going to be fine." There was a stilted air to his words, as though Todoroki were reciting them but didn't trust that he remembered them correctly. Still, the effort was enough to make a spark of warmth fizzle in Izuku's chest, and he had to break eye contact because he couldn't handle how kind and heartfelt and amazing all of his friends were-

"Th-thanks," he managed to utter a moment before the bus lurched to a halt, breaks squealing as they were both tossed forward from the sudden halt of forward momentum.

"Whoopsy! Breaks are a little more touchy than I expected." All Might's nervous laughter bounced off the metal interior of the bus, nearly drowning out the hiss of hydraulics as the doors slid open. He was the first one off, metal creaking so loudly under his footfalls that Izuku was surprised there weren't indentations in the stairs for Todoroki and him to step into on the way out.

They emerged onto a circle of asphalt, bordered by the sparse woods that made up most of the outskirts of U.A.'s campus and facilities. A smaller path of pavement led towards, presumably, the testing grounds, the walls of which Izuku could make out through the gaps in the trees. His fear slowly bled back into him, less tumultuous thanks to Todoroki's reassurances but no less potent.

"Your entrance is just ahead," All Might informed them, shading his eyes with a hand as he peered over some of the smaller trees, his staggering height never more clear than that very moment. Izuku would probably need a step ladder to look him in the eyes. "You have a few minutes before the exam starts. Use your time wisely. And try not to think of this as your final exams."

Izuku looked up to properly receive All Might's sure-to-be calming advice-only to lock up, stiffened to crumbling stone as he was engulfed by searing blue infernos, blinding and all encompassing in their power, their scope, their indomitable might. "Instead," the Symbol of Peace rumbled, more a vessel for the unending fury of pure justice than the man who housed such awe inspiring strength, "remember that you are the heroes, and I am the villain."

"...Well, see you in a few!" And with that off-puttingly cheerful farewell, All Might took off with the force of a cannon firing, sending up a whirlwind that tossed Izuku's loose hair back and shook a flurry of leaves off the trees.

"..." Rattled, Izuku could only gape noiselessly behind his mask, and wish he had never woken up that morning.

"It's an intimidation tactic," Todoroki spoke up suddenly, his inflection-less tone a soothing balm that, unfortunately, had to contend with a burn that turned bones to soot. "He wants us off balance, and likely also wants to see how well we can handle it. It's important for a hero to not be swayed or cowed by a villain, and remain calm under pressure."

Todoroki glanced over from where he'd been staring contemplatively at the testing grounds, his eyebrows furrowed when Izuku couldn't muster up a response. "...He can't really hurt us, you know. Despite what he said, it's just an exam. If anything did go wrong, he'd put a stop to it."

Izuku bit his tongue before he could blurt out that he wasn't worried about All Might hurting them, and more the fact that he might accidentally seriously wound his teacher, or barring that, he might fail the exam for both of them because he couldn't bring himself to actually use the full power of Living Nightmare. They didn't have enough time for him to start dumping out all his insecurities.

"Y-yeah. Thanks," he murmured instead, gesturing awkwardly towards the path through the woods.
"W-we should head for the gate, a-and talk about our st-strategy."

Todoroki nodded, and set off for the gate at a pace that Izuku stumbled to keep up with, silently cursing his short legs. "I was thinking that combining our Quirks for maximum mobility right at the start would be the best idea. I can use my ice for us to skate on, and you can use your Quirk for propulsion. Though we should probably avoid using it the way you did at the Sport's Festival for mobility; It would be too difficult to maneuver, and we might hit something. We just need a way to keep All Might from simply catching up and attacking us, but I'm unsure if my giant ice wall could hold him back for very long, and if I use my flames too heavily it will be difficult to keep the ground icy beneath us."

Izuku quietly absorbed Todoroki's strategy, grateful for the glut of information to cover up the heavy buzzing in the back of his head. It sounded fairly solid, but of course, All Might's speed was unmatched even with the weights slowing him down, and he could break through any obstacles they put in his way. Pelting him with attacks would only impede him if Izuku used an enormous amount of power, which he would rather not have to do, and using the... commands, on All Might-he was reluctant to do that as well.

The gate swiftly approached, and once they couldn't move any further in, Izuku plopped down onto the pavement and pulled a trio of markers out of one of the pouches on his costume. Todoroki glanced down at him with the impression of a puzzled look, and Izuku flushed the moment after he'd already removed his mask.

"A-ah... I j-just wanted to... c-color on a design. It h-helps me think." Izuku crooked an awkward smile up at Todoroki, who merely inclined one shoulder before joining him, much more gracefully, on the ground. Izuku carefully laid his blank mask onto his lap, popping off the caps of the red, blue, and yellow markers he'd retrieved to quietly color in a heavily All Might inspired design.

"...I-I don't think my attacks w-would be enough t-to h-hold All Might off, e-even at full power. I-I'd incapacitate myself b-before we could get the h-handcuffs on him. W-we need something he c-can't just.. p-punch through." Izuku's gaze flickered down, and he carefully decorated his mask with bold stripes of color. He wracked his brain, fighting a haze of sleepiness and general discomfort, before a spark ignited among his errant thoughts.

"T-Todoroki! C-can you-are you a-able to create steam, w-with your Quirk?" Izuku's voice had pitched upward in excitement, and Todoroki's eyes widened slightly as the idea was unearthed.

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"I-it's something of a byproduct, when I use both sides together, but I guess I could try." Todoroki stood back up, aiming his hands well away from Izuku and the forest both. His left hand ignited with a red-orange inferno that crept up to his elbow, and his right grew so cold that Izuku could feel it from where he was sitting, watching frost creep over Todoroki's fingers. He carefully brought both hands closer to each other, steam leaking in steady streams that dissipated in the air before he clasped his palms together.

Izuku instinctively hunched over into a ball as a cloud of steam exploded from Todoroki's conjoined hands, covering his head with his hands to protect his face, which turned out to be unnecessary when the steam didn't burn him. It was certainly warm enough to be distinctly uncomfortable, but when Izuku slowly dared to open his eyes behind his visor he marveled at the thick, rushing fog that his classmate had conjured, so dense that Izuku could barely see a few feet in front of him. The back of Todoroki's jumpsuit was all he could see, but he slowly came into view after he ceased using his Quirk.

The steaming fog hung stubbornly in the air, and Izuku could feel his heart pounding with elation. "T-Todoroki, that w-was amazing," he gushed without shame, eyes blown wide into shimmering
stars as he leaped to his feet, carefully cradling his decorated mask in one hand. Unfortunately, he couldn't satisfy his urge to hug his friend, both because Todoroki didn't really seem too happy with much physical contact and also because he was absolutely radiating heat when Izuku stepped closer to him.

"I guess that's our distraction tactic," Todoroki said plainly, but the slight upturn of his lips betrayed how pleased he was. "I'll just have to be careful not to scald you." He huffed out a long breath, steam billowing from between his lips like a dragon's maw as the ambient temperature dropped enough that Izuku could almost forget how unforgivingly hot the day actually was.

"Y-yeah," Izuku replied, smiling lopsidedly at Todoroki before he examined his mask. Sharp, bold, eye catching-utilizing All Might's trademark colors had definitely been a good idea. He wished he could sharpen it even more with some black outlines, maybe touch it up to make it look like it was gleaming, but the slow groan of clicking gears let him know he didn't have the time. The gates to the training ground parted in increments, opening the way to their Final Exam.

["Team Midoriya and Todoroki: Practical Exam! Ready? Begin!"]
Stepping through the threshold of the parting gates, footsteps shadowed by the hollow echo of mechanisms and moving parts, Izuku couldn't help but feel fragile underneath the shell of his costume. His nerves could not be truly abated, but Todoroki's calming presence helped to temper them, at least a little. Seeing his classmates' cool, collected confidence as he stepped through the gate was enough to stoke Izuku's own fire, to help him outshine the opaque shadow of Living Nightmare. They stepped out into the main street of a mock-up city block, and Izuku knew the escape gate waited on the opposite side.

And so did All Might.

Izuku nervously flexed his hands and stretched his legs as the gate swung shut behind them, tending the fires of his self-assuredness and tenderly reaching for the oil-slick heat that could fill his veins and subdue the wild impulses of Living Nightmare. It was his, it belonged to him and he did not belong to it. It was his Quirk to control, his power to use at his command, and he would not be consumed by its terrible presence.

"Ready?" Todoroki glanced askance at him, eyes burning with frostbite and body shifted for locomotion, his right foot planted firmly in front of him and shoulders lowered to reduce wind resistance. The air around him turned foggy and frigid, ice spreading to coat the concrete below, but the hand he offered to Izuku was warmed through, and he did not hesitate to take it.

"R-ready." The gates clunked shut behind them, and a buzzer sounded over the training grounds, the signal to begin the exam. They were off without pause, without time for second thoughts, Todoroki freezing the earth before them in a chilling field of ice as he sprinted to build momentum, forcing Izuku to follow suit. He strummed his thinnest wire, and Living Nightmare sputtered into brilliant existence at his heels, a sudden burst of speed that almost knocked Izuku clear off his feet, each step launching them forward by two feet, five feet, eight feet. Mere seconds into their startup and buildings were starting to flicker by, Living Nightmare leaving smoldering footprints in the ice as they built up speed.

"Get on my back," Todoroki ordered with unflappable calm, his left hand wrapped tight around Izuku's fingers so that they wouldn't separate, his heels skating across ice with a precision and grace that Izuku founded himself equally awed by and envious of. He didn't hesitate to give himself a larger burst of propulsion, almost overshooting Todoroki entirely as he flung himself forward, releasing warm fingers to wrap his arms around Todoroki's neck and lock his knees around his torso. When he was secure on his friend's back and in sync with his center of balance, Izuku ceased the alternating bursts he'd channeled through each foot, and instead focused on a constant source of propulsion, his heels spitting forth twin jets of sparks and white fire that rocketed him and Todoroki across the ice and heated up the heels of his boots until they glowed a dull red.

Unimpeded by the rushing wind thanks to his mask and visor, Izuku was able to crane his head
around the red and white of Todoroki's hair, and roughly calculate the upcoming building-spanning bridge hanging over the street to be about one quarter of the way across the training grounds. They were making excellent time, but he couldn't help but worry when All Might would attack--

His ears were suddenly assaulted by the deafening pop of a sonic boom and the roar of typhoon-force winds, cringing in pain and ducking his head against Todoroki's back in lieu of being able to cover his ears.

"W-watch out!" His yell was a raindrop in an ocean of noise, but proximity alone seemed enough for Todoroki to skid them to a halt and form a thick, curving wall of ice the moment the street exploded around them, ravaged by raging winds that crumbled concrete and bent steel and powdered windows. They both slammed into the ice, hard enough that he could hear Todoroki's grunt when Izuku smashed into his back.

"Come now, little heroes... did you really think you could simply run past me?" All Might's voice cut through the dust choked air with serrated edges, making Izuku's insides twist with overwhelming fright. He fumbled to remove himself, to cease boxing Todoroki against his ice wall, only to turn and meet the neon gaze of his opponent. All Might's grin stood out from the dust with a wicked sheen, the mask of a titan.

Izuku didn't have time to think. He flung his arm outward in a surge of sparking plasma, an inverted thundercloud unleashing its bottled fury with a novalike eruption in All Might's direction. The glowing cloud of brilliant cosmic emissions burst from his spread fingers, the force flinging him backwards in a reaction that he empowered with his heels, leaping nearly fifteen feet up and away as he screamed "T-Todoroki!" in a cracking voice.

"You should really work on your aim, Young Midoriya! That power will do you no good if you can't land a hit!" The dust cleared in an instant, the wind battered as All Might went from standing to blitzing through the air so quickly that Izuku didn't even have time to blink. He choked on air as a hand snagged him by the upper lip of his armor, and he caught only a flash of All Might's smile before he was swung over a head of slicked blond hair and flung straight at the ground.

Living Nightmare raged in his chest, teeth gnawing and scoring Izuku's ribs as he forced it through his hands, desperate to create a cushion that could soften the impact. It worked well enough to at least stop him from leaving a crater in the dirt, his armor absorbing the majority of the impact but his breath sufficiently torn from his lungs. He gasped for air and flipped over onto his back, eyes widening as All Might hurtled down towards him with a fist raised.

Izuku flinched as All Might was suddenly engulfed in a stream of raging flames, his silhouette swallowed up by Todoroki's attack. The shield of ice next to him was rapidly melting, but his right foot was already producing the foundations of what Izuku recognized to be a massive glacier. His flames let up the instant the pillars of ice compounded atop one another, slamming into All Might with the force of a bullet train and rocketing him up into the air, the base of the glacier stopping only inches away from Izuku.

"Let's go, that won't slow him down for long!" Todoroki's voice had risen in volume and urgency, but Izuku couldn't read even a trace of fear in it. There was no reason to be afraid, he reminded himself firmly. He and Todoroki would pass the exam together.

"W-we have to l-lose him!" Izuku forced himself up onto his feet, focusing on the ingrained reflex to breath deep and even, and bounded after Todoroki with stardust trailing from every footfall. Todoroki had already begun creating another trail of ice for them to skate on, glancing over his shoulder before extending a hand towards Izuku.
With one last burst, he caught up and linked his fingers with Todoroki's, allowing his classmate to pull him forward until he could clamber up onto his back. "I'll try to cover our escape," Todoroki informed him, his left hand igniting again until it resembled a blazing torch. "Keep your head down," he tacked on thoughtfully, and Izuku, having no plans to potentially have his visor melted by the heat of the steam, tucked his head against Todoroki's back and focused only on propelling them forwards.

He could feel the moment Todoroki pressed both hands together, heat and moisture exploding off of him in a massive cloud of steam that swept through the streets around them, a moving cloud that would hopefully conceal them from All Might long enough to close some distance to the exit gate.

"Nice try heroes, but you'll have to do a little better than that!" The bellowing call was punctuated by a burst of wind pressure that cut through the trail of steam Todoroki was leaving behind them, less destructive than the one they'd been hit with to start but more than capable of clearing large swaths of steam faster than Todoroki could produce it. Izuku dared to glance over his shoulder, and blanched at the sight of All Might thundering towards them, each footstep tearing gouges in the concrete behind him.

"W-we can't just run fr-from him," Izuku yelled over the calamitous noise of All Might's approach, straining his single wire to push them forward until it felt like his control might simply snap. All Might thundered towards them with all the force and fury of a freight train, his pursuit impossible to shake for long.

"TEXAAAAASSS-"

"Hold on!" With only the careful angling of his feet, Todoroki redirected their flat plane of ice into a brilliant crescent wave. They swung right, hard enough to make Izuku's stomach flip, and Todoroki extended his right hand, brushing his fingertips against the face of the building they swerved around. Even with his building momentum, All Might wasn’t waylaid, pivoting so sharply that he peeled the layers of pavement off in twisting strips. His raised fist followed their trajectory, the mouth of a cannon, and Izuku was overwhelmed with a sense of impending doom.

"SMASH!"

Sprouting in a torrent of absolute zero from Todoroki’s right hand, a crystalline spire of ice emerged from the side of the building to crowd the space between it and the opposite structure only milliseconds after Izuku and Todoroki had curved down flat onto the surface of the side street. It formed a colossal frozen shield that shattered instantaneously from the force of All Might's Smash, shards of ice reduced to powdery snow as they absorbed enough of the intense wind pressure that Izuku and Todoroki weren't buffeted off their icy track. Todoroki's fingertips left the face of the building as they curved back towards the center of the street, leaving the icy mist behind them.

"I can see the gate!" Todoroki's voice prompted Izuku to lift his head from where it had been pressed against the back of Todoroki’s neck, peering over his shoulder to catch sight of the (oddly adorable) signage that indicated their exit. He trembled with anticipation and anxiety both, whipping his head back around to gauge how closely All Might was pursuing them. A flash of red, yellow, and blue emerged from the dissipating cloud of ice crystals and debris, and Izuku almost vomited from the violent reaction of Living Nightmare, a hundred geysers of boiling tar raging against the cage of his mortal flesh.

"H-he's catching u-up!" Izuku warned, more than aware that they had no chance of outrunning the number one hero-they just had to slow him down, maybe Todoroki could use his steam again-

"Hit him with your Quirk, slow him down!"
"I-it's not strong e-enough!" Izuku's organs twisted and knotted even as he called back, dread emerging in a terrible mound because he knew what Todoroki had meant; he wanted him to use the real power of his Quirk on All Might. The kind of power that could turn a human body to paste, that had horrifically mutilated the arm of a Noumu meant to defeat All Might himself, that could obliterate steel and stone so thoroughly it might as well have never existed in the first place.

And he knew he could do it. Izuku had been practicing, extending the range of his attacks beyond the forty feet he'd been constrained to when every use of his Quirk was a gut punch that made him want to black out. His thinnest wire wasn't as effective at long range-it didn't pack as much punch the further he extended it, and was practically useless at his maximum. But with a handful of wires... he could destroy All Might. The image clung to the back of his eyes with piercing needles, the image of All Might torn in half, his blood soaked organs spilling on the floor and his skin boiling and dripping away, just like that villain-

"B-brace y-yourself!" Izuku's voice was thin and trembling, and he could feel Todoroki shifting to adjust his weight when he removed one of the arms wound around his classmate's neck. It shook as he flung it behind him, fingers curved into a bowl and Living Nightmare howling in his veins as he extended his grasp to a handful of wires. He took a tentative hold, and the power hurtled through his bones with enough fervor to make him gasp.

The distance between him and All Might was rapidly dwindling, space and time melting away beneath the rolling thunder of his teacher's approach. He couldn't spare a thought as to why All Might wasn't moving faster-he just had to aim, and fire.

"You can't escape me, heroes!" All Might's legs tensed on his next crushing footstep, sinking into the concrete, and Izuku knew he didn't have any time to waste before they would be under attack again. He tugged the wires in his grasp, and Living Nightmare wailed as its terrible strength was birthed into reality.

Living Nightmare's emergence stole Izuku's hearing from him, its ravenous hunger for obliteration dead silent along with the world it had been unleashed upon. His entire arm had been cloaked by a ragged sleeve of encroaching darkness. It poured from every pore in his flesh, a rendition of a discharging flare plunged into the looking glass, twisted so that it might consume all light in spitting, ravenous billows. It zapped from his fingertips, striking nothing but the air behind him in a detonation of oxygen boiling pressure that launched Izuku and Todoroki both as if from the barrel of a rail gun.

Todoroki's feet skidded over concrete before the angle of the recoil sent them both careening just above it, the right side of his Quirk no longer activated after his foot had left the ground. They hurtled through the air with ear popping velocity, the loss of Izuku's hearing making the entire experience stomach-churningly surreal.

"I'll break our fall!" Izuku shouted into the deafening silence, fighting back nausea as he once again grasped his thinnest wire, hooking his arms underneath Todoroki's underarms and struggling to twist them in mid-air so that his feet pointed at the ground. He sputtered out clouds of plasma as they slowed and approached the asphalt, leaving streaks of glassed earth behind that caused them to skip and tumble across the concrete. The landing was jarring enough that Izuku lost his grip on Todoroki, gritting his teeth as the rough ground scraped his palms through his gloves when he caught himself.

They were maybe a hundred feet from the escape gate, so close that Izuku had to blink gathering moisture from his eyes. They really could pass the exam. His veins sung with an oil slick of determination, and Izuku forced himself to his feet even as his right arm throbbed beneath his skin. He glanced around to find Todoroki doing the same, the front of his jumpsuit smeared with dirt from
their landing. Piercing eyes turned his way, and Izuku was graced with the barest hint of a smile before it morphed into a cry of alarm.

His hearing fuzzed back in with a hissing whine, like a radio finding the right frequency, just in time for it to be too late. "-PSHIRE SMASH!" Izuku didn't have time to blast himself away, the ice spreading from Todoroki's right foot wasn't quick enough--

All Might hurtled into him with meteoric force, one outstretched arm catching Izuku across the back and hurtling him forward. He could almost feel his organs slosh inside him from the whiplash, his armor creaking and his back exploding in pain as he was skipped across the ground like a stone over water. The thunderous crash of All Might skidding through hard packed earth like it was liquid was a distant observation.

"Midoriya!" Izuku twitched at the sound of Todoroki's distress, struggling to crane his head up to catch a glimpse of his teammate. He was barreling towards him over open ground on a sheet of ice, his left arm blazing with the makings of a conflagration. All Might stood between them, his shoulders shaking with ominous laughter before he simply relocated, so quick that were it not for the cloud of dust he left in his wake Izuku would have assumed he teleported.

Todoroki was halted in his tracks by a massive hand wrapping around the back of his head, fingers clenching around his face as All Might reappeared directly behind him. There was no time for him to react, his flames sputtering as he was lifted from his feet and flung aside with a violent swing of All Might's arm, a spinning twister of dying embers that hit the ground with an echoing thud.

"What will you do now, I wonder? Your plan has taken you this far, but it's clear you heroes don't have any clue what to do in a real fight! Your little maneuver was clever, young Midoriya, but not clever enough." All Might dusted off his hands, his grin unmoving as he leisurely strolled over to where Izuku was scrambling to pick himself up. "You should have hit me when you had the chance."

Blinking hard to clear his watery vision, Izuku's legs wobbled as he slowly managed to stand up, fists trembling so hard they nearly knocked together as he brought them up in front of his face. "T-Todoroki, a-are you alright?" He was barely able to raise his voice enough to hopefully be heard by his discarded classmate, syllables crumbling into powder from the choking grasp of his fear.

"You should be worrying about yourself right now, hero. After all, your opponent is right in front of you!" Izuku fired on all cylinders before All Might even finished taunting him, both hands erupting with galactic fury in a dazzling stream of plasmatic power in the same moment that Izuku's heels lit up in a brilliant supernova, pushing him backwards with a comet's shimmering trail.

Izuku's eyes widened as All Might emerged from the cloud of raging plasma, sparks of erupting molecules seeming to simply slide off of him. He charged forwards more quickly than Izuku could ever hope to match. His battering ram of a fist crunched against Izuku's breastplate with the kind of monumental force that locked him in place, choking and sputtering as his ribs creaked in protest before he was hurled away. He crashed into the face of an already wrecked building, slamming sideways against the sagging door frame and tearing through it in a shower of sawdust and wood fragments.

"It is a hero's duty," All Might began, his voice hazy and distant as Izuku gasped for air around the searing burn in his ribs and the crackling ache in his back, "to ensure that they cause minimal damage, both to their opponent and their surroundings. Restraint is a trait of the virtuous, those who would see justice done with a hand that is both firm and kind. But a villain has no such duty."

Izuku wheezed as the debris piled on top of him was swept aside, and he was jerked off the floor by
the back of his armor, the front of which bore a spiderweb of cracks. He stared up at All Might blearily, struggling to catch his breath. "And sometimes, a hero must use all their strength to subdue those that care not for the well-being of others. It is important that you learn to make that distinction, young Midoriya. You will not always be afforded the luxury of restraint."

He was tossed again, lighter than before, tumbling over twice in the dirt before he was left, shuddering, on his hands and knees. Izuku's head was filled with the buzz of static, thoughts too disjointed to fit together into coherency. He could only focus on the rhythm of his breathing, the burn of his muscles, the distress of his nerves, the effort it took to rise again, swaying on his feet but steady enough not to fall.

All Might regarded him with a strange curve to his grin, and Izuku wavered for a moment before he raised his shaking fists again, wincing as the motion agitated his ribs. He wasn't going to give up, he would pass the exam, he and Todoroki both!

Startled by the sudden realization that Todoroki wasn't lying in a heap on the ground anymore, Izuku started turning his head before he could stop himself, only for All Might to plant a foot in his chest and shove him backwards, his arms pinwheeling in a panicked effort to stay upright.

"Eyes forward, hero! If you get distracted, that's the end for you!" All Might taunted, and Izuku's frustration drove him to kick out against All Might's torso, planting the red-hot metal soles of his boots straight into his chest. They sizzled and popped, which became a hideous crackling as Izuku pumped his Quirk through them, and All Might's expression twisted with strain, his grip loosening on Izuku's head. It was loosed entirely when his back was lit up by a lash of white hot flames, so hot that Izuku could smell All Might's costume searing. The Symbol of Piece staggered, a grunt of pain leaving his mouth, and Izuku slammed the searing hot cudgels that were his boots into All Might's stomach, again and again, until he was dropped unceremoniously into the dirt.

"One of us has to escape while the other distracts him." Todoroki's voice floated over the roar of his flames, strained with exertion but steady enough that Izuku could sap some relief from it. Fire snaked along his arm in a single yellow-white stream that hurt to look at, and visibly took most of Todoroki's concentration to conjure.

"Is that right?" All Might twisted around to deliver another devastating punch, the sort that could turn entire city blocks into wastelands, or pulverize every bone in Todoroki's body. The logical part of Izuku knew that All Might wouldn't seriously injure either of them, but-they couldn't afford to keep taking turns being pummeled, they only had so much time left before the exam was over. He couldn't afford restraint anymore.

"A-ALL MIGHT!" The scream that snaked out of Izuku's chest and boomed out of his lips was almost hysterical, born of desperation and frustration both. Living Nightmare's jagged, bloating power was awoken by his yank on a handful of wires, and he raised his fist in imitation of his idol and teacher.

All Might did not ignore his challenge, the wind pressure produced by the full rotation of his Detroit Smash enough to send Todoroki flying backwards, the blue of his jumpsuit lost in a cloud of dust as
the hammer-fist bearing the full might of One For All seemed to puncture all barriers of space that sought to impede its righteous fury.

And Izuku was there to meet it. His body moved under Living Nightmare's own power, a puppet strung up by razor wires in the grasp of the formless darkness that lurked between stars. Abyssal fumes twisted into misshapen specters, their zealous need to escape his flesh manifesting in acrid, soot black emissions that were belched forth in ominous clouds.

Their fists collided, and in an instant the air itself was rent and gnarled by the staggering power of Living Nightmare. Izuku's curse was a twisted aberration of terrible strength and inhuman malignance hungering for total annihilation, culminating in a calamitous cascade of cutting wires.

The impact was deafening. Izuku gaped in agony from the piercing shriek that assaulted his eardrums, the roaring might of One For All and the wailing fury of Living Nightmare combining in a thunderous cacophony that felt like it would turn Izuku's skull to powder. His legs went completely numb, sensation ripped away and nerves deadened by Living Nightmare's gluttonous demand. He collapsed onto his side in a smoking heap, his right arm throbbing with a molten, searing pulse.

And All Might staggered backwards, his grin broken and replaced by a pained grimace. He grasped at his hand, and Izuku's entire world began to crumble at the sight of it. Blood trailed in thick rivulets down All Might's wrist, collecting against the lip of his handicap bracer and dripping off in droplets. The skin on the tops of his fingers bore heavy abrasions, which faded into thin, curving lacerations down the back of his hand, freely weeping blood. He.. he'd hurt All Might.

The Symbol of Peace flexed his injured fingers, though it seemed to pain him to do so, and re-affixed his grin when he met Izuku's dilated, horrified pupils. "Looks like you pack a bit of a punch after all, don't you?"

He seemed as though he were about to say more, but the sudden crackling of rapidly forming ice caught both of their attention, and snapped All Might's gaze up to where Todoroki was making a break for the exit on a frozen wave. "Not so fast, hero!" He sank back in a runner's stance, his bleeding hand tucked close against his body as he reared back his opposite fist. Izuku attempted to stand and slow him down while simultaneously forcing back the trauma of injuring his idol, making it halfway up before his numb leg slipped underneath him and sent him crashing back to the ground.

All Might was off with supersonic haste, leaving only an explosion of dust in his wake as he rocketed for Todoroki, only to emerge into an eruption of steam that blanketed the final stretch before the exit. Izuku strained to see through it, panicking when all he could make out was momentary jets of flame and a rush of wind from All Might's punch, which didn't seem to connect with anything.

With sheer force of will, Izuku managed to stagger up onto his wobbling legs, using the smallest amount of power he could muster to boost his swaying steps and keep himself upright as he threw himself headfirst into the fog. He knew he had to make his way to the escape gate, to get out so that they could both win. The fog suddenly cleared in an instant, a shockwave of wind created by All Might leaping into the air, and Izuku's heart twisted in a knot when he realized Todoroki was in All Might's grasp. A massive fireball momentarily engulfed All Might's head, only to sputter out when he reared back at the apex of his jump and flung Todoroki like a rag-doll, his body a blur of blue, white, and red that slammed into the abandoned bus left near the exit. A ragged shout of pain spilled from Todoroki's mouth on impact, and he bounced off to collapse heavily into the dirt a moment later.
All Might, comparatively, came down much more gracefully, thudding into the dirt on both feet and striding over to Todoroki's prone form. He was slow and casual in his approach, seemingly unconcerned if Izuku had recovered or not. Izuku only made it a few steps closer on his uncooperative legs before All Might's voice filled the air.

"Something you need to understand, young Todoroki, is that you will not always be able to rely on overwhelming your opponents with raw power. You are an intelligent young man with a very flexible Quirk; you would be better served by creative uses of it, especially against a stronger foe."

Todoroki shifted, his chest rising and falling with quick, sharp breaths, and Izuku could just make out the turn of his head to likely meet All Might's gaze. Their teacher stood over him, hands on his hips, before Todoroki's left side ignited and he unleashed a hellish firestorm from his fingertips upon All Might. The pillar of flame was so bright to look at that Izuku had to squint, stomping the feeling back into his legs as he limped over, desperate to fend All Might off, knowing that attack wouldn't be enough to stop him-

"Are you quite done?" All Might's booming timbre was matched by a weak gasp from Todoroki, whose flames guttered and died into a final few embers as he was lifted by the front of his uniform, which slowly began to stain with blood. Pristine save for the trickles of smoke wafting off of him, All Might raised his uninjured fist in preparation for a final blow. Panic gnawed the inside of Izuku's chest, a harrowed beast that made him dizzy with pounding blood and racing thoughts. He pushed himself into a broken run, gasping around the burn of bile in his throat, and reached for Living Nightmare's clustered wires. "Rest well, young Todoroki-"

"P-PUT HIM DOWN!" The shout ripped its way free with the wrath of a damned apparition, and All Might whipped his head around as it echoed off the ruined buildings surrounding them. Neon blue eyes peered back, cast in eternal shadow-

The machinations of time shuddered and groaned, gears grinding and shrieking to a halt with agonizing swiftness. A world in ruins hung from flesh rending wires, inhabited by a single soul, and the harbinger of unmaking.

Izuku's consciousness was peeled away in glistening strands, plucked from his own head with razor tipped fingers. A dark, horrible mass was its replacement, crammed into his too-small skull and bulging out through his eyes, his mouth, his gums. Blades of enamel wriggled through his flesh, his jaw creaking from the strain of containing their inhuman mass. They parted in a ghoulish mockery of a grin, humid darkness peeking through the cracks in the blood-shined teeth. His eyes rolled with sickening ease in their sockets, one burst open in a supernova of dark matter and the other squeezed into a pinpoint of focused malice, poised to pierce outward so that the other might pull inward.

"Allllll Miîîîight," the anomalous will of pre-consciousness gurgled with Izuku's voice, twisted and strained through a broken radio into a static infused hiss. Izuku could feel his last threads of consciousness snapping, his control slipping away with a final twitch of his fingers as the husk inhabited by Living Nightmare peered into All Might's frozen visage-

Terror. The very blood in his veins withered to ash as Izuku's final perception beheld the mask of righteous, unyielding, blood-curdling fury on All Might's face. His grin was not a shield, a symbol for the innocent to rally behind or a diversion for the fear inside; it was a hammer forged to smite all evil, to light aflame and burn away the shadows, to strike mortal terror in the wicked and to warn any and all who might stray from the path of righteousness.

Locked beneath the shredding gaze of the man who was justice, Living Nightmare's tenuous grasp was vaporized by the neon blue that had drowned out every other color in existence. The fragments of Izuku's consciousness snapped back into place, and he was abandoned to inhabit his own
vulnerable flesh once more.

All Might staggered backwards and released a limp Todoroki from his grip in the same moment that Izuku stomach *heaved*, forcing him to rip off his mask and allow his lunch to spill onto the ground. His vomit was thin and acidic, tinted pink by the blood leaking from the roof of his mouth. The caustic bile burned on its way out, sparking a pain so sharp that Izuku choked around each mouthful. He collapsed onto his hands and knees, head bowed from the weight of dawning horror. Even when his stomach contents were vacated, they left behind a horrible, twisting ache in the pit of his stomach that made every breath too short, every thought shake with dread and regret.

"I-I'm so-sorry," he gasped out the moment vomit ceased flowing from his lips, tears streaming down his face to gather inside his fogged-up visor. The static haze that had plagued him for hours was drowned out by his own calamitous thoughts, circling chaotically and raining down an endless storm of blows upon him. He had hurt All Might. He had used the *stare* on All Might. Izuku had made him *bleed*, and afflicted him with something horrible and invasive, something he kept telling himself he wouldn't use again-

Dimly, he could hear All Might speaking, his voice low and distant. There was a pause, filled by something he couldn't hear over his own screaming thoughts, before slow, heavy footsteps came his way.

"Young Midoriya, your partner is unable to continue the exam. Nod your head if you feel like you can continue, and shake it if not." Izuku began rapidly shaking his head before all Might could even finish speaking, his eyes squeezed shut and his voice breaking in a sob when he attempted to speak.

A buzzer sounded, and Izuku caught the crackle of a loudspeaker in the same moment he felt All Might's hand rest on his shoulder. ["Team Midoriya and Todoroki are unable or unwilling to fight. Exam over."]

Izuku spat out another sob, his shoulders heaving under the gentle press of All Might's palm. "I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so-sorry-" the mantra flowed forth without his input, lips still forming the words even when his voice broke and he choked on tears. He'd failed. He'd hurt All Might, he'd used the *stare*, and he *failed* because he had been too afraid to use the power he needed to win. It was all his fault.

"It's alright, young man. You're alright." All Might's voice, the smooth, deep reverberation of his words did nothing to stymie the wretched ache in Izuku's chest. He could only sob and shake his head, broken apologies dripping from his lips. All Might's hand gently gripped his shoulder, and Izuku put up no resistance, limp and pliant as he was pulled over to sit properly, thick fingers slowly divesting him of his broken armor before it returned to rub gentle circles into the taut, angry line of his upper back. For all that a small part of Izuku was forever grateful, he was inconsolable.

Izuku sat numbly in the dirt with his injured, bleeding idol, drowning in his own tears and overwhelmed by his own failures.
"So, like... Mr. Cementoss is actually made of cement, right?" Eijirou Kirishima's inquiry left him after a sudden moment of thought, echoing off the tile walls of the locker room. Satou turned to give him an odd look, before his expression became equally thoughtful.

"I guess so? I mean, he's still a person, so he can't be completely cement, or anything. At least I don't think so." Eijirou nodded, shrugging one shoulder to concede the issue. Satou made a good point.

They were discussing the particulars of their upcoming exam from a locker room stationed just outside the testing grounds, stocked with little more than folding chairs and a plastic table to sit around. But it was at least air conditioned, and gave them a quiet place to plan.

Unfortunately, Eijirou's curiosity got in the way of the important planning things he was supposed to be bringing up, and so what came out of his mouth was something a little different. "Okay but like, he doesn't really look like cement, does he? He's kinda more like..." Eijirou gestured with his hands, jaw loose as the perfect comparison continued to elude him.

"Like tofu, right?" Satou's voice echoed the chiming bells of realization that pulled Kirishima's lips into a toothy grin. He shot forward in his seat, practically jumping out of it.

"Yeah, he totally looks like tofu! Dude that's so weird, we were like totally on the same wavelength-" Lost in his effusive enthusiasm, Eijirou didn't tune in to the sudden crackling of speakers until he caught Satou's head craning towards the corner of the room they were placed in, his pursed lips parting in shock.

["-Midoriya and Todoroki are unable or unwilling to fight. Exam over.""]

The clamor of the buzzer landed like a flurry of sucker-punches. Eijirou froze, hovering halfway out of his chair as a brick of lead crashed into the bottom of his stomach. Todoroki and... and Midoriya had...?

"Whoa... those are the last two I expected to fail the exam," Satou was almost hushed when he spoke, aftershocks of uncertainty creeping between his words. "Was it just like, crazy tough?"

Honestly, that was the last thing on Eijirou's mind. His heart clenched, squeezed by phantom fingers as a picture of how devastated Midoriya would be flashed behind his eyes. He collapsed back into his seat, chewing on his lip and struggling to ignore the sickening pit that had opened in his stomach. He twitched with nervous energy, the urge to find Midoriya, to make sure he was okay, but there was no time to do so.

For a moment, the world was drowned out by the jackhammering drone of his thoughts, the hammer and chisel of self-doubt that had chipped away at his cracks for years. If Midoriya, someone he looked up to, someone he knew would be an incredible hero one day had failed, then what hope did
Only.. that was wrong, wasn't it? It was like something Midoriya might have said before. Something he'd have said before he had started advancing, lost and hurting and so unsure of himself. It hurt to think of those days, to think of Midoriya driving himself into the dirt of his own will, over and over, unable to see how much he was capable of, how astounding he was.

And then, seemingly in the blink of an eye, he'd gone from the hurting boy Eijirou had silently vowed to protect to sprinting forward in a shower of stars towards self-confidence and trust in his own abilities. Seeing him use his Quirk, really use it, trust in its power and drive himself forward with a smile, working his hardest every day to be more, to get stronger, to be the hero he dreamed of being.. It left Eijirou breathless.

And it reminded him that he had to do the same. Eijirou Hardened the skin from his elbows down, smashing his fists together in a ringing impact that sent sparks flying across the table. "I don't care how tough it is! You and me are passin' this thing Satou, no matter what!" He stood so quickly that he knocked over his chair, the ringing clatter joining his exuberant shout to ring off the tile walls.

Eijirou leaned forward to jab a finger at a visibly stunned Satou, reaching deep inside his own core to grasp the molten steel he needed to pump through his veins. "C'mon, I wanna hear you say it! WE CAN DO IT!" Each word escaped him with red hot fervor, the clamorous 'bang' of a hammer striking a hot iron. He was burning up, burning with the need to succeed, the drive and the will to push himself towards victory-for himself, and for Midoriya.

Satou's stunned look slowly faded into something almost awe inspired, until the moment Eijirou saw his eyes ignite with the same fire. "Y...yeah," he began, squaring his shoulders and clenching a fist in front of him, "yeah, we can! We can do it!"

"Hell yeah we can!" Eijirou cracked his fists together once more, relishing the sharp friction against his skin and the heat-flash of sparks it produced. "Mr. Cementoss has got another thing comin' if he thinks he can beat us!"

Already, it was all coming together in his head. The pieces of his strategy welded together in a lattice of white hot alloys, connecting and combining and constructing into what they needed to win. Midoriya had helped him see that his strength was useful for more than overpowering and pushing through whatever stood in his way; if he wanted to pass against a stronger opponent, he just had to flip the situation on its head.

"So, Satou.." Eijirou grinned, his lips parting to reveal a gleaming array of knife sharp teeth, "how high do you think you can throw me?"

Izuku Midoriya was a failure. There were no two ways about it; he and Todoroki had failed their Final Exam, and that was that. Izuku was so tired he didn't even have the energy to blame himself completely. The very clear issue was that he and Todoroki hadn't fought together, as a team. They had synchronized their Quirks for mobility, and then the second that plan had hit a snag they had failed to act as partners. Instead of fighting together, they had both fought individually at roughly the same time and place. They were unprepared.

But knowing why he had failed didn't do very much to lessen the harsh sting of their loss. Not a word had passed between himself and Todoroki since the exam had ended, both of them stewing in silence after All Might had helped them off the ground and back to the bus. Distantly, Izuku was worried about All Might's time limit-he had been in his hero form for a while yet, and it wouldn't be good if he simply ran out of steam before they got back.
Though, that concern was secondary compared to the bloody print etched at the forefront of Izuku's mind: All Might's injury. Logically, Izuku knew that his idol wasn't invincible. He had seen unquestionable proof of that, in the twisted scar spanning across All Might's sickly-thin chest. He could bleed and bruise and break just like anyone else. And yet he was unable to accept that, to dash away the knowledge that only the most dangerous of villains had ever even put a scratch on All Might, let alone made him bleed.

And Izuku had done it in a single punch. He'd torn All Might's hand into a bloody mess, and hadn't even felt the impact on his end. It was... terrifying, horrible, sickening to have hurt All Might, even when that was what he was supposed to do. He could only cling to the small comfort that he hadn't been under high enough stress to increase the upper limit of Living Nightmare's power. The memory of the damage he'd wrought at the USJ was still fresh, a stake driven into his mind so that he could never forget the hot spray of blood and the stench of vaporized flesh.

A jolt from the bus rolling over a bump knocked Izuku out of his thoughts, and he raised his head from where it had been pressed against the window frame to glance over at the opposite seat. Todoroki was laid across it on his side, his feet hanging over the edge and into the aisle. When All Might had asked how he was doing, he had mentioned a tightness in his back, and been told to not put any pressure on it.

The thought of Todoroki's wounds reopening was nauseating, but there hadn't been any sign of blood or aggravation just yet. Still, Izuku kept a careful eye on him, and nervously fiddled with the pieces of his mask lying in his lap.

"You both did very well in your exam," All Might spoke up suddenly, his voice easily carrying through the interior of the bus. "I could easily see how you've both grown, and I hope you take pride in that. Don't think of this as a failure; rather, use it as a learning experience. I'm proud of both of you."

"...T-thanks, Mr. All M-Might," Izuku mumbled halfheartedly. Across the aisle, Todoroki said nothing.

An uncomfortable silence filtered over the bus, the debris that lingered after devastating impact. All Might coughed, and Izuku saw a flash of his teeth in the rear-view mirror. "Ahem... well, be sure to... keep that in mind!" All the wind had been taken out of his sails, leaving his addendum to fall even flatter.

Izuku turned to face the window again, unwilling to risk the slim chance of meeting All Might's eyes in the mirror. He should be... elated, right? To have his idol say he was proud was something Izuku had always strived for.

Instead, he was wracked with shivers that wouldn't go away, and a stewing, bubbling mass in the pit of his stomach. Izuku traced a finger down the front of his chest-plate, testing the edges of the spiderweb of cracks that ran through it. Military-grade resin coating, reinforced plastic polymer exterior, fiberglass and cooling gel mid-layers, ballistic weave under-layer-if All Might hadn't been holding back, it would have been as useful as cardboard.

Maybe later he'd find comfort in the hero's words. Maybe if All Might hadn't been the one to stomp him into the dirt, they would help. Maybe..

The bus squealed to a stop a moment later, jerking Izuku forward in his seat and pulling a noise of discontent from Todoroki. "We're here, boys! Let's get you two to the nurse's office, shall we?" The doors parted with a hydraulic hiss, and Izuku rose from his seat on aching legs.
He approached the seat occupied by messy, ash streaked hair and a singed blue jumpsuit, and hovered uncertainly. "A-are you o-okay to s-stand up?"

Todoroki shifted in slow, careful movements, his soot stained boots clacking against the floor of the bus as he sat up as straight as he was able to manage. "I'm fine. Thank you for the concern." He began rising in increments, and despite his assurances, he didn't refuse when Izuku offered a hand to help him up.

The bus creaked and tilted as All Might stepped off, a backdrop to Izuku's concern over Todoroki. His classmate's normally stoic, unflappable expression was cracked wide open, flickers of pain and long strokes of exhaustion marring his features. His striking gaze rooted Izuku in place, pupils slow and methodical as they scanned his slightly nervous expression.

"Thank you," Todoroki spoke finally, tugging the moment apart like taffy as he slid past Izuku and began making his way to the front of the bus. Izuku followed at his heels, ignoring his own aches and pains in favor of maintaining hyper-vigilance for any sign that Todoroki needed his assistance.

The short walk to Recovery Girl's office was as tense and awkward as the bus ride had been. She had set up in an auxiliary office built into the monitoring facility, and Izuku could faintly hear conversation drifting from behind the doors to the main room.

The nurse's office was already occupied when they walked in, All Might ducking under the doorway just in time for Recovery Girl to push a plastic curtain out of the way, her gaze hard as steel and zeroed in on All Might.

"Would you mind explaining to me again how a man who preaches restraint managed to seriously injure both of the students in his care?" She barked, before Izuku had even had a chance to step in the door.

There was a long moment of silence, where All Might almost seemed to shrink in on himself. "I... h-haven't said anything yet?" He stammered out, almost as though it were a question.

Recovery Girl pressed forward, taking one commanding step that had the Symbol of Peace backing against the wall. "Well don't you worry about that sonny, because when I'm done with you, you'll be singing like a canary!"

Izuku cringed and tried not to draw attention as he sidled into the room, using the cover of All Might's stammering to step out of the way. He checked over his shoulder to make sure Todoroki was following, and managed to catch a glimpse of the naked discomfort on his face.

"-now scram, you're crowding my patients. Go wait outside, why don't you; I'm sure Aizawa will be along to chew you up as soon as he hears about this." Recovery Girl's biting words rang off the linoleum, and All Might had gracelessly scramble from the room before they had even stopped echoing.

Dumbfounded, Izuku was only able to stare in shock as Recovery Girl harrumphed and turned back to him and Todoroki, returning to her normal brisk demeanor. "Now, both of you take a bed. How is your pain on a scale from one to ten?"

"Sorry to interrupt, but what was that all about?" Todoroki interjected bluntly, voicing Izuku's thoughts before he had time to work up the nerve.

"That man may have his heart in the right place, but he is an absolute buffoon of a teacher," she ranted, shuffling over to herd them both over to a bed. Izuku settled awkwardly on the edge of a
mattress, wincing from even that slight exertion. He quickly began slipping off his broken armor, leaving it in a heap on the floor along with his mask as Recovery Girl kept speaking, almost absentmindedly. "To think that such unprofessional behavior could come from a man that hails himself as a hero, it's shameful-"

Izuku awkwardly turned his attention to the rest of the room, unsure of how to take the blatant criticism of his idol. A monitor was set up in the corner of the room, facing the beds, and appeared to be showing footage of the Final Exams. For a moment, all Izuku could see was a mass of flowing concrete flooding down an intersection (it must have been Satou and Kirishima's exam) and a hint of yellow uniform amidst the deluge. Then the viewpoint suddenly swapped, and Izuku's eyes blew open at the sight of Kirishima launching himself out of the window of a skyscraper, a pair of handcuffs clenched in his hardened fist. He was a blur of red and black, hurtling towards the ground-towards Mr. Cementoss, who Izuku could just barely make out before the impact sent up a plume of dust.

A buzzer sounded over the intercom a moment later, followed by the back-up announcer's voice. ["Team Satou and Kirishima have passed the final."] A weight that Izuku hadn't even realized was in his chest suddenly dissolved, and a sigh eased its way out of him as he flopped back onto the raised mattress.

The announcement seemed to prompt Recovery Girl as well, and her absent-minded complaints came to a halt. "Now, do either of you have any significant injuries? Anything that needs immediate attention?"

Her head turned to Izuku first, and he floundered for a moment, unsure if his all-over aches and pains and throbbing chest were really worse than Todoroki's back- "Y-you should c-check on Todoroki f-first," he blurted. "H-he got hit in the b-back pretty badly."

"Is that so?" She bustled over to him, and Izuku wasn't able to quite tell if the look in Todoroki's eyes was gratitude or annoyance before she began gesturing at him. "Alright, let's get that jumpsuit off and take a look. Describe your pain for me, dearie. Is it throbbing? Does it only hurt when you move?"

"Ah... the muscles are tight. I can't move very well," Todoroki admitted slowly, carefully undoing clasps and shrugging out of the upper half of his jumpsuit. Izuku hissed through his teeth before he could stop himself at the sight of dark, mottled bruises painting him in deep purples, and abrasions streaked in red.

Recovery Girl tutted and motioned for him to turn at the waist, exposing the canvas of blue-black flesh that obfuscated even his pink, healing wounds. It made Izuku sick to look at; everyone in class 1-A had accrued at least one injury during practical exercises, but the thought of any of his friends in pain combined with the visible severity only made him feel worse.

After a moment of critical inspection, Recovery Girl leaned back, her lips tight. "No broken skin at least; your wounds haven't reopened. But I won't be able to heal it all in one go. You'll be taking it easy for a few days, young man. And if you feel any pinching, or loss of sensation, go to a hospital immediately, understood?"

"Yes ma'am," Todoroki replied agreeably enough, and sat obligingly still as Recovery Girl laid a wet, smacking kiss against his cheek. The moment it was over he released a gasp that trailed off into a sigh, his shoulders losing lines of tension as the smearing bruises on his back shrank and faded. The violent canvas of contusions transitioned from oxygen-rich red and bludgeoned-violet to scattered patches of sickly green and yellow.
Izuku turned away as Todoroki redressed, and twitched as a shock of nerves spilled over him in rivulets, frothing and hissing at the very real possibility that he'd have to disrobe as well. He... the scars on his chest still felt too visceral, too raw to expose for anyone other than Recovery Girl to see—and she had indeed seen them—, and with Todoroki in the room. 

"I-I'm not as b-bad off," Izuku jammed out through his teeth before he had anymore time to overthink worst-case scenarios (though a meteoric impact interrupting the moment where his scarring was exposed was probably the best-worst-case scenario), and garnered a slightly skeptical look from Recovery Girl. "R-really," he continued, "i-it's just bruises and s-scrapes."

She regarded him for a moment longer, and after she found whatever she was looking for in Izuku's face, her expression softened. "Alright, dearie. But if I find out you're keeping anything from me, you'll be spending a week in that bed!"

"Y-yes ma'am." Izuku smiled a little, and if Recovery Girl recognized the gratitude in it she didn't say anything. He leaned down when she motioned for him to do so, and received a healing kiss pressed onto the crown of his head. It was an instantaneous rush of both relief and exhaustion, the lingering symptoms of Living Nightmare clearing up along with the bulk of his aches and pains.

He muttered a drowsy 'thank you' as he sank back into the mattress, stiff springs suddenly enveloping him like a cloud. He missed most of what Recovery Girl said next, something about calling her if they needed anything, and it took him a few moments past her departure to realize he and Todoroki had been left alone.

As quick as it had come, his warm drowsiness was doused in an icy deluge, regret discharging forth from where it had been hastily sewn against his stomach. In the long run, it didn't matter that Izuku hadn't passed the final exam; he was used to losing, and crying, and then getting back up to try again. He had people in his life that would support him even when he fell short, even when falling short was painful, and made him feel like he couldn't accomplish anything.

But Todoroki wasn't allowed to fail. Izuku didn't know what had happened after the Sport's Festival, behind closed doors. He couldn't know what Endeavor may or may not have done, after his son had failed to take first place. Todoroki hadn't seemed any worse for wear, but-

But it was twice, now. It was twice that Todoroki had failed something because of Izuku. It was twice after he had talked back to Endeavor himself, challenged him to his face, had given away how much he disliked the man.

Izuku didn't know what it was like. His mother had always been kind and worried, even if she wasn't perfect. Izuku loved her with all his heart regardless of anything. And his father... he had never met Hizashi Midoriya, which limited his experience. He didn't know what it was like to live in fear of someone in his own home, someone with just about absolute power over him, and what happened to him.

But Todoroki did.

"I-I'm sorry." The apology was inevitable-Izuku had made up his mind, he couldn't allow his own mistakes to rest on Todoroki's shoulders.

He received a slightly confused look from the opposite bed, and sought to clarify. "I-it's my fault w-we lost. I should h-have listened to you to begin w-with, and used my Quirk w-without hesitation. I'm the r-reason we didn't pass."

Izuku's apology hung in the air for... much longer than he had expected it to. He fidgeted under the
compressing weight of Todoroki's eyes, the muscles in his face arranged like they were hand crafted into absolute neutrality. Beyond that, Izuku could just about make out a tightening around his eyes, a contemplative crease in his forehead.

Before he had time for his nerves to really ramp up, Todoroki spoke. "I don't believe that. And I don't think you do either. There's rarely one clear blame for why someone fails at something. There are a lot of factors that go into it. Many of them are outside of our control." For a moment, his pupils shifted as if to bore holes through the door to the nurse's office.

"Also," he continued without pause, "I already know that you've grown past blaming yourself for everything that goes wrong. I was there in the hospital with you and Iida, in case that slipped your mind." Despite the lack of irritation or accusation in his tone, Izuku's cheek colored with shame. Was he just slipping back into old habits, because one thing didn't go his way?

"So I want you to tell me the real reason you're apologizing to me. That's the only way I'll accept it."

When the first tear landed noiselessly on Izuku's sheets and soaked into the fibers, he wasn't surprised by it; rather, Izuku was surprised that more did not follow. He took a deep, even breath, and ignored the distant twinge in his chest.

"I-it's because of... E-Endeavor." The truth leaked from between his teeth, and he almost flinched at the immediate hardening of Todoroki's eyes, closing over like armored shells. "H-he-I o-only know what y-you told me, o-of course, and it w-would be rude to p-presume, but... I d-don't want to be the r-reason he's angry a-at you. I-I was supposed to b-be your teammate, t-to help you win, and n-now..."

Izuku choked on something raw, something so vulnerable that it twisted and writhed coming out of his throat. "$I-I d-don't want him to h-hurt you," he croaked, hunching over and wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. His tears were so hot that he could feel them burn, slipping down the curve of his ocular cavities and dripping in heavy droplets from his cheekbones. It made him feel foolish, acting so miserable when he wasn't even the one in harm's way, when his only consequences would be summer school.

But rather than looking annoyed, or angry, or even neutral, Todoroki just... smiled. It was sharp, and a little scary, a gradual curve of his lips that Izuku rarely got to see. "You really shouldn't worry so much. There isn't anything that old bastard can do to me that I can't handle. So try not to be upset, please."

Despite his fears not being fully assuaged, Izuku nodded and wiped his face with his still-gloved hands, sniffing as he soaked in as much of Todoroki's odd reassurance as he was able. "..O-okay," he said finally, his voice a little wobbly. "J-just promise me yo-you'll be careful, okay?"

Todoroki's face barely moved, but his smile suddenly dulled at the edges, safe to touch. "$I promise." He was quiet for a long moment, long enough for Izuku to catch a few moments of Tokoyami and Asui's (extremely impressive and exciting) exam on the silent screen before speaking again.

"And if it makes you feel better, I could bring it up with Endeavor and pin the blame on you, instead." Todoroki's tone was so dry that Izuku could practically watch his words sublimate, and his initial spike of panic was short lived.

He laughed before the silence could settle long enough to prompt Todoroki into explaining himself. It was a pitchy, crackling sound still wetted by his evaporating tears, but it still managed to lift some of the weight out of his chest.
"I-I'm pretty sure I'm s-supposed to be m-making you feel better," Izuku mumbled, his lips crooked up in a lopsided smile. Todoroki graced him with another barely-there quirk of his lips, genuine contentment shining through his transparent mask. It was enough to smudge the bleak, charcoal carved future that Izuku dreaded so powerfully; it was enough to make what came after feel a little more malleable.

"I never said you hadn't," Todoroki retorted with the utmost seriousness, his gaze sweeping over Izuku until he made steady, unbreaking eye contact. "Don't be so hard on yourself. Supporting yourself is just as important as being supported by others. You can't accomplish anything if you don't believe you're capable."

Izuku ducked his head, and resolved to take Todoroki's words to heart. "T-thank you. I-I'll try," he murmured, his guilt and anxiety chased away by the soft, plasmatic bubbles that crowded his chest. They would return to him in time, as they always had, but for the moment he was content to rest, and sink into the comfortable silence his friend had laid out.

Izuku turned his attention back to the monitor, riding the gentle high of emotional stability, and was just in time to watch Asui graphically vomit up a pair of handcuffs.

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Shouta Aizawa was not a happy man.

His chest twinged and ached with each loping stride he took, his clothes were singed from repeated glancing blows from Bakugou's Quirk, and his ribs still felt compressed from the bindings Yaoyorozu had improvised to disable him. Those kids were perceptive; he doubted anyone who hadn't been at the USJ would be aware of how his injury had slowed him down, making each breath a little more laborious, each maneuver causing a little more strain. That ruthlessness was something he'd come to expect from Bakugou, but it was a little surprising from Yaoyorozu.

Though they had rallied and defeated him in the end, he doubted a single match of working together would completely erase the tension between them. Yaoyorozu was staunch in her morals and didn't forgive too easily, while Bakugou was irreverent and abrasive. Despite the fact that his progress was clear to Shouta, it likely didn't come across as obviously to his classmates. Though, as long as tensions didn't increase, it was doubtful he'd have to intervene. Either Bakugou would grow in time, or he'd regress, cause another incident, and be expelled.

Shouta was hoping for the former, mostly because it meant less paperwork on his end.

But that wasn't why he was upset; no, the source of his ire was stowed away in the Testing Observation Center, the emaciated skeleton that played at being a Saturday morning cartoon superstar.

Shuzenji had called him the moment he'd finished with the exam, relaying exactly what the blond buffoon had been up to. All Might was lucky that the walk from the testing grounds to the observation center was long enough for Shouta's boiling blood to calm to a simmer.

He threw open the door to the building with a clattering bang, sweeping through the hall in a clutter of scarves on his way to the nurse's office. He'd let All Might stew for a bit, get him nice and uneasy first.

Besides, the condition of his students came first.

He slunk into the nurse's office with more care than he'd taken to enter the building proper, and was struck by muffled conversation and laughter from behind the curtain sectioning off the back half of the office.
Shuzenji glanced up when he entered, her lips pursed. "Doing well in there?" He asked, nodding towards the partition. A shriek of 'K-Kirishima, q-quit it!' sounded from behind it, followed by a blended chorus of laughter.

"Oh, they're all doing quite well," she replied, some of the tightness receding from her face to be replaced by fondness. "No major injuries, like I told you. It was more the shock of the situation that hit them, the poor dears."

He read the question that appeared on her face, and shook his head minutely. "I doubt it will keep them down for long. They're resilient kids." He spoke with the utmost confidence in his words; yes, even Izuku Midoriya had an incredible ability to recover from setbacks. Though he might need a talk, first.

Satisfied with the state of his students, Shouta nodded and leaned back against the doorway. "As long as they're okay, I won't disturb them."

"You're going to go talk to him, then?"

"Yeah." Shouta's mood darkened, and he rubbed roughly at the bridge of his nose with two fingers. "Someone's gotta screw his inflated head back on. I'll try not to leave him too badly off." The corner of his lips twitched into a smirk, but he didn't feel a shred of amusement.

He turned to leave, but Shuzenji halted him in place when she piped up again. "That fool of a man..." Rather than the biting tone she'd taken over the phone, she almost sounded.. regretful. "He's learning slower than he should be, but he has his students' best interests at heart."

Shouta considered her words without turning around, mulling them over carefully. "Well," he began finally, all inflection lost in dulled dismissal, "maybe he should have it in the classroom, too."

He slipped out of the office without another word, stalking down past the main observation room (if All Might was stupid enough to sit in that room, his secret completely exposed, then Shouta would strangle him to put him out of his misery) towards a small break room, loaded with the bare essentials for making tea and sitting on uncomfortable couches.

He swung the door open carelessly, and was treated to the sight of the Symbol of Peace hunched over a cooled cup of tea, blond tufts of hair drooping, and the monitor in the corner replaying the footage of Midoriya and Todoroki's exam.

"Feeling sorry for yourself in here?" Shouta said by way of greeting, loud enough to startle the man. The pathetic 'rabbit in headlights' expression would have been amusing in any other circumstance.

"O-oh. Hello, Aizawa. I.. had a feeling you'd want to talk to me." Shouta picked apart every facet of the man's gaunt expression, his own gaze cool and dispassionate. Good, he already looked guilty.

"Oh, really. Then I can skip the part where I talk to you like an unruly teenager, and get you to admit you did something wrong?" Shouta stayed standing, perfectly content to loom and pierce All Might with his stare until he squirmed.

"..I'll admit I got carried away during the exam," All Might sighed, looking small and frail despite being at least seven feet tall even without all his muscle. "I shouldn't have taken it as far as I did. But I stand firm in my decision to fail young Todoroki and young Midoriya. There were critical behaviors needed to pass that they did not show."

Shouta narrowed his eyes, just a hair, and crossed his arms over his chest. "Is that so. Well, luckily for you, I'm not here to ask you to give them a passing grade. That would be unprofessional. I'm here
to ask what your intentions were for the exam. What was the plan, exactly? Were two teenagers really supposed to defeat the world's strongest hero?" He allowed a few droplets of contempt to drip through.

"I was testing them for their ability to overcome unexpected obstacles, work as a unit, and evade a more powerful opponent. They showed promise and creative use of their Quirks, but ultimately I did not feel like they were adequately prepared." All Might presented his point as if it were diplomatic, like he hadn't just repackaged what he'd already said and given it to Shouta as though it were a gift.

"And this is coming from the man who punches his problems away, hogs the spotlight, and has no equal?" Shouta retorted dryly. He continued as soon as he saw All Might's eyes widen, the moment his insult had a chance to sting and rile. "Looking past your hypocrisy, I can't really judge until I've seen the footage for myself." He motioned sharply at the monitor, eyes locked with neon blue.
"Rewind it. I'm going to watch the entire thing."

All Might's reaction said more about his state of mind than anything he'd ever get the man to actually admit. He hacked out a cough that made blood dribble from between his lips (a reaction Shouta had to steel his heart to; just because the man was dying didn't mean he wasn't responsible for his actions) and let his jaw hang open in shock just a moment too long, before he hastily reached for a tissue and the remote both.

Shouta kept his spot by the door. He could see well enough, and being behind All Might gave him a position of power. He watched calmly as the footage rewound, showing Midoriya and Todoroki entering the testing ground. For god's sake, the kid had even colored his mask in to emulate his idol. He couldn't imagine the impact of the disappointment his student was surely left with.

All Might's body language swiftly degraded, the man rucking up his shoulders and tapping long, thin fingers together arrhythmically. Shouta kept a silent, watchful eye on him and the footage both, careful not to outwardly react to anything he saw.

The footage was, of course, silent. The only sound to be heard in the room was the quiet buzz of the air conditioner, and All Might's breathing. Shouta didn't make a noise. He didn't move an inch. He watched carefully and intently, until the footage on screen suddenly distorted into shifting static and untethered color, obscuring everything until it abruptly cut back to All Might staggering and Midoriya losing the contents of his stomach.

"A side effect of Midoriya's Quirk?" Shouta asked rhetorically. "Like what happened in the battle trials, and the Sport's Festival." He could see All Might's hesitant nod, but he already knew the answer. The boy's Quirk was an enigmatic headache.

The exam fizzled out at the end, Todoroki left in a dusty heap on the ground (at the very least, he could see All Might checking him over for serious injuries) and Midoriya sobbing silently on his hands and knees. The footage cut to black, and they were left in a cold, charged silence.

Shouta allowed the silence to drag, not even reacting when All Might's pupils landed back on him, waiting for him to say something. It was only when the man looked uncomfortable enough to start speaking that Shouta said something. "You're right. Midoriya and Todoroki weren't perfect. They had never worked together before, and it showed. Midoriya still hesitated to use his Quirk when it counted, and Todoroki relied too much on raw firepower."

He waited for the moment All Might's shoulder's drooped to continue, voice dropping into scathing criticism. "You were also right that you took things too far. You were reckless and entirely unprofessional; you're extremely lucky that neither of those boys is seriously injured, and you aren't being walked off this campus right now."
Shouta took his first step into the room, deliberately activating his Quirk to flash siren red eyes at the man shrinking into the couch. "I have a question for you, Toshinori Yagi. When you were out there, playing the part of a villain to test your students... what was your plan for their victory? What was the opening they were meant to find? The opening you were meant to leave them?"

Neon blue eyes widened almost comically, and All Might sputtered out nothing but air. Shouta released the practiced grip on his Quirk, blinking and running an agitated hand through his hair. "I've been awake for thirty hours," he uttered flatly, "preparing for these exams and hunting down a maniac across the width and breadth of Japan. This is the time I was supposed to spend napping, but instead I'm lecturing you for being such an utter embarrassment of a teacher."

Shouta didn't give him a moment of respite. Maybe he was being harsh, and letting his personal dislike for All Might color his decision, but the bulk of what he was saying needed to be said.

"What you're going to do," he concluded, "is think about what you could have done to make sure that your students passed while still acquiring the knowledge and experience they needed. You are going to contemplate, and ruminate, and you are going to apologize to those students that you failed so utterly. You're going to talk to Nedzu, and you're going to attend teaching seminars so this doesn't happen again."

He turned to exit in a flurry of scarves, unwilling to spend another moment in the same room as All Might in case he said something he might actually regret, but he couldn't resist adding one last parting remark. "Make no mistake; if access to the summer camp wasn't already restricted, I'd do everything in my power to bar you from coming."

He slammed the door shut behind him, and stalked away. He had a killer headache to attend to, and the Symbol of Peace had a teaching career to rethink.
"Alright," Mr. Aizawa began in a startlingly loud voice, almost before he'd even managed to enter the classroom, "I'm just going to get this out of the way so I don't hear any whining and bemoaning. I lied, you're all going to summer camp."

Izuku Midoriya's groan as every ounce of tension in his body suddenly exited him in a violent expulsion of agitated particles was only matched in volume by the high-pitched squeals of Ashido and Kaminari.

Mr. Aizawa continued speaking after Izuku had smooshed his face against the surface of his desk, trying to contain the overwhelming happiness that threatened to eject itself via his tear ducts.

"Alright, alright, before you kids get too rowdy," he glared over at Kirishima in particular, who was halfway out of his desk and clearly on-route to Izuku's, "that doesn't mean that those of you who failed the exam won't face the consequences. You'll all have remedial lessons and supplementary training with me. Frankly, it will be significantly more difficult than whatever you'd have in summer school."

"These supplementary lessons will, of course, be tailored to suit your individual needs. Luckily, none of you failed the written exam, but the five who failed-Ashido and Kaminari, Midoriya and Todoroki," Izuku blinked in surprise when Mr. Aizawa turned a deliberate look (apologetic?) his way, before directing that same look towards the back of the classroom, "and Sero-all have different areas in need of improvement, so your lessons will reflect that."

He swept a flat look over the class, shuffling some papers on his desk and sighing. "Well, that's it. Hope you're all prepared for summer camp." The predictable cheer that sounded after he was done speaking was, for once, something that Izuku felt resonate within him.

He'd never been excited for a school trip before, but the thought of getting to spend a week camping with his friends in the woods vastly outweighed the looming challenge of training and remedial courses. That excitement stuck with him through the rest of his classes as well, a latent energy sticking bright and ephemeral to the inside of his chest even as the hours ticked on.

It was only once lunch rolled around that he was given a proper outlet, and the first thing out of his mouth had Kirishima nearly hacking up his lunch.

"Dude, you've seriously never been camping before!?!" Kirishima just-about shouted once he'd sufficiently cleared his airways of onigiri, coughing up grains of sticky rice. Todoroki quietly slid his tray further away to avoid collateral damage.

Izuku fiddled with his chopsticks, watching chili sauce bead at the ends. "M-my mom gets really bad allergies around camping season, s-so we've never had the opportunity."

"Boo, that sucks. Camping is totally fun!" Uraraka poked at one of her steamed dumplings (Lunch Rush had been kind enough to make it look like a particularly displeased cat) and looked almost reluctant to eat it. "It's like a vacation, except without the travel and hotel expenses."

"Indeed!" Iida gestured with enough force to knock his bottle of water off the table, and a shadowy arm darted out from underneath to catch it. Iida didn't appear to notice. "Camping is an excellent..."
activity! It promotes a healthy lifestyle, and provides ample opportunity for exercise if you camp near a hiking trail! It also provides the opportunity to form a deeper connection and appreciation for nature!

Izuku tugged on his lower lip with his fingers, eyes trained shyly on his pan fried chicken (and accompanying rice and vegetables, all smothered in a sauce spicy enough to make his eyes water and dye his food a deep orange) as he popped a bite into his mouth.

"I-I'm sure it would be f-fun, but I don't think I'm r-really the outdoorsy type, i-is all. I like b-being outside, but sleeping in a t-tent sounds kind of..." Izuku made a so-so gesture with his chopsticks, and Tokoyami nodded gravely.

"Indeed. The civilized man mustn't ever surrender wholly and utterly to the wilds, lest he find himself consumed by the primordial past we have sought to climb free of." He took a sip of milk, one hand brushing through sleek, shining feathers. "Also I get bugs in my feathers quite frequently. It's annoying."

"Well," Kirishima countered with an optimistic grin, "I doubt they'll have us shackled up in tents, so that won't be a big deal. It's strength training, not a survivalist camp, right?" A chorus of nods and hums went around the table. Todoroki said nothing, seemingly fascinated by Tokoyami's use of a straw.

"Indeed, it would be counterproductive to our training if we weren't given sufficient sleeping quarters to recuperate." Iida adjusted his glasses with two fingers, and the lenses gleamed. "But! We must remain vigilant, and be sure to bring the necessary equipment, clothing, and accessories for a stay in the woods! Make sure to bring proper footwear as well as bug repellent! A satchel or backpack separate from your luggage is also ideal! In case of an emergency, road flares are an oft overlooked but incredibly useful tool-"

"Jeez, what do we even need strength training for? We can just let Iida pack for us, and get buff lugging it around all week!" Kirishima laughed at the scandalized expression that Iida adopted, and Izuku felt his face flush with blood at the sound of it.

Uraraka patted their class president's hand with a grin that was half compassion and half amusement. "Aww, leave him alone! He just wants us all to be prepared."

Iida's crestfallen expression did not waver, and Izuku laughed even as he flashed a bashful, apologetic grin. "I-it's kind of a l-lot," he admitted, and giggled uncontrollably when Iida threw a melodramatic arm over his eyes.

He felt warm all over, a beaming sun holding fast under his breast as he basked in the easy camaraderie of his friends. He leaned against Kirishima's side almost without thinking about it, earning a sharkish flash of teeth and a set of firm, soft fingers intertwining with his own on top of the table.

"I wouldn't mind a list of necessary items. I've never been camping before either." Todoroki's quiet contribution shocked Iida back to life, and with a determined chop of his arm he went off on another spiel.

Izuku glanced up when Uraraka jumped in her seat, craning her head backwards and peering upside-down at whatever it was that had startled her. "Tooru!" She cried in a mock-accusing tone, and Izuku caught a flash of empty uniform as Hagakure stepped to the side. "You scared the heck out of me!"
"Sooorry," Hagakure replied with a flap of her sleeves, not sounding very sorry at all. "I was just coming over to relay a message! I had the idea that, since we have tomorrow off, we should all go hang out at the mall together! Everyone else is already coming, so please say you guys will too!" Her clothes swayed back and forth, and if Izuku squinted he could sort of make out the pantomime of pleading.

Kirishima slammed an excited fist onto the table, making his tray rattle. "Hell yeah we're comin'! A class hangout-sesh sounds totally awesome!"

"Wh-which mall?" Izuku asked tentatively, part of him hopeful that they could go to one that was out of the way and not too crowded-

"Kiyashi Ward shopping mall, of course!" Hagakure's tone was so overwhelmingly thrilled and cheery that Izuku felt like he was drowning in bubbles. But it wasn't enough to keep his shoulders from sagging.

"Hmm," Iida hummed, rubbing his chin with careful fingers, "that would be an ideal location for us all to purchase the supplies we need for our camping trip. An excellent proposition, Hagakure! I accept!"

"Unfortunately, I must decline. I have critical plans on the morrow that cannot be abandoned," Tokoyami intoned with a slightly shifty look.

Dark Shadow emerged from under the table a moment later, looking unreasonably sly. "He's just going to play video games in his bedroom all day-" the shadow monster was cut off with a squawk as Tokoyami drove a palm into the top of his head, forcing him back under the edge of the table.

"Be silent, you insolent traitor-!"

"C'monno Tokoyami," Uraraka whined, more for effect than anything, and wound an arm around his neck. "We never get to hang out as a class outside of school! You can play video games some other time." When he offered no protest other than dark mutterings, she turned a bright grin on Todoroki. "You're coming too, right Todoroki? I hear they have a great soba place there!"

Todoroki was quiet, stirring his noodles absently. "...I can't. I'm visiting my mother tomorrow. Sorry." He suddenly jolted in his seat, face lighting up with undisguised surprise, and Izuku would have been completely ignorant to the reason if he hadn't felt Kirishima's leg momentarily slide past his own to nudge the other boy.

"Don't even sweat it, bro! It's totally manly you'd wanna visit your mom." Kirishima's reassuring smile suddenly glinted at the edges, and it made Izuku's heart skip a beat for a reason he couldn't quite pin down. "We'll just have to drag you out another time, no biggie."

Izuau received the most mild look of absolute terror from Todoroki that he'd ever seen on anyone's face, and was forced to slap a hand over his mouth to stifle his squeaking, involuntary peals of laughter.

Even with the shadowed vestiges of his final exam looming behind him, the vibrant cosmos trapped within him still shone in star-bright brush strokes. He wouldn't let his fears come to pass. He wouldn't allow Living Nightmare to creep from its confines. Izuku Midoriya would push aside all his worries, and allow himself to be happy.

Izuku hummed on-and-off again to the song that echoed through his bathroom, emerging from his
slightly tinny phone speaker. It was some bubbly chiptune song that Uraraka had sent him, the kind of song that sent the urge to dance and sway rushing through him in foamy waves.

Unfortunately, that urge was counterproductive to the careful work he was attempting to do, fingers slow and nimble as he arranged his freshly washed curls and layered them with clips. The mall was open air and the air was steadily growing thick and muggy with oncoming summer heat, so he'd thought it best to style his hair up and keep it from cooking the back of his neck.

The little counter space he had to work with was crowded with hair styling products on top of the typical paraphernalia, and Izuku nearly knocked over a tin of ointment in his blind groping for styling gel. He bit his lip in concentration and stood on his toes to get a better look at himself in the mirror, infinitely meticulous as he applied the aromatic gel to his hair. He'd (hopefully) watched enough Youtube tutorials to have picked up on the technique required for the particular up-do he'd decided on.

"Izuku! Your breakfast is getting cold, honey!" His mother's frazzled lilt was enough to startle him, his elbow knocking over a can of hairspray that clattered noisily to the floor.

"J-just a minute mom, I-I'm almost done!" He called back, absently wiping a glob of clear gel off his forehead. He stepped back, pausing the song on his phone to swipe back to the video guide he'd watched, and compared and contrasted.

It looked like he'd done it well enough; his curls framed his face just like the girl in the video. He put on his brightest smile, beaming at his reflection, and poked at the side of his face that was partially numbed by his scarring. Well, he didn't look too bad. His bright yellow shirt (which read 'This article is not sufficient protection from UV rays') was wrinkle free, he had a creamsicle orange windbreaker tied around his waist that he thought looked pretty cool, and lime green capris that wouldn't be too hot, had sufficient pocket space, and were also fashionable (at least, that's what the internet told him).

Satisfied that he at least looked sufficiently alive and ambulant, Izuku haphazardly stowed away his hair care products under the sink and relocated to the kitchen, nearly falling into the seat his mother had pulled out for him.

"Well don't you look handsome this morning!" Izuku flushed and ducked his head at his mother's compliment, shoveling liberally spiced eggs and rice into his mouth.

His mom, apparently having already eaten, briskly washed her own dishes in the sink. The sound of running water and the distant television blended together into pleasant white noise. "What mall were you and your friends heading to, again?"

"The one t-that just opened up, in Kiyashi Ward." Izuku absently swirled his chopsticks through his food, mentally mapping out the train routes he'd have to take to get there. "I-I'll probably have t-to leave pretty soon t-to make it there on time."

"Oh, that reminds me." Absently wiping her soapy hand off on a dish towel, his mom carefully dug through her pocket before retrieving a neatly clipped wad of Yen notes that made Izuku's eyes widen. "Here's some spending money for you!"

"Y-you-you don't h-have to do that m-mom, I-I have some money s-saved up." Before Izuku could properly ward off what he felt was an undeserved gift, his mother had already pushed it into his unwilling grasp.

"Nonsense, honey. You take that, and go have fun with your friends, alright? Just try not to spend it all in one place!" She gave him one of those wobbly smiles that meant she was liable to burst into
tears for one reason or another, so he thought it best not to protest further. "And if it makes you feel better, it's just the amount I'll save on groceries while you're out at camp. It was getting spent either way."

Izuku bit his lip and nodded, pocketing the notes returning to try and get down a few more bites of the breakfast that had slipped his mind. "A-Alright if you're sure. U-uhm, are you going shopping today?"

"I sure am. I've got a few errands to run after as well, so I might not be back before you get home. Make sure to eat some lunch while you're out, alright? I don't want you going hungry."

"I-I will, promise." Bled of any urge to protest his mother's overbearing kindness, Izuku handed off his (mostly) empty bowl and kissed her on the cheek, hurrying to grab his bag off the couch. "I-I'll see you l-later mom, thanks for breakfast!"

"Have fun, sweetie!" Her voice followed him out the door, his shoes hastily toed on and newly decorated with glittering, adhesive constellations. They twinkled in the morning sunlight, minuscule mirrors of the starlight that shone beneath his fragile exterior. The shadows sizzled and shrunk until he was barely aware of them, bathed in the absolution of purified illumination.

But it wasn't a hero's light that lightened Izuku's steps, that let him walk on shimmering clouds of plasma as if he weighed nothing at all. It wasn't a hero's light that brought a smile to his face, unbidden, no longer constrained or reliant on crumbling struts and creaking wires. That light did not sear him as he approached, forever unattainable but just inches from his reach. What swelled within him was his own radiance, a kaleidoscope refracting off of ionized molecules and spatial matter just waiting to flare with cosmic brilliance.

Izuku wasn't chasing the light, because it was his own that kept him looking forward. The sounds and sights of city life sublimated into pastel brushstrokes, the squeal of train tracks chiming in the wind. To have a day, even a single day to be nothing but happy, to exist with his friends and treasure their company. If it was just a dream he was skipping through, Izuku never wanted to wake up.

The yawning pull of gravity eased Izuku's consciousness back to earth as his train came to a halt, the intoxicating euphoria that subsumed him retreating with the fickle kiss of emerald ocean waves. He rubbed his eyes with one hand, wiping away crystalline beads of moisture and hiding the smile that made his cheek ache.

But the moment he stepped off his train, the strap of his bag secured over his shoulder and his breaths so light it was as if he didn't need to breathe at all, he saw something that brought that euphoria back tenfold. Eijirou Kirishima grinned at him with moon-white teeth, deep red tresses spiked up and filtering the sunlight that spilled through them.

"Yo, Midoriya! You ready to get your shop on, man?" Izuku stepped forward as if in a daze, the jewel that thumped in his chest dripping color that sought to imitate Kirishima's eyes, daring crimson and smooth citrine blended into a sea he would gladly drown in.

"H-hey," he breathed, eyes overflowing with stars. He moved without thinking, the transition from standing to skipping towards Kirishima seeming almost instantaneous. He registered surprise on the redhead's face before they impacted, Izuku's arms flung around his neck in a crushing hug.

Kirishima grunted just above his ear, a sound that melted into the creamy, sunlit warmth that enveloped Izuku from head to toe. Hugging Kirishima mirrored the satisfaction of satiating a months-long craving. It was eating his favorite foods, watching his favorite shows, and hearing his favorite music, all crisscrossed into breathtaking synesthesia.
After a moment, warm hands settled on his back, squeezing him with just enough affection that he was sure his bones would soften into taffy. "Somebody's feelin' the good vibes today! You just that excited to go shoppin'?" Kirishima's words were soft and teasing, and the heat they brought prickling across Izuku's cheek pulled him a little further into reality.

"I-I'm just really h-happy today," he mumbled into Kirishima's t-shirt, half-wishing to stand there all day, leeching at his warmth until he grew sleepy and contented. It was almost funny—a few months ago, the thought of embracing someone in public, at all even, would have sent him hurtling straight into a blazing furnace of mortification. But now it felt so... natural. Hugging his friends was the closest he'd ever come to finding a physical embodiment of happiness.

"..Glad to hear it, Midoriya." Kirishima's voice dropped again, a murmur engraved with contentment. The arms around Izuku squeezed him close for a moment, then three, before beginning to drift away.

He parted with a sting of reluctance, but the wellspring of his joy easily washed it away. He offered Kirishima his best smile, and it was reflected in a shining, smooth-edged grin that made his heart skip.

"C'mon, let's get goin' before the trains get too crowded. We still got two stops before we're there." Kirishima linked their fingers together without a moment of hesitation, and Izuku was quick to trail after him when he started walking.

"I-I hope you didn't have to get up too e-early to.. w-wait for me," Izuku uttered in a shy little mumble, unwilling to compromise the dreamy serenity that encompassed them.

"Nah. I don't think we live too far away from each other, so it was no biggie." Kirishima set an easy pace, allowing Izuku to comfortably stroll beside him. "Which makes it even weirder that we've never hung out at each other's places before."

Flustered color splashed against Izuku's cheek, and he rubbed at the side of his face to try and erase it. "A-ah.. i-it's probably because we u-usually hang out with everyone e-else outside of school. S-someone would p-probably end up h-having to stay the night, s-so they wouldn't be going home late."

Kirishima pursed his lips thoughtfully, and took them both down a side street to avoid an oncoming crowd on the sidewalk. "Yeah, that makes sense. But if it's just the two of us, that wouldn't be an issue, right?"

Kirishima's casual suggestion implanted a vivid image into Izuku's psyche, of a long night spent watching movies, playing video games, sharing snacks and blankets, sharing the same bedroom as Kirishima—maybe even the same bed-

The glowing starstuff in Izuku's core went full nova, filling every iota of his being with burning heat. His cheek felt like it was on fire, and the squeak that left his throat was horrifically strangled.

It was only when Kirishima sent him a concerned look that Izuku managed to remember how to craft human speech. "U-u-uhm! M-maybe after c-camp, we co-could-I mean, if w-we both have t-time depending on if our c-course load increases or if w-we go on other t-trips, uhm... T-that could be... a-Alright." He swallowed hard enough that he almost choked, and felt his lips twitch from how hard he was attempting to smile.

It was clear that Kirishima recognized his odd behavior, but mercifully he didn't bring it up. "Sure thing, man. Whenever you're ready." He squeezed Izuku's fingers gently, and even though it sent a renewed pulse of heat through his system, it helped to bring him out of range of a total meltdown.
"Station's just up ahead," he continued, pulling Izuku's attention away from his flare-red hair and heart-stopping smile (and.. A flush on his cheeks? Surely Izuku was imagining that), "we should get to the mall in about a half hour."

"O-okay. Sounds good." Izuku grinned lopsidedly, privately okay with the idea of spending the entire day just walking at Kirishima's side.

The trip to the mall was uneventful, half an hour condensed into what felt like mere moments of comforting bliss. Izuku chatted with Kirishima about not very much at all, just little things about new movies, or their hobbies.

The approach to the mall itself was almost frightening; it was so huge that even the hundreds of people walking around barely managed to cover a fraction of the available ground. At least he wouldn’t be caught in a crowd, especially with the 1-A crowd acting as a buffer.

Mina was the first to spot them, leaping off the ground with her arms fanning back and forth over her head. It was enough to prompt most everyone else’s attention as well, and she was joined by additional waves and greetings. “Guuuuys, you made it! What took so long, we’ve been waiting forever!”

Izuku scanned the crowd of familiar faces to get a count of who had actually come along, only to be jerked upwards when Kirishima raised their linked hands to wave, toothy grin on full display.

“Sorry we can’t all be totally rad slime surfin’ gals and break waves instead of takin’ trains,” he greeted, only seeming to remember that their fingers were still entwined when Izuku’s sneakers started lifting off the ground. He quickly lowered their hands, and Izuku sighed in relief when his spine was no longer being stretched.

Mina pressed a finger to her chin in mock-thought, grinning mischievously. “Hmm, I dunno, I think you could pull off the bikini beach babe look. Might have to special order the slime though.”

Izuku’s insides immediately exploded with a heat so overwhelming that for a moment, he was convinced his Quirk was actually Self-Combustion. “H-hey guys s-sorry w-we’re late! U-uhm,” his eyes darted frantically to superimpose something over the mental image stuck in his head (sure, Kirishima was... handsome and cool and had a great smile and made Izuku’s heart almost beat out of his chest just by standing too close but that didn’t mean he should imagine something so.. indecent!). Thankfully, he quickly noticed two unexpected absences, and wasted no time in changing the subject. “H-hey uhm. W-where are S-Shinsou and Kacchan?”

“Shinsou said he had to feed his cat,” Sero piped up. “I.. dunno why that would take all day, but he hasn’t shown up yet.”

One by one, every head turned in Hagakure’s direction as the last half of Izuku’s inquiry lingered, and she somehow managed to look flustered even without any sleeves to manipulate.

“I… I guess it slipped my mind to invite him? I thought maybe someone else had!”

A general murmur of uneasiness went up, and for the first time that morning Izuku felt his good mood begin to waver. It… made sense, he supposed. Kacchan still hadn’t really smoothed things over with the rest of the class, even if he had started branching out a little more from just Shinsou. Treating everyone with disinterest instead of animosity was a step up, but it clearly wasn’t enough to erase the memories of the Battle Trial.

Izuku bit his lip, shoulders drooping, but stopped himself before he could decline. “I-it’s okay,” he
said suddenly, words lifted by emissions of twinkling plasma. The warmth in his chest was still glowing, and he wouldn’t let anything snuff it out. “K-Kacchan usually l-likes to b-be alone on days off, a-anyway.”

The words kept flowing almost without his input, his desire to help Kacchan’s reputation, even a little, spurning him on. “B-back in middle school, h-he’d go h-hiking on long weekends, a-and camp out overnight. And he always c-cooked on Saturdays, t-too. I could smell the c-curry all the way from m-my apartment.”

“Huh, I never took Bakugou for an outdoorsy kinda guy,” Uraraka spoke up thoughtfully, and that was apparently the prompt needed to cut the tension loose.

“I know, right? I bet he just punches the tent posts into the ground with his bare hands,” Kaminari joked, earning a smattering of laughter. The group began slowly trailing into the mall a few moments later, and Kaminari turned his head to wink in Izuku’s direction.

The creeping tendrils of tension dissolved entirely, and Izuku flashed a grateful smile in Kaminari’s direction as the buzz of conversation swelled to life.

With that situation resolved, Izuku was finally able to really take in the sheer scope and breadth of the shopping mall. He knew there were bigger in Japan, of course, but the abundance of shops and restaurants and multiple floors all stacked on top of each other were still a little overwhelming.

“W-where do we e-even start?” He murmured, scanning the shops closest to them. First priority would likely be clothing, shoes, and accessories most suited for a week in the woods, even if they wouldn’t necessarily be camping in the traditional sense it would be best to have something to wear that was suitable for both intense workouts and uneven terrain as well as breathable and easily replaceable if they happened to get dirty which was a very likely possibility-

“Hard at work, motormouth?” Uraraka’s teasing comment snapped Izuku back into focus, and he flushed lightly when she beamed good-naturedly and sneaked an arm around his shoulders. “Unfortunately,” she stage-whispered conspiratorially into his ear, “I think Iida’s already got a time table printed out, so you’re a bit late on the draw.”

Iida spluttered in his own defense, hands slicing the air with mechanical precision, forcing Tokoyami to take a single step to the side to avoid becoming a casualty. Kirishima laughed beside him, slipping his hand out of Izuku’s grasp to start walking a little further ahead. The rest of the class had already started drifting in different directions, fractured into small groups.

Izuku wouldn’t say that his absence was a loss, but he still felt the urge to seek further warmth, to touch the wick of his happiness to another. He embraced Uraraka without thinking twice, one arm clinging around her middle as he momentarily pressed his face into her hair. It was soft and bouncy, fragrant against his cheek. The hug wasn’t quite as beseeching as the one he’d given Kirishima, lacking the powerful urgency, but it still made his heart shine.

Uraraka made a little noise of surprise, but didn’t hesitate to return the gesture, squeezing him with more strength than her deceptively slim arms suggested. He could still remember the ease with which she’d flipped him repeatedly into the dirt, and she’d had months of training since then.

“Feelin’ huggy today?” She asked casually, like it was completely normal, almost expected. Somehow, that was almost as validating as the hug itself.

“A-a little,” he replied shyly, squeezing her a moment longer before it came to an organic end. She smiled up at him, only a few hairs shorter, and just looking into the homey, toasted-honey depths of
her eyes spawned within him the urge to just hold all his friends close, to exist with them until the end of time.

“It’s nice to see you look so happy.” Her soft exhalation broke him from his reverie, bringing his attention to each filament of her smile, all swelled to bursting with gladness, and something alike to pride.

Izuku’s eyes watered, just a little, and he sniffled and wiped his face even as his cheek started to ache. “I’m j-just really excited to go to camp w-with you guys.” Uraraka hummed a soft note, not disbelieving but clearly aware that there was more to it, and turned her attention a little ways forward.

Kirishima had escalated Iida’s flustered state, goading him to show off his fabled time table while the taller boy vehemently denied its existence. Tokoyami, clearly used to tuning out rambunctiousness after hanging around them so long, was coolly scanning the storefronts on either side of them. He seemed particularly taken by a shop that was somehow more darkly lit than if it hadn’t had any lighting at all.

Well, Izuku was hardly going to insist that everyone stay by his side if they wanted to browse, but..

That urge was still there, an unmistakable longing. He was drawn to those familiar flames, sought to bathe in gentle plasmas.

Izuku didn’t try to resist it. He gravitated towards Tokoyami, craving his quiet serenity, desiring only to bask with him in the tranquil darkness, even if only for a few moments. Tokoyami’s sharp gaze turned his way, focused but without the malice one might mistake from his stony visage.

“You’re looking well,” he greeted, and distantly Izuku could hear Uraraka beginning a pincer-attack of teasing on Iida. Tokoyami regarded him without the hard glint that was oft present in his gaze, and Izuku couldn’t help but notice how striking he looked that day. He looked much more comfortable in street clothes than a school uniform.

“Y-you too. You look r-really nice today-I l-like your hoodie.” Compliments tumbled outward atop each other, and Izuku was gifted a moment where Tokoyami almost looked flustered to receive them. “H-have you been sleeping b-better?” He asked, to allow his friend a chance to smooth his (metaphorical) ruffled feathers, as well as to give himself a chance to clear his thoughts of how overwhelmingly cool Tokoyami was.

“Indeed. The study group you put together was a great boon in the days before our exams. I must thank you again, Midoriya. I would not have been so easily prepared without your intervention.” Tokoyami bowed at the shoulders, exposing the tufted crown of his feathers, and Izuku was stricken.

“I-it was no-no trouble a-at all! I-I’m just so g-glad I could h-help you, e-even a little,” he babbled, eyes beginning to well up. But the burn of tears was not harsh and blinding, and it was for that reason that he did not blink them away. He’d never known that being overwhelmed could feel so good.

“I-is it alright if I h-hug you?” Izuku ventured with uncharacteristic boldness, the suddenness of his request earning a startled look from Tokoyami. He was quick to try and clarify, the last thing he wanted was to make Tokoyami uncomfortable. “I-I mean, y-you don’t have to if you don’t w-want to, I k-know you’re not b-big on ph-physical contact. I j-just..” Izuku’s heart swelled in his chest, soft crystal expanding and gushing and filling his chest until he felt like he might burst. “I-I’m just r-really glad w-we’re friends, a-and I w-wanted t-to…”

“I understand,” Tokoyami followed up, after Izuku had trailed off. “For many, there is a hunger that
can only be staved by the touch of another. As a friend, I would be remiss to not offer you that relief.”

Izuku hesitated for only a split second, a toxic bubble rising to the surface to wonder if Tokoyami just felt obligated, if he only saw it as a chore. He considered it. Then he took a breath, stepped forward, and hugged Tokoyami with all the care and caution that he could offer.

His hoodie squished under the pressure of Izuku’s arms, still retaining warmth from the heat of the sun. Izuku did not press as close as he had with Kirishima or Uraraka, unwilling to push any limits, but he could still catch a faint scent of something floral coming from Tokoyami. He returned the embrace with only one arm, a little stiff and awkward, but Izuku could feel every ounce of sincerity as if it had been poured straight into him.

It was, comparatively, a brief moment of sparse contact, a short hug that didn’t linger or go further than a basic closeness. But none of that mattered, really—he knew his friends all expressed kindness and affection in different ways, and to have Tokoyami even agree meant everything to him.

“W-we should start t-training at the beach again after camp. I-if you want to, of course,” He mumbled once the embrace was broken, atoms splitting in his chest and erupting in gleaming flashes of light. Ahead of them, Iida had apparently regained control of the conversation, and was reading off the list of necessities he really had prepared. Uraraka glanced back, her eyes soft, and flashed a quick smile.

“I believe that would be wise. We still have much to learn from one another.” Tokoyami, due to the rigidity of his beak, couldn’t truly smile. But over time, Izuku had adapted to reading the shape of his eyes, and the shifting muscles under his feathers. It was rare, and often easy to miss, but Izuku had a hard time mistaking when Tokoyami looked pleased.

“I dunno, Iida, those shoes are pretty expensive.” Uraraka’s voice drifted back as Izuku and Tokoyami caught up to the rest of the group, where they were stood in front of one of the mall’s numerous maps.

“You know, it’s super cool you’d make this list and all, but I think tennis shoes will be just fine.” Kirishima patted Iida’s arm as the list quivered in his grasp, fingers not-quite holding it.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he conceded, “I didn’t take into account financial stipulations when researching, and for that I apologize.”

“Don’t even worry about it, Iida! Besides, I’m sure other people in our class would find it useful. Todoroki said he wanted one, right?” Uraraka peered around Iida’s broad shoulders to get a better look at the mall map, tracing it with her finger. “Gosh, there’s just so many places to go.”

“Maybe we should split up for now, and meet up later?” Kirishima suggested. “That way we can get our shopping done, and make room for some quality goof-off time.”

“W-we could all meet up at t-the food court, if y-you guys wanted,” Izuku piped up, turning three heads in his direction. “A-and we could t-text everyone else t-too, see if they w-want to eat as a class.”

“An excellent idea, Midoriya,” Iida praised, and just being spoken to directly by him made Izuku’s chest erupt in fireworks packed with stardust, another thread tying back together the frayed connection between them. “I will send out a mass text at once!” He whipped out his phone, and proceeded to type with one finger in the same way Izuku’s mom did.
He stifled a laugh, warmed through with endearment, and stepped close enough to rest his head against the side of Iida’s arm. Izuku felt him pause, and held tight to the plasmatic happiness that had taken residence within him. Kirishima flashed him a supportive thumbs-up while Tokoyami and Uraraka both pretended to look at something else.

“...W-we’re okay, aren’t we?” The question trickled from his lips in grains of glass, delicate despite all of the strength Izuku had been gifted.

There was quiet, for a time. Iida was still, hand hovering over his phone and gaze hidden behind his glasses. When he did finally speak, it was subdued, vulnerable-only a fraction of the boldness he normally spoke with. “Of course. You are a dear friend to me, Midoriya. I would hate for anything to come between us.”

Iida did not turn to hug him, but Izuku wasn’t unaware of the shift in his center of gravity, the way muscles loosened and his posture lost tension. He could feel the weight of his friend leaning into him, the both of them holding each other upright. Tears spilled forth, uninhibited, and Izuku was careful not to wipe them on the sleeve of Iida’s nice button-up.

“I-I’m glad.” He wiped his face clear with one hand before butting a little more firmly against Iida’s arm. When he could again feel the vibration of typing, Izuku stepped away, almost expecting to exhale starstuff on his next breath.

His phone buzzed insistently in his pocket, and at the same time he heard Kirishima, Uraraka, and Tokoyami’s phones chime as well. Iida froze with his phone in his hand, and the sound of Uraraka’s snorting giggles coaxed Izuku into squeaky laughter as well.

“I can’t be the only one that saw that comin’, right?” Kirishima patted Iida’s shoulder teasingly, the grin on his face laced with amusement. “You’ll get it one day, buddy.”

“Yes, well.” Iida swiftly slid his phone away, clearly attempting to gather his pride back together. “We shall reconvene in two hours, yes?”

“Sounds good to me!” Uraraka chirped, hopping up to link her arm around Iida’s and nearly yank him off his feet.

Tokoyami peered at the map a moment longer before he nodded, slipping his hands into the pocket of his hoodie. “We will meet again,” he intoned without any of the gravitas his weirdly ominous statement should have had, turning to walk off towards the dimly lit shop they had passed earlier.

Before long, it was just Izuku and Kirishima again, the redhead gifting him with a cheerful grin. “Anywhere in particular you wanted to head, Midoriya?”

“W-wherever you want to go is fine. I j-just need to buy s-some t-shirts and shorts, s-so I’m not in a hurry.” Izuku’s own smile was still crooked, but he didn’t find himself caring too much. He just kept slipping back into fuzzy euphoria, floating through a starry sea that carried him, weightless, at Kirishima’s side. But even then… none of that explained the heat trapped under his face, and the frantic fluttering of his heart that seemed tied to their proximity.

He’d started zoning out on the (oddly adorable) scar cutting through Kirishima’s eyebrow when his classmate spoke up again. “Weeeelll, I’m kinda totally craving some ice cream right now. I usually eat pretty healthy at my place, so I don’t get the chance too often.”

Well, that wasn’t quite what Izuku had been expecting him to want to do, but he’d hardly pass up on the chance. “S-sure, that sounds good!”
“I think I saw an ice cream place on the second story. Oh man I hope they do like, the strawberry and caramel double dip cones, those are amazing.” Kirishima slipped his palm into Izuku’s, less tugging him along and more giving him an additional physical incentive to follow.

Just hearing Kirishima excitedly list his frozen dairy dreams gave Izuku’s insides the consistency of soft serve, filling him with the compulsion to just sit against Kirishima and melt into him.

The journey to the ice cream shop was fairly short, though still provided ample time for Kirishima to inquire after Izuku’s own favorite flavor (“F-fudge coffee.”) after proudly sharing his own (“Rocky road all the way, bro!”). They had just started a discussion on the pros and cons of sugar cones versus bubble waffle when their place in line advanced up to the counter. Kirishima ordered a double scoop of rocky road (and they did, apparently, do double dips) while Izuku went for a safer mint chocolate-chip with a chocolate dip, not feeling adventurous enough to try any of the more bizarre flavors.

Izuku reached into his pocket to dig for the notes his mother had given him, only to hear the clank of coins against the counter. He opened his mouth to protest, but Kirishima was already easing a cone into his grip, his localized-solar-flare of a smile on full display.

“Y-you didn’t have to p-pay,” Izuku managed to squeak out once he had squinted the sufficient amount to avoid going blind, clutching his ice cream cone as he reluctantly tucked his money away.

Kirishima shrugged one shoulder, and licked a long stripe along his ice cream. “Sure, I didn’t have to. I wanted to, though.” He said it as though it perfectly explained his actions, before motioning to one of three small tables set up outside of the shop. “Wanna sit down and eat?”

Izuku tore his eyes away from the faint smudge of chocolate on Kirishima’s lower lip, and quickly pulled out a chair to distract himself. “Y-yeah, sure. I-I’m bad at eating and walking anyway.” He settled down in his seat, careful not to spill any ice cream, and jumped a little when Kirishima practically collapsed into his own.

“It’s a skill that takes years of practice,” he responded seriously, which had little impact when he immediately followed up by licking droplets of ice cream off his cone with an expression of intense concentration.

Izuku took his first taste of his own ice-cream once he recalled its existence in his hand, sighing in pleasure as his taste buds perked to life from the cool, sharp mint.

“I meant to mention earlier,” Kirishima began around a mouthful of rocky road, “I like the hairdo, Midoriya. Tryin’ somethin’ new?”

Izuku flushed up to the roots of said hairdo, ducking his head and reaching up to self-consciously pat his tamed curls.”I-I just wanted t-to keep my h-hair up, s-since it was going to be hot today. Y-you really like it?”

“ Heck yeah! It looks totally cute.” The words left Kirishima’s mouth as if they weren’t capable of igniting every inch of Izuku’s flesh, inside and out, with the galactic fury of a super-luminous supernova and a quasar combined. He exhaled in a strangled wheeze and buried his face in his ice cream to avoid potential further embarrassment.

“I-th-th-thank y-you,” he eeked out, attempting to defy the laws of three dimensional perspectives and hide himself entirely behind his double scoop cone. Desperate for some kind of deflection (and a distraction from the painfully tender look in Kirishima’s eyes), Izuku blurted the first thing that came into his head. “Y-your hair is r-really nice t-too. I mean it’s a-always nice and looks super s-soft and
cool and I-I’m kinda envious of how manageable you make it look though even when it’s down it looks s-super nice-

Izuku’s muttering came to a screeching halt when he spied the truly unmistakable spots of color resting high on Kirishima’s cheeks, his knife-edge teeth bared in a sheepish smile. “Well uh, I wouldn’t call it manageable, but I’m glad you like it. Maybe when you stay over at my place, I could give you some tips for doin’ your hair.”

“.Y-yeah,” Izuku breathed, hiding his smile behind another lick of ice cream. “T-that’d be nice.” Overflowing with warmth and a peace so rare that Izuku couldn’t quite remember ever knowing it, out with his friends and enjoying a stress-free day… Izuku couldn’t possibly ask for more than that.

Although moments later, when the sight of Kirishima crunching through half his cone in one bite made Izuku’s heart almost thump out of his chest and caused him to choke on his own spit, he did wonder if he could ask to be less of a walking disaster.

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Inko Midoriya checked her shopping list for the third time in as many minutes, left off-balance by the fact that, for the first time in years, she was buying a week’s worth of groceries for only one person. Despite technically being easier, the task was somehow daunting.

Of course, that wasn’t to say she wished she wasn’t. On the contrary, her excitement was boundless; her baby boy was going on his first camping trip! At U.A., no less! Oh, her heart could barely take it.

While there had certainly been some… shocking developments, after her son had been accepted at his dream school, she wasn’t blind to all the good it had done him despite the incidents that still made her shake with panic when she thought about them too long. Her son was growing, leaving his shell and making friends and smiling. It made her want to weep, to hold him close and apologize now that it had become so clear how poorly he’d been doing for so many years.

Inko would never stop regretting her inaction, fear and uncertainty and loneliness all conspiring against her, against her son. She’d given him space when he needed comfort, and given him independence when he needed guidance. Even though she truly had believed him Quirkless for many years, she had known that something wasn’t right. Sometimes she had even wished that Hisashi had still been with them, even for all his faults.

But, it was all in the past. All she could do from now on was look forward, to support her dear boy in everything he hoped and worked towards. Her sweet, sensitive Izuku had always dreamed of being a hero, so that’s what she would help him be. The sight of him in his hero costume, captured in a picture taken with his friends—it made her heart soar to see such genuine happiness on his face. Truly, it was all she could ever ask for.

Lost in her thoughts, Inko almost hadn’t realized she’d entered the butcher’s block of the grocer until a gust of cold from the frozen foods section made her shiver. She hoisted her shopping bag and approached the butcher’s counter, peering over top of it to see if the nice girl trying to complete her culinary course was there.

“Can I help you, ma’am?” Oh, that was-Inko blinked, and then blinked again just to be sure. The man behind the counter had appeared almost without a sound, and certainly wasn’t anyone she recognized. He was… oh, quite tall, with the bulk to match his stature. He was thick and solidly built, rather than muscular in the body-builder sense. He looked a bit tired, strained around the eyes and gaunt in his squared, blocky face. Maybe he was a foreigner? He was hairless as well, deep furrows lining his forehead.
She jolted, startled, when calm red eyes locked with her own. “O-oh, yes.” She glanced away from his oddly striking eyes (not quite red, she realized; darker, almost rusted) and consulted her list, tittering self-deprecatingly. “Sorry, I’m a little frazzled. My son is going off to a camping trip in a few days and I’m not used to cooking for one!”

“No trouble at all,” he rumbled, voice gravelly and oddly inflection-less. Well, he didn’t quite look the energetic type, and Inko would hardly fault him on his manners. “You seem quite excited. How old is your son?” He inquired after she’d given her order (white meat chicken, pork mince), heading further back behind the counter.

“He’s turning sixteen in a few weeks! And he’s attending his first year at U.A. too! He’s always wanted to be a hero,” she babbled perhaps a little too excitedly, over-eager to share how proud she was of her baby boy.

“At U.A.? That’s quite prestigious. You must be very proud.” The man spoke easily over the rapid ‘thunkthunkthunk’ of the cleaver in his hand. Distantly, Inko wondered how long he’d been working as a butcher.

“So proud,” she admitted, her eyes watering just thinking about it. “Oh, the look on his face when he told me he was accepted.. I’m just so happy for him to get to follow his dream. And the teaching staff there are all wonderful, so kind and understanding!” She spoke mostly of her son’s angel of a homeroom teacher-why, she’d received a call from him just the other day, regarding Izuku’s end of term exam results. He’d calmly assured her that everything was fine, her son wasn’t being held back or punished, and his academics were perfectly fine, all the while with her blubbering over the phone. She’d have to do something for that man to show her appreciation.

“Hmm.. Your son is one of the boys from this year’s sport’s festival, yes?” The observation caught her a little off guard, and she looked up to find the man dutifully mincing out her pork. “I can see the family resemblance. Your son was quite impressive,” he continued, turning the odd feeling in her stomach into bashful pride.

“Yes, that was my little Izuku. Almost gave me heart palpitations, acting so daring!” She laughed a little, and the man chuckled, a noise that was almost lost in the cadence of his mincing.

He turned back to her a few moments later, her orders individually wrapped and neatly bagged. He set them on the counter, and for a moment Inko was struck by the scarring on his hands, visible even through his translucent gloves. Thick and ropy, they raised the skin and covered even his fingers, disappearing under the sleeves of his uniform. For the first time, her eye caught on his name-tag, pinned neatly over his breast pocket. ‘K. Kizamu’.

He didn’t seem to notice her brief staring, thankfully, and she swiftly pulled out enough coins for the total, plus a little extra. “Sorry for talking your ear off,” she apologized, gathering up her order to plop carefully in her basket.

“It is no trouble,” he repeated, a hint of a smile on his thin lips. “I hope you have a fine evening, ma’am.” He nodded shallowly, and she offered him a brief smile in return as she turned away to complete the rest of her shopping. She felt a strange tingling in the back of her neck, like his eyes were still on her, and almost missed his parting words.

“And I hope your son has a nice time at his camp.”

Chapter End Notes
Ahhh some gorgeous fanart I got for this chapter!
Be sure to check out the artist!
Chapter 48

Itching, itching itching—that damnable itching never seemed to go away. Ever since that day, that awful day at the USJ, every aspect of Tomura Shigaraki's existence just seemed to keep getting worse. He'd lost Father, he'd lost his chance to kill All Might, his favorite Noumu had been broken... all in what felt like a few moments.

He'd been trying to keep busy to block it all out. Ever since that other night in Hosu, with that infuriating, self righteous heap of refuse, he couldn't stop thinking. There had to be a reason that his efforts were being swept under the rug in favor of a fucking dead guy, the Hero Killer. Tomura had never even met him, but he wanted to feel Stain's dust between his fingers, just to quell the dark singularity that pulsed in violent resonance at every single mention of his name.

But there wasn't enough to occupy his mind. Without more members, the League was basically just himself and Kurogiri, who had been grinding against his nerves incessantly. Sensei had ordered to him to keep Tomura from scratching, and every attempt to relieve just a single iota of the maddening itch was met with his hands sinking into warp gates.

Just because the collar of every shirt he owned was stained with blood, suddenly it was an 'issue' and he was being 'obsessive'. He fucking hated it. It was infuriating to be treated like a child, condescended as if he didn't understand what he was doing.

But (moping) seething in the bar wasn't getting him any of the peace and quiet he was craving anymore. He couldn't kill Mincemeat, couldn't kill that brat, couldn't kill All Might, so why bother sitting there until they got more recruits?

"I'm going to my room," he announced, not acknowledging the hum from Kurogiri. He slithered off his bar stool and stalked towards the door leading upstairs, ready to drown out his incessant anger by grinding in his newest RPG-

A knock sounded at the bar's exterior door, a hollow rapping that made Tomura still. His anger flared as his chance to play Pillars of Eternity (the sequel was coming soon he had to be caught up before he got it) was ripped away. But slick, electrifying satisfaction was soon to join it, at the sound of Giran's sleazy voice entering through the widening crack in the door.

"Hey, Shigaraki, I think I found something you might like." The broker entered in his usual haze of cigarette smoke, the glowing orange pinhole illuminating his yellowed teeth. "Your League has been making a bit of a buzz, you know. Rumors're circulating, about somethin' that'll dwarf the attacks on U.A. and Hosu. That kinda talk gets people real excited."

"Show me what you brought," he commanded impatiently, loping back across the length of the bar. Giran was a guy that wore his mask well, but the flash in his eyes (primal, lesser) when he saw Tomura's naked face almost gave him a thrill.

But Giran just flashed that gross smirk again, stepping out of the doorway and swirling his arm through the air in a lazy beckoning motion. Instantly, a pair of footsteps sounded from out in the hall.

Shigaraki tensed and raised his hackles in displeasure; what the hell was Giran thinking, bringing new recruits to his bar immediately, instead of.. sending in character sheets first, or something. What kind of unprofessional pricks was Sensei dealing with these days?

Even with his expectations lowered all the way into the gutter, he still found himself sneering at the
two bodies that Giran dragged in with him. It was just some teenager in a cutesy school uniform with a
dazed, spacey look on her face, and an overcooked punk that looked like he was cosplaying a
JRPG rival.

"So. You're the guy in charge of the League of Villains, right?" The burnt bastard rasped, his noise
grating and too loud. Tomura's opinion of him was already souring. "You look scrawnier than in the
pictures." So irreverent, so disrespectful-Tomura could already vividly imagine shoving a hand into
his mouth, squeezing his lower jaw out of existence before dusting him straight through the throat.

"Heeey, don't be mean!" The girl whined, her high-pitched voice much too breathy for her childish
inflection. Her bratty tone, her flapping arms-Tomura already hated her. Geez... how hard was to to
find party members that didn't suck? "Handy guy is the one we need! His monster fought that big
mean gross guy in the video, remember? The one that killed Mr. Stainy!"

She whipped her head around to stare directly at him, and Tomura was instantly revolted by the
sickly blush staining her face, as well as the obsessive gleam in her eyes. "You're gonna find him,
right? You're gonna kill that meanie, aren't you? Please please please let me help!" She bounced
back and forth on her heels, more like someone playing the part of a child than anything.

But her unsettling behavior wasn't what scraped at the inside of Tomura's head, flecking apart his
skull in chisel-fine chips. It was that word, it was that name that kept ringing in his ears, the fucking
name that stained everyone's lips.

Battery acid erupted at the base of his spine, pouring over his brain in steaming jets. His fingers
twitched and clenched, aching to squeeze nonexistence from every pore in his skin.

"Out," he ordered suddenly, earning a raised eye brow from the guy who pulled himself out of an
ash heap, and a curious head tilt from the freaky little girl. "I want them out, Kurogiri. I don't need
some creepy brat and a rude prick in my party." There, how was that for 'restraint'? He could have
just killed them and been done with it, if he wanted, but he was being gracious instead.

"Come now, Shigaraki," Kurogiri began, the condescending chastisement in his tone making
Tomura's blood spit and sizzle, "Are you not perhaps being too hasty in your judgement? Mr. Giran
is a well respected broker, I should hardly think he would bring us recruits that would not prove
useful."

Giran hissed out a cloud of acrid smoke, his slimy vendor's smile frosting over at the edges. "It's up
to you if you keep 'em or not, but I'll be expecting payment either way." His leather shoes clicked
irritatingly against the scuffed hardwood as he stepped forward, gesturing to the two scum suckers on
either side of him. "Of course, you might change your mind after a bit of an introduction. This little
lady looks like your average high schooler, right? Well, she's actually behind a spree of murders all
involving extreme exsanguination, so try not to let that innocent smile fool you."

"I'm Himiko Toga! You League guys are killing a bunch'a heroes and avenging Mr. Stainy, right? I
wanna help! With those jerks out of the way, life won't be so hard anymore!"

Her grin (nothing but teeth and hunger and childish desire) was an enamel splinter under his skin.
Oh, and that name dripping from her parted lips was only kerosene to the mounting conflagration
burrowing beneath his ribs, and the skin of his neck.

"You must be pretty desperate if you'd let little psychos like her join your group," the black and blue
bastard snarked, his burnt lips curling in distaste. Tomura's urge to erase every inch of skin that
wasn't ruined only compounded.

"-And this guy right here," Giran hastily cut in, clapping a hand on the prick's tensed shoulder, "may not have made too big a splash, but he's packin' a helluva punch, and he's responsible for a lotta organization between Stain's followers."

The freak narrowed his eyes in displeasure, making the ruined skin around his eyes stretch in hideous lines. "I'm here to avenge the Hero Killer and carry out his will. If you're not aligned with him, then this is a waste of my time." Tomura's anger spiked, steel and razors punching up through the skin of his fingers in phantom punctures.

"Apparently that makes two of us," Tomura bit out, in lieu of biting his nails into scarred flesh and watching it crumble. He lurched forward to sever the distance between them, knocking his sneaker into a bar stool and making it clatter loudly. "What's your name, ashtray? Gonna just stand there and stare, or are you going to introduce yourself?"

"Dabi," the freak muttered, his eyes hooded with disinterest but the muscles in his jaw tightening. He had a decent poker face, but Tomura could pick him apart into glistening strands just like anyone else.

Silence settled between them in ashen layers, frigid blue eyes blankly watching the frustration slowly crawl up Tomura's face. This fucker was really trying his nerves.

"Dabi what?" he snapped, when it was clear no further utterance was forthcoming. Did this guy really think he was some edgy antagonist? "I want your full name, you overcooked mongrel, not your larping title."

'Dabi' revealed slivers of teeth in a humorless grin, straightening up and attempting to use the few inches he had on Tomura to loom threateningly. What a joke. "You'll get my full name when I deem it necessary. Right now, I think you barely deserve the one I gave you." He curled his lip in displeasure, and for the first time in weeks Tomura's horrible itching was slowly replaced by something else. "You guys aren't really dedicated to Stain's philosophy, are you? I can't imagine he'd ever sanction such a gross little creep playing villains with his babysitter."

Oh, there it was. A burning black flood raged through Tomura's veins, bloating him near to bursting with that urge, that sweet, maddening urge; overwhelming blood-lust was preferable to itching any day.

Tomura took a single step forward, arms tensed and fingers twitching erratically. A chuckle bubbled in the base of his throat, eyes burning as his pupils unfocused. He was deaf to the warning note in Kurogiri's utterance of his name, lips stretching and cracking to the corners of his face.

"You've got a pretty big mouth, Dabi. Let's see how clever you are when I finish cremating you!" Reason and restraint boiled away into the acrid steam that pulled Tomura's hands out in grasping claws. Hatred roared and flooded the inside of his skull, trickling down in oily strands until a strangled yell of rage was forced from between his teeth. He was so close, he could almost feel the flesh he'd squeeze until it crumbled away, he could see the flashing alarm in blue eyes and tasted the licks of embers rising from the palm that hastily rose to meet him-

Kurogiri's warp gates appeared in a rush of opaque fog, the bartender having nearly vaulted the bar in his rush to get in Tomura's way. His hands grasped nothing but empty air, transported through broken space somewhere up over his head. Slowly, the bloody hum of stilling hearts faded in Tomura's ears, his frame shaking with unused adrenaline and fury both. He glared his loathing into eyes that had frozen over once more with apathy.
"You are acting irrationally, Tomura Shigaraki. We cannot expect to reach our goals without increasing our available numbers, and killing potential recruits is counterproductive. The League no longer has the luxury of operating in secrecy; we have taken the attention of our adversaries, and they will not hesitate to prey upon our weaknesses."

Tomura didn't turn to look at Kurogiri, but he could feel the phantom pressure of his gaseous form resting against his shoulder—a grip without weight. "Stain's death is an opportunity for us," Kurogiri murmured, making his ear itch from the proximity, "the desire for vengeance is easily twisted, and if we should satiate it, we will earn their loyalty."

Silence was his only response. He stared forward, more through Dabi than at him, and considered his infuriating behavior. No respect, no fear, no deference—and it was all because he had lost. His humiliating failure at U.A. had been overshadowed by the loss of his minions, his terror wrought in Hosu had been lost beneath the shadow of Stain's departure and the man who killed him, who mutilated his Noumu and led the heroes to disposing of the rest.

Tomura knew that he had lost to a smurf and a cheater, but on the outside looking in, he just looked incapable. But he still didn't get it. At the end of the day, what made Stain and Mincemeat any different? Stain was in the ground, and Tomura had killed more than his fair share of wanna-be heroes as well. Mincemeat was a babbling maniac who hadn't even bothered to make a name for himself, but he was still an online phenomena. What was it... what was the difference..?

"Whatever," he spat, thoughts clinking and rattling together in hollow collisions as their pieces slowly formed a full body, "I'm out of here." He roughly shoved Dabi out of the way, not looking back at that stupid girl, or that stupid contact, or his stupid bartender. He slammed the door behind him with four fingers, his anger reduced to a smolder as he considered what he had to do.

...Maybe he just needed a second opinion.

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Katsuki Bakugou was definitely, absolutely, in no way whatsoever upset that none of his classmates had bothered to invite him out to the mall with them. It wasn't like he didn't have anything better to do; there was a plethora of important shit for him to take care of while those losers were busy goofing off. Yeah. Super important errands that he could do... all by himself.

Katsuki swore and barely resisted the hazy red urge to kick over the trashcan to his left, forcing his hands to remain stuffed into his pockets. Denial was a hell of a lot more difficult with a fuckin' therapist talking him in circles every day. He knew why he wasn't invited. He wasn't that stupid. Why would anyone want the fuckin' hair trigger asshole delinquent around to ruin their good time?

His thread of control finally snapped, and Katsuki swiped his foot out at a trashcan in petulant rage. It clattered against the wall of the alley, the metal noise ringing off the cramped walls. It did little to drown out the cacophony of regret exploding off the walls of his skull, though. Why did he have to be such a fucking idiot? If he could meet the him from a few months ago, Katsuki would fucking strangle him to death. Thinking he was such hot shit, the best there was, able to coast by on a fuckin' flashy Quirk; how could he have ever been so stupid?

Every fuckin' moment from the day he'd first shown signs of his Quirk to the moment he was sitting numbly in the principal's office with his mother in tears and his father ready to blow a gasket was just one disaster after another. If he could fix just one mistake in his life he wouldn't even know where to start, because he'd somehow managed to unerringly fuck up everything important in his development and his relationships with other people.

Fuck, here he was feeling sorry for himself in a putrid-ass alleyway just because nobody wanted him around, as if he'd ever had friends in the first place! All his old 'friends' had just been afraid of him,
tagging along and egging him on because it meant they weren't in his crosshairs. And the only person in the world who had probably ever genuinely liked him was fucking-fucking Izuku.

Katsuki's eyes stung, welling up with shitty tears, and the rattling bottle he'd stuffed all of his emotions into shattered into dust. He let out a choked yell that twisted in on itself somewhere in the back of his throat, ripping a burning hand out of his pocket and slamming it against the rough brick wall in front of him. He could feel the explosion crackling between his fingertips, more flash and heat than anything of substance.

Letting it out didn't even make him feel better. He'd been trying his damned hardest to keep a lid on everything, on his stupid temper and his damaging Quirk, and now that he was fuckin' crying his eyes out like a loser and painting the wall with soot, he didn't even feel better.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit" he grit out through his teeth, slamming his palm against the wall well past the point where it started to sting, the muted cracks of his explosions struggling to drown out the miasma of his insecurity. How could he have ever thought he was hot shit? Every single day of attending U.A. had proved just how much of an asshole he really was. Even disregarding the worst day of his miserable life, he'd fucked everything up at the USJ and then just stood there while everyone else cleaned up the mess, he'd only won the Sport's Festival because half-and-half didn't feel like winning, he'd wasted his internship on a stuck-up pro that spent the whole week belittling him, even his fucking exams, he'd only passed because fucking Ponytail was smarter than him, wasn't a bull headed moron like he was-

He slammed his hand against the soot smeared bricks again, but no explosion was forthcoming. All he had was a bloody palm that stung with his regret. He turned to slump against it, shadowed by an empty dumpster, and choked on the pathetic noises that wanted to crawl up out of his throat. He was a fuck-up loser with no friends and nothing to show for years of boasting. Even... even fuckin' Purple Guy only stuck around because he didn't know what Katsuki was really like. Just because Izuku smiled at him like everything was alright didn't mean it was okay, didn't mean he could move past all the awful shit he'd done. Katsuki was just a background prop that'd convinced himself he was a main character.

He dug his fingers into his hair, head bowed, and tugged furiously at the roots. Why, why, why did he have to do it? Izuku didn't deserve any of the shit Katsuki had dumped on him. It was all because he was fucking insecure, because somehow that fucking nerd had still been able to get up and smile every day despite looking so hopeless, despite Katsuki pummeling him into the dirt. It was all because he had to be better, to convince himself he really was the best-a fat fucking load of good that had done him. He knew better now, he knew he was just a piece of shit who had hurt the only person who ever actually wanted to be around him. Just because Izuku's smile had pissed him off, because his tears had made Katsuki's chest twist, because just being in his presence made him twitchy and agitated and he hadn't known why-

"Hey, kid... you alright?"

Katsuki's head snapped up, the cumulonimbus-clusterfuck thundering around his head dissipating in an instant at the sound of the thin, raspy voice that echoed down the alleyway. He jumped to his feet, shoving soot stained and blood smeared hands into his pockets in the same motion. He quickly slapped on a scowl, allowing his pounding frustration to shape it believably as he looked for the source of the voice.

A lanky, shabbily dressed man stood in the middle of the alleyway, back the way Bakugou had come. His height was masked by his poor, slouching posture, and his face was covered by a dark hoodie. Katsuki could just make out a few tufts of pale, feathery hair, and felt the stranger's eyes on
"Piss off," he muttered with cantankerous venom, lowering his head and affecting a swaggering, intimidating demeanor. It would hopefully be enough to dissuade a nosy stranger from following him out of the alley.

Before he'd even managed more than a few steps, the man spoke again. "Hey, don't be so cold, kid. I was just worried. Anyone would be, if they found a kid crying alone in an alley, right?" Something about the way he spoke made the hair on the back of Katsuki's neck prickle, but the odd inflection of the stranger's voice was dwarfed by his defensive anger.

"You didn't see shit," he snarled, head stubbornly turned away as he stomped towards the open street. He didn't need some random asshole prying at him. It wasn't his fuckin' business anyway.

"Don't be like that. If it helps, I promise not to tell." Slow, lazy footsteps followed Katsuki's own, less a pursuit and more of a retracing. He didn't look behind him; it'd give the fucker the impression that he was frightened, and he fuckin' wasn't. He just wanted to not have some weirdo chatting him up.

"Say.. you're one of those U.A. kids, right? Yeah, I recognize you-you're the one that came first in the Sport's Festival. You were pretty cool, kid." The unwarranted praise only made Katsuki prickle further, a stew of insults brewing on his tongue, before he forced himself to relax. It was just some weird dude who saw him on TV. He'd have to get used to that kind of shit as a hero. If he ever actually made it that far.

"What, you want some kinda autograph or somethin'?" Katsuki asked gruffly, pausing in his departure to start digging through his pocket. He probably had a pen, or a marker or something-

In the single moment his attention wavered, something struck him in the back of the head. He staggered from the force of the blow (not a weapon, the heel of a hand or an elbow maybe), dazed enough that his attempt to swing around and detonate the fucker ended with his arm wrenched behind his back (palm pointed at the wall) and an elbow jammed into the base of his spine.

He grunted on impact with the brick wall, his cheek scraping against the rough hewn brick, and his palm burned as an explosion ignited from the sweat gathering between his fingers. It went wide, wrenched aside by the same powerful grip, fingers (only four, no thumb) digging into the flesh of his wrist, his tendons, until crackling bolts of pain made his echoing explosions sputter out.

"Get the fuck off'a me," he bellowed, rage and adrenaline boiling through him like liquid dynamite. He wrenched and fought, fury the only thing that momentarily allowed him to pull free, only for a leg to twist serpent-like around his own and send him to the ground. He skidded on one elbow, the other arm caught underneath him, and twisted around to blast the fucker into oblivion with a murderous snarl pulling at his lips-

-and four fingers wrapped around his throat, pressing into his windpipe. He could see under the stranger's hood, breath stilling in panic at the sight of wide, manic eyes, cracked lips, and a neck littered with sores and lesions.

"What was it you said at the USJ?" Shigaraki (how the fuck hadn't he realized, not recognized his voice) mocked him, a demented grin making his lips crack further. The hand around his throat squeezed Katsuki's growl into a gasp, and the grip around his wrist tightened to match it. "'You're all gonna die here', wasn't it? You should have made good on your promise, brat."

"What the fuck do you want?" Katsuki grit out, hiding his fear behind glinting teeth. He was so
fucked, this guy would fucking squeeze his throat into powder before an explosion could take him out. "You just here to gloat before you kill me? How's about you spare me the fuckin' speeches, you crusty freak."

Shigaraki blinked down at him, his grin not even twitching. He felt the brush of a thumb against his forearm, and suddenly *pain*, a dry, burning throb that crackled and sank into his flesh, making him squirm in agony, a shout building in his throat-

Shigaraki's thumb lifted, leaving him with a sharp, aching throb around his wrist. He couldn't see how bad it looked, but the fingers still pressing into his raw skin were hot irons of discomfort. "You should watch that mouth of yours, brat. Don't you know it's impolite to insult the guy that could kill you whenever he wanted?"

"But lucky for you, I'm not here for that. All I really want is... a friendly little chat." Shigaraki shifted his weight, pinning Katsuki down by his hips and lower legs. The freak's smile faded away, replaced with some childish agitation that Katsuki wanted to peel off of him. "I have this problem, you see, and you seemed like the perfect person to ask about it."

In Katsuki's opinion, this fucking mutant had more than *one* problem, but he bit his tongue. "Yeah, and why's that?" Maybe, if he could appease Shigaraki with a 'chat', the villain would give him an opportunity to turn the tables. If the fuck was distracted, Katsuki would paint the alley with his brain matter.

"We're a bit alike, you and I," Shigaraki said casually, as if it were an obvious fact. "We're both powerful. Both tenacious. Both fighting to get what we want without letting anyone stop us. And even then, despite it all, we were *still* overshadowed." In an instant, he made a seamless transition into furious hatred, eyes wide and twitching and just about as capable of turning things to dust as his Quirk. "Pushed aside, *ignored*, in favor of *trash*!" The hand around Katsuki's throat tightened, bands of flesh and bone that dug into his windpipe until he choked out a gasp for air, eyes wild as he twisted his arm in Shigaraki's grip.

It was only then that the villain seemed to come back to himself, his fingers loosening and his eyes refocusing. "No squirming now," he hissed, dancing his thumb over Katsuki's jugular. White hot terror flashed through him, until he realized the villain's pinkie had lifted just in time.

"What I want to know," he continued a moment later, no longer incensed but clearly on a hair trigger, "is *why*? What makes them so special? The Hero Killer, and that *Mincemeat* freak. What have they done that I can't? What's the *difference*?"

"How the fuck should I know," Katsuki growled, only bringing the villain to crack his head back against the concrete. The blow only stung, weakened by the poor leverage, but it was a clear enough warning.

"I've seen your grades, *Katsuki Bakugou*," Shigaraki snarled in his face, instability clear in his pupils, and the stink of hatred on his breath, "don't play stupid with me. I just need to to answer my simple little question, so I don't have to end your game, got it?"

How the fuck was he supposed to play to the whims of this maniac? He didn't know a damn thing more about those other villains than anyone else, what sort of insight was he supposed to pull out of his ass? Maybe he could make some shit up to just tell him what he wanted to hear, because the only real difference he could think of was..

"..You don't stand for anything," Katsuki laid out with as much care as he could muster, forcing himself to stare defiantly into reptilian amber eyes, "I don't know as much about this Mincemeat guy,
but the Hero Killer... he fought to the death for what he thought was right, even if he was a fuckin' deluded lunatic. You just leave whenever things don't go your way. People see videos of a mysterious villain fuckin' up one of the monsters terrorizing the city, they wonder what he wants, what his motivations are, what he's after. 'Far as anyone can tell, the League just shows up to cause destruction for no reason. You're like a fuckin' natural disaster instead of a group of villains."

He swallowed under the unblinking gaze carving holes into him, but Shigaraki didn't speak. So, figuring he was probably gonna die anyway, he kept speaking. "You said you wanted to kill All Might, but you didn't even try to fight him. And then you showed up months later, attacking a random city for no reason. People will talk forever about a villain who has a plan; they won't talk about a storm until it's already hit."

"...Is that really it?" Shigaraki's voice was a confused murmur, his eyes flickering across Katsuki's face in a manner that made his skin crawl. "It's all... it's all a media circus, isn't it? People don't care about a random encounter, no matter how hard it is... they just want a cinematic fight." His lips tightened in twitching fury, the hands locked around Katsuki's vulnerable flesh beginning to tremble. His pupils swam across the whites of his eyes, looking at everything and nothing all at once. "It's all because... the reason, this whole time the reason was..."

His face split apart like a chunk of meat ripped by brute force, the curve of his lips sickle-sharp and the glint in his eyes shattered into kaleidoscopic shards. "It's all because of All Might, isn't it?!" A shriek of laughter ripped out of him, a hideous noise that cracked to and fro off the brick walls of the alley. "He's the one responsible for this world, where the only thing that matters is being cool and popular! That walking trash bag... I knew it. I knew I wasn't wrong! I just have to kill him," Shigaraki hissed in delight, his fingers tightening in childish glee. "I just have to kill him, and everyone will realize! I'll wreck this world until they understand who they should really be afraid of!"

Shigaraki's laughing fit subsided, but the hideous smile on his face remained. "This was a good talk. Thanks for helping me, kid. It's like a weight off my chest. Be sure to look me up if you ever want to chat about your own problems."

Katsuki said nothing, certain that opening his mouth would only prolong the nightmarish encounter.

Shigaraki started sitting up, the weight that was turning Katsuki's thighs numb relenting partially. "Actually, before I forget... you really pissed me off at the USJ, you know. You could have killed me with those grenade cannons of yours."

The hand around his throat peeled away just long enough for Katsuki to draw an unimpeded breath, and that was all the time Shigaraki needed to slap it across his face with all five fingers. It pressed halfway up his left eye, one finger splaying over the bridge of his nose and the other just brushing the edge of his ear. He screamed as his flesh crumbled and cracked, skin cells reduced to dust and nerves buzzing in agony. He fought and wriggled and twisted, and the hand retreated a moment before Katsuki bucked the weight off of his hips. He couldn't see, he couldn't see out of his eye, he didn't recall pressure on it but every inch of skin around it burned. He swung a wild hand around, explosions cracking out of his trembling palm with enough power that they nearly deafened him, flares of orange-white erupting wildly throughout the alleyway.

"Now we're even, you little brat," Shigaraki's voice taunted him, and he was unable to locate the source through the maddening burn that covered a third of his face. He fired off another wild
explosion, his ears ringing as he staggered to his feet and clutched the wound on his face. He couldn't tell if the moisture under his palm was sweat or blood. "Hey, look on the bright side; now you'll match your little green boyfriend!"

A wordless roar of anguish and wrath twisted out of Katsuki's chest, an exhalation so hot that it was not easily lost even amidst the blooming explosions he forced from between his fingers.

He only ceased once the throbbing in his face had started to sting from the sweat pouring into his wound, furious pants making his chest heave and shudder. The alleyway was empty, all signs of the villain having been there overshadowed by the soot and craters left by his Explosion.

"Fuck... fuck, fuck fuck, god **fucking** dammit!" He crashed his knuckles against the wall with a furious shout, uncaring of the crack that echoed back at him, and the blossoming pain under his thin, bloodied skin.

For the first time, he could see his right wrist—the flesh was covered in a spiderweb of angry red cracks, bubbling with smearing blood that just about covered the pinker, raw patches they bordered. The villain's Quirk hadn't been applied to his face for near as long, but..

Katsuki didn't dare lift his hand from the searing mark that stretched from the bridge of his nose to the side of his ear, up into his hairline and shadowed across the top of his eye socket. He.. he needed to go to a police station, or something. Call someone.

A thought occurred, and he ripped his phone out of where it had sunk deep into his pocket. He struggled to unlock it with one hand and navigate to his contacts. The school had given them all a number to call—a direct line to whatever hero was there to pick it up, without having to go through a receptionist or be put on hold. It was supposed to be for emergencies only.

He dialed it without thinking about it, holding it up against his ear and waiting for someone to pick up in a numb haze of anger and misery.

The call connected, and an unprofessionally boisterous voice came in from the other side. "Well heeeeyyyyy, if it isn't my loudest little listener! What's the emergency, kid?"

"Fucker from the League of Villains attacked me in an alley," he grit out, unwilling to listen to even a second of Present Mic's annoying voice. He quickly sent out his location ping as well. "Fucked up my face. They're definitely mobilizing again, so kick up a fuckin' stink about it or somethin'. I'm goin' to a police station."

"..Gotcha," the hero replied, sobered from his previous mirth. "You just sit tight, little listener. We'll get out there quick as we can. I'll be sure Recovery Girl comes to check on ya, too. How bad are your injuries?"

"They're not a big fuckin' deal," he muttered, unable to ignore his throbbing face. "Just fuckin' hurry up before I get arrested for using my Quirk in public."

He hung up before the hero could eek in another too-loud word, jamming his phone into his pocket and sliding back against the soot caked wall. He trembled from leftover adrenaline, breaths quick and too-shaky. Katsuki hung his head between his knees, and kept his hand pressed against the left side of his face. His eye began to burn in earnest, tears running unbidden down his face and pooling into the streak where Shigaraki's finger had brushed the underside of his eye. He couldn't bring himself to care if it scarred or not, if he'd have a fucking hand print burned into his skin for the rest of his life.

As far as he was concerned, he deserved every inch of it.
Chapter 49

Shouta Aizawa was a multitude of things, foremost an educator and professional hero, as well as (he suspected) a ghoul born of apathy and exhaustion that had somehow blundered its way into inhabiting human skin. What he wasn’t, was a bus driver. And yet... there he was, four hours before his students’ field trip... checking the tire pressure on a bus. He might have taken that time to wonder where his life had gone completely out of his control, but that would likely involve looking further back than he cared to examine.

Normally, the time he was spending hunched over and destroying his back would have been allotted to a nap, so that he’d have the energy to deal with a score of hyperactive teenagers for a two hour bus ride. But, as usual, Shouta’s life couldn’t be easy. He’d been awake for at least 57 hours since the news of Katsuki Bakugou’s encounter with the head of the League of Villains, attempting to simultaneously acquire a more secure location for the trip and keep his fellow faculty members from running around like beheaded chickens.

Well, he reflected with the sort of grim optimism that came with decades of disappointment and lowering his standards, at least Nedzu was the one that’d had to talk to a thermonuclear Mrs. Bakugou. The rodent was pretty unflappable, but Shouta enjoyed the image of an angry mother making him sweat. It helped take the edge off his own exhaustion.

He straightened up with a groan, slipping the tire pressure gauge away and tapping the set of wheels he’d been inspecting with the tip of his shoe. They probably wouldn’t get a flat or a blowout, and that was good enough for him. All that was left was a cursory inspection of the interior, and then he’d have three and a half hours to kill.

Shouta smirked at the far-fetched notion that he’d spend that time doing anything other than triple-checking everything that had already been prepared for the trip. Sleep could wait until they actually got there. He swept a lock of hair out of his face, plodding over to the doors with the keys jingling in his pocket.

The hydraulics on the buses locked up tight once the engines were turned off, so use of a key fob was the only way to actually get on without forcing your way inside. Decent enough to keep out anyone who had any ideas about snooping, but hardly the top notch security he’d expect from-

Shouta slowed to a stop, his hand stilling in his pocket with the keys loosely caged by his fingers. He leaned in to squint at the folding doors, only to find… they were cracked open. He straightened up, glanced around the exterior for any sign of forced entry, and came up empty. How had they...? He inspected the parted seam more closely, tracing down the length of it with his index finger. It was barely a digit’s width apart, he could maybe work in a pinkie with enough tenacity and elbow grease.

Well, that couldn’t go without investigating. Shouta fished out the keys and thumbed the fob, the engine rumbling to life as the hydraulics squealed apart. Normally, if UA equipment was expected to have been tampered with by malicious forces, they’d call in a bomb squad, or at least have Hound Dog sniff it out beforehand. But Shouta couldn’t imagine a villain that was clever enough to both sneak onto campus undetected as well as rig one of their secured buses with an explosive trap would leave such an obvious crack in the door.

So he stepped inside without fear, his gut feeling justified when he didn’t immediately explode. He inspected the driver’s seat first and foremost, raising an eyebrow when he saw it was pushed back as far as it would go. That probably meant All Might had been the one to use it. His suspicions of a sloppy break-in dwindled into resignation that his oaf of a coworker had just broken the doors, but he
went through the motions of checking every inch of the driver’s seat for anything suspicious.

A few minutes trickled by as he found every standard issue set of papers and booklets in the glove compartment where they were supposed to be (though the manual for operating the bus was dog eared), as well as no signs of anything being tampered with. He swept the length of the bus, checking under the seats as well as inside the overhead luggage compartments.

Nothing. The bus was totally clean. Shouta sighed, more relieved that there wasn’t an issue than annoyed at wasting his valuable time. He’d just have to reprimand All Might for his careless treatment of school property the next time he saw the man. Hopefully he was enjoying his teaching courses. Shouta huffed a breath of amusement at the thought, and turned to exit the bus so that he could wrangle a bunch of a teenagers onto it. Apparently, he was just getting paranoid from his lack of sleep.

Although, Shouta considered with a wrinkled nose, he’d have to make sure it was thoroughly cleaned once they were done with it. Damn thing smelled like something had died inside of it.

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Izuku Midoriya was lost in quiet. The cold bliss of silence had not found him. The blessed dark had not blinded him. He was trapped, suspended upon his own emergent core. Weightless, without power, he hung from the base of the beast that had repurposed his insides, warm meat and wet bone rusted over with oxidizing hunger. His lips parted, torn, tissues ripped into threads by a force uncaring.

He choked and gagged on eternity, voice stolen, autonomy dwarfed. His eyes did not blink, melting in a river of saline and soft tissue as he beheld the greenblack static that consumed all he could perceive. He was battered by the unceasing hiss, an agonized shriek of broken pixels and shattered molecules that he could do nothing to soothe.

Izuku hung suspended, at the mercy of the great and terrible obelisk of wires that emerged from deep within his belly, splitting apart his throat and mouth in their maddened desire to be free. He was an ornament, a seedling, discarded once the horror had outgrown him. It hungered to consume all that was, no longer satiated by gnawing on his bone and gristle.

The Living Nightmare contorted in a cage of cutting wires, a hideous warhead of malignant gluttony. Snapped apart, hung to die, Izuku could do nothing. He could only hang, and feel the vibrations of unmaking in his cracked bones. He vomited cosmic hatred, and when all life had been subsumed by its titanic weight there was only the burning the burning the burning the burning the burning the burning-

Izuku’s eyes snapped open, a strangled noise ripping out of his chest that was momentarily drowned out by the deafening whine of static in his ears. He jerked upright, and the television-snow specters clogging his ears vanished with the sudden intake of sensory data. His skin crawled with a prickling itch, a thousand steel ants with needle feet that was already beginning to fade. The bus seat underneath him was warmed through by his body heat and the sunlight shining in through the window, but the air conditioner kept him from sweating through his clothes. The bus was filled with the chatter of his classmates, loud enough to drown out the rumble of the engine and the wheels turning over the dirt road they were driving on.

“Hey, Midoriya, you alright?” Izuku’s head snapped to the side, eyes wide and wild as he absorbed the sight of Kirishima’s concerned expression, only just beginning to realize that he’d dozed off against the redhead’s shoulder. “Had a bad dream?” He prompted gently, while Izuku was busy putting all the compartments of his conscious mind in the proper order.

“Y-yeah,” he agreed hesitantly, unsure if he even knew what a dream really entailed but certainly
Kirishima laughed, a noise that was born of relief rather than amusement. “Must’ve been a heck of a bad dream, huh? I can’t lie, I was gettin’ a little worried.” His smile, all teeth and concern, began to slip at the edges. “...Does that happen often?” A note of worry threaded between his words, tying them together with the liquid-soft look in his eyes.

“No, not really. I usually don’t dream at all.” Izuku bit his lip and glanced away from Kirishima’s vibrant eyes, unable to collect his thoughts when he peered into the dizzying depths of their color. He was still unsettled by his nightmare, as well; he’d assumed before that it was just an odd buildup from Living Nightmare, but he’d been practicing with it ever since they’d gotten out for summer break. Hopefully he could figure out a reason for it as well as a way to put a stop to them. Waking up feeling like his ribs were going to crack open from his pounding heart was incredibly unpleasant.

“So this has happened before?” A note of disquiet harmonized with Kirishima’s blatant worry, and Izuku blanched when he realized he’d been mumbling aloud. He’d thought he was getting better with that.

“Only one other time,” he answered honestly, anxiously turning and tugging his fingers in his lap. “It’s probably nothing to worry about. Sorry for troubling you.”

He squeaked when Kirishima slung an arm around his shoulder, pulling him in for a sideways hug that nearly pulled him completely out of his seat. “C’mon man, none’a that! I’m only worried cuz’ I care, bro. You’ve got nothin’ to apologize for.”

Izuku felt the blood that rose to stain his face in tingling inkblots, and quickly glanced away. “Yeah, you’re right. I-I’d just rather not talk about it, if that’s okay.” He applied a quick smile, the uneven crescent seeming to ease a bit of the stiffness from Kirishima’s shoulders.

“Yeah, no problem,” he relented, squeezing Izuku for a moment longer before their bubbles of personal space ceased to intermingle. “I just know there’s been a lot on your plate lately, and I wanna make sure you’re all good.” He patted Izuku’s leg with a firm palm, and offered another breathtaking grin, alight with affection. “Just lemme know if you ever wanna talk, okay?”

“I will,” he promised, before he could overthink it. He returned Kirishima’s smile, shaky and flustered but more genuine than the things he adorned, only for the moment to be broken by the bus pulling to a rough stop.

“Alright everyone, settle down,” Mr. Aizawa droned over the din through the speakers, his no-nonsense tone ensuring absolute quiet only moments after he’d spoken. “We’re at the first rest stop, so everyone off. Don’t dawdle.”

Relieved to have a chance to stretch his legs, Izuku slid out of his seat once he was sure he wouldn’t be stampeded by his classmates, Kirishima following close behind him. The entire class unloaded into what looked more like a... vantage point, than a rest stop? Putting it out of his mind for the moment, Izuku took the time to stretch and attempt to work out the kink in his neck, groaning in relief.

“This doesn’t really look like a rest stop, does it?” Asui croaked, prompting a few murmurs of confusion and agreement. Izuku took another look around, attention fixating on the vintage black car parked just on the other side of the stop.

“Yeah, and what’s with the car?”

ready to label that... vision, as a bad one, “j-just a bad d-dream.”
“And where’s class B?”

Izuku slowly lowered his arms from over his head, anxiety sparking in his chest as he turned a suspicious look on their ominously silent homeroom teacher. Mr. Aizawa didn’t quite catch his eye, but the curl of his lip suggested he wasn’t unaware of the eyes turned in his direction.

“You all didn’t really think we stopped just for you to stretch your legs, right?” He raised an eyebrow when Izuku’s subtle staring became full blown deer-in-the-headlights, as if asking what Izuku had really expected after months as his student. Despite the dread in his stomach, Izuku had to agree that Mr. Aizawa’s raised eyebrow had a point.

That formless dread crystalized when one of the doors of the black automobile burst open (almost off the hinges, he realized with a cringe) and allowed two lithe and strangely poofy shapes to burst out onto the clearing in a dazzling flourish. Half prepared for instant death, Izuku’s anxiety was suddenly overshadowed by a monolithic growth of awe as he realized that the two figures were actually-

“O-oh my god it’s t-the Wild Wild P-Pussycats!” He exclaimed in shock, his words echoing through the suddenly silenced clearing, the stars in his eyes slowly drifting aside to reveal nearly every head turned in his direction, including Pixiebob and Mandalay. He froze, eyes darting to realize both of their hands (well, paws) were raised in a clear first move of some sort of flashy opening… that he had just ruined.

He squeaked and flushed in embarrassment, slapping a hand over his mouth. “S-sorry for ininterrupting,” he apologized through his fingers, part of him wishing the earth would simply open up and swallow him under, and then dump him in a trash can or something.

Pixiebob was the first to speak, her cutey smile razor sharp as she sashayed over in his direction, tail flicking playfully. “Oooh, looks like this kitten is a fan, huh? Since you’re so in the know, how’s about you do our intro for us?” Izuku had maybe half a second to gape at her in shock before she leapt behind him, one hand placed firmly on his shoulder while the other lifted his arm, gloved fingers pulling his own into the Pussycat’s recognizable ‘nyan’ pose. “C’mon, we’re all waiting!” She teased him, her voice sing-song.

Izuku locked up in humiliation when he heard a few laughs from the rest of the class, though he was at least able to make out the horrified look on Iida’s face, along with the sympathy in Kirishima’s amused grin. Uraraka on, the other hand, was practically spitting from how hard she was laughing.

It took a moment to become clear that Pixiebob was prepared to embarrass him as long as she pleased, which was the only thing that allowed him to find the willpower to actually open his mouth. “U-uhm… t-these two heroes are P-Pixiebob and Mandalay, both members of the Wild Wild P-Pussycats. T-the Pussycats a-are a four person h-hero team that specializes in m-mountain rescue, a-and are the top r-ranked arborous hero t-team in the nation! Th-their uniquely combined Q-Quirks and skillsets along w-with their practiced t-teamwork h-have left th-them unmatched in m-mountainous rescue s-statistics! Th-there are a lot of pro h-heroes, but the Pussycats are s-serious professionals!”

Pixiebob laughed in his ear as his hasty introduction faded out, an adorable ‘meow meow meow!’ that was, somehow, more than a little unsettling. “Informed and complimentary! I like you, kitten!” She released her hold on him and stepped away, bopping him lightly on the nose with a finger as she passed around him.

“Midoriya is correct,” Mr. Aizawa droned. “The Pussycats will be assisting with your training, and you’re staying on their land, so say hello and be grateful.”
Izuku took the opportunity to slip out of the center of attention while the chorus of greetings was ringing out. He managed to squeeze in beside Uraraka and Asui, who regarded him with a teasing grin and a mellow croak respectively.

Mandalay gestured over the edge of the cliff they were stood upon, towards the forested valley and the squat mountain on the opposite side. No longer being accosted by a pro hero, Izuku realized there was a young boy standing in the shadow of the car, eyes shadowed by the brim of his cap and arms crossed over his chest. He almost voiced his curiosity, but Mandalay began to speak, cutting off his attempt before it could begin.

“The training camp you’ll be staying at is at the base of the mountain, over there.” She gestured to a spot in the distance, the sloped roof of a building just barely visible in the tree line. Uneasy murmurings broke out among the class, all wondering the same thing that reminded Izuku of why he’d been anxious in the first place. If the camp was down there, then why were they…?

Mandalay turned back to face them, her previously welcoming smile casting a long shadow. “It’s about nine thirty right now. I’d say, if you’re quick on your feet, you might make it to the camp by noon!”

“Uh… guys…” Sero eeked out, slowly backing away from the devilishly amused Mandalay…

“Maybe we should… run for the bus!” he turned on his heel in a spray of dust, sparking a panic that had nineteen teenagers stampeding and shouting numerous variations of ‘Save yourselves!’ and ‘We’re all gonna die!’ as they sprinted for the bus.

Izuku remained where he was, rooted to the ground like a gravestone as he numbly accepted his fate. With Pixiebob’s earth manipulating Quirk, they didn’t have any chance of escape. It was only a matter of time before-

-the cliff-side exploded in a shower of rushing, silt-fine earth as Pixiebob presumably activated her Quirk, creating a landslide that tore the solid ground from beneath Izuku’s feet. He shrieked and flailed in midair, joined by the chorus of his classmate’s screams as they were swept off the cliff and towards the forest floor below. Faintly, he could hear Mandalay shouting at them to inform them that they could use their Quirks. Streaking disks of plasma exploded from his hands on reflex once that information sunk in, slowing his descent only slightly. He briefly considered properly using his Quirk to try and soften the landing, only to realize it’d probably melt his shoes and socks to the soles of his feet.

So he plummeted with all the grace of a gangly teenager tossed off a cliff, the sky spinning out of his vision as he beheld the hard, merciless ground below. He crossed his arms over his face and squeezed his eyes shut, prepared to fire a white hot burst that would hopefully help him not crack his head open, only for a hard jerk of his collar to keep him from colliding with the ground. He hung from whatever had grabbed him, rotating as the fabric of his shirt twisted, and glanced up in confusion.

“Are you alright?” Shouji asked him mildly, one of his hands snagged on Izuku’s collar and keeping him suspended a good few feet above the ground. He darted his eyes around, finding that the rest of his classmates were all either okay or mostly okay but covered in dirt, and sagged in relief.

“Y-yeah, I’m fine. Th-thanks Shouji.” He received a soft nod in return, before he was gently lowered onto his feet.

“You’ve got three hours to make it to camp!” Mandalay called down to them, prompting numerous heads to turn in her direction. She leaned on the wood post fence at the edge of the cliff, looking incredibly pleased with herself. “All you’ve gotta do is make it through the Beast Forest, and you’ll
be eating lunch by noon!”

“B-Beast Forest?!” Kaminari cried out in disbelief, looking particularly rumpled by the trip down the cliff. “What the heck is this, a video game? What’s next, we’ve gotta collect a magic sword or something?!”

“Quit your damn whining, spark plug!” A sudden hush fell over the class, averted eyes and guilty expressions cropping up in the wake of Kacchan’s annoyed growl. Izuku could do nothing to clot the gaping wound inside his chest that spat blood at the sound of Kacchan’s voice, an ache so deep that he had no hope of mending it himself. As if he even deserved to, he thought with uncharacteristic heat. He knew he wasn’t supposed to blame himself for things outside of his control anymore, but… he couldn’t shake the iron stake in his back, the thing that twisted in his muscles and reminded him that if he’d been a better friend, Kacchan wouldn’t have ever been attacked in the first place.

He flinched when Kacchan stomped forward towards the edge of the forest, tossing a scowl over his shoulder when nobody made to follow him. “Well? What are you fuckin’ losers waiting for? You gonna sit here and cry all day, or are we goin’ to the damn camp?!” The furious flare of scar tissue around his right eye only intensified his scowl, the molted skin a deep pink that, if Izuku focused on, formed the faint smear of a hand print.

“That’s what I was planning,” Shinsou drawled, breaking the thick silence that had fallen over the clearing. “Dunno about anyone else, but letting you trail blaze while I dawdle along sounds like a pretty good strategy.”

Kacchan sneered at the gentle jabs, some of the tension fading from his hunched shoulders. “Lazy bastard. Keep up or I’ll fuckin’ dropkick your smartass to camp.” A shared sigh of relief went up amongst Izuku’s classmates, and though he could hardly forget the twisted growth of emotions ailing him, he could at least put it out of mind for the time being.

“So, what exactly is a ‘beast forest’?” Uraraka piped up, once it became clear that Kacchan wouldn’t be going thermonuclear. “I don’t think they’d make us fight actual animals… right??”

Sensing an opportunity for his wealth of hero knowledge to come in handy, Izuku opened his mouth to explain the particulars of Pixiebob’s Quirk including the ability for it to create earthen golems, only for a low, rumbling roar to echo out from the tree line behind him.

A quadrupedal, vaguely reptilian looking monstrosity that cleared well above fifteen feet in height lumbered out from between the trees, snapping off branches in its wake. It bore long, loping legs capped by thick claws, as well as jutting tusks from its elliptical snout. It bore what looked like thick armor plating, which covered everything on its head save for the mouth. It probably would have been more terrifying if Izuku didn’t know it was basically just a claymation monster, something that could easily be broken apart by the arsenal of powerful, destructive Quirks his class possessed.

It was only when Kouda began to cry out for the beast to calm itself and not hurt anyone that he realized not everyone knew it was just hardened dirt, his eyes widening when it lunged forward and swiped a massive paw at Kacchan. He managed to evade it, as Izuku knew he would, explosions bursting out of his hands in ferocious flashes of light as he blasted himself backwards, leaving the claw that had been swiping at him in crumbling shambles.

“Kouta’s Quirk didn’t work?!” Kaminari exclaimed in disbelief. “Oh man-Shinsou! Use your brainwashing on it or something!”

“It’s made of dirt, you dead battery,” Shinsou responded dryly, looking entirely unconcerned by the
now-injured beast loping towards them. “And it can’t talk besides. Did you want me to ask how its day is going, and wait for it to pen me a response? Try using your brain for once.”

“Hey!” Whatever rebuttal that Kaminari was preparing went unheard when Izuku activated his Quirk, plasma blossoming from his palms and obscuring his hands in arc light fury. He could hear the whine of Iida’s engines gearing up over his own crackling emissions, and spotted the glint of Todoroki’s glittering ice when the bolts of plasma leapt from his hands, projectiles that were more refined than the wild, sweeping lashes he’d been fighting with before. Katsuki wasn’t far behind, flinging himself forward like his own projectile with a furious shout.

The twin bolts collided with the monster’s earthen head in a glassy eruption, tearing devastating, red hot gouges through its face before they fizzled out, leaving its head a mangled mess of molten dirt and glassed earth. It groaned (probably just for show) as it was simultaneously frozen from foot to waist, legs shattering into icy chunks when Iida delivered a knife-edged strike with the heel of his foot. Over his head, Bakugou roared and excavated its chest cavity with blooming explosions, coating himself in a shower of dust and dirt as he soared straight through the opening he created.

The beast crumpled to the ground in his wake, shaking the ground with the impact before it lost form, collapsing into a mound of loose earth.

In the silence that followed, Izuku glanced down to make sure he hadn’t somehow injured himself with his Quirk, shaking off the fading sparks and sighing in relief when he was met with unblemished skin.

“Holy crap, you guys bodied that thing!” He glanced up at the sound of Kirishima’s swiftly-nearing exuberance, only to yelp when an arm slung over his shoulder and a set of knuckles gently dug into his scalp. “Totally manly display,” he lauded, the wolfish grin on his face gleaming with excitement and anticipation both.

“Save the hot air,” Kacchan muttered, dusting himself off as he stalked further into the woods, “you’re gonna need it.”

His statement was punctuated by a distant roar and the rumble of approaching footsteps, which soon escalated into a bellowing din as presumably more monsters formed from the earth. Izuku flagged a little when Kirishima’s arm left his shoulders, stomach roiling with the feeling that they were about to have a very long day making their way to camp.

“Hey, Yaoyorozu,” Shinsou piped up, his voice buttery smooth with telling mischief, “Since I don’t have a flashy Quirk like these guys, how’s about you make me some equipment so I can pull my own weight? Say… a grenade launcher?”

…A very, very long day, Izuku amended.

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Izuku dragged his dirt-caked sneakers through the leafy underbrush of the forest floor, his breathing coming in slow, ragged pants and every inch of his body covered in aches. His hands burned and throbbed, lines of fire snaking down his arms and encompassing everything from the wrist down. Apparently, he’d managed to find the limit of even his thinnest wire.

He glanced up wearily, momentarily dropping out of the weary chorus of his classmates’ moans and groans, and saw the orange sunlight that trickled through the forest’s canopy begin to broaden in the distance, trunks thinning in density. He squinted against the sunlight dappling over his face, and choked on a sudden, recurring surge of nausea. Hopefully they made it back before he puked everywhere—his stomach was already so empty, but that’d surely be the kick in the head that finally knocked him out.
"Hey," Iida panted out, staggering forward in a sputtering cloud of engine exhaust at the front of the pack, "the camp, I can see it!" His exuberance and the relief granted by his announcement garnered a few half-hearted cheers at least, even though Izuku felt like he could cry just from hearing it.

His eyes did water when they all trickled into a clearing surrounding a cluster of squat buildings with Mr. Aizawana waiting out front, along with Pixiebob, Mandalay, and the boy Izuku had seen earlier.

"Oh my goooooooooood," Ashido wailed in soul-crushing relief, echoing what Izuku was sure everyone was feeling, "did we actually make it?"

"Might be delusions from hunger," Shinsou muttered, swaying and shuffling his feet as he dragged the grenade launcher Yaoyorozu had made for him (after much expert wheedling) behind him.

Izuku could hear Kirishima’s stomach growling in agreement with that statement, and he winced in empathy when his friend let out a miserable whine.

"Are we dead yet?" Jirou rasped, head bowed in preemptive defeat, and Izuku could almost swear that it put a smile on Mr. Aizawana’s face.

"Not quite yet," he replied, the remnants of amusement clinging to his flat, calculating expression.

"I’m surprised you kids made it here as quick as you did," Pixiebob cut in before anyone could fully register Mr. Aizawana’s incredibly foreboding statement, bouncing forward with a gleeful grin on her face. “My golems are pretty tough, but you kids knocked them out of the park! Excellent job, all of you.” He gaze shifted suddenly, and Izuku blinked as it swept over him for a long moment. “Especially the four of you!”

She pointed at Todoroki and Iida with two fingers on one hand, the other leveled straight at Kachcan and her tail pointed at… him?! “You kittens are clearly experienced in a fight!” She licked her lips, eyes pinched in delight, and cleared the distance between them in a single agile leap. “Dibs on this litter! I’ll have them fighting fit in no time!”

Izuku squeaked and ducked away when she circled him, herding him closer towards Iida, Kacchan, and Todoroki and ruffling his hair before he could lean away in time. "Look at you, precious little kittens! I’ll turn you rough-and-tumble tomcats into ferocious felines before you know it!"

"Ma’am, please, shouldn’t we get inside-hey!" Iida covered his nose with a hand when she tweaked it, giggling more girlishly than was probably appropriate for a woman of her age.

"Quit it-don’t fuckin’ touch the hair!" Kacchan barked, his fingers twitching in annoyance as she mussed his already ruined shock of spiked locks.

"U-uhm, Ms. Pixiebob, c-can I p-please ask you something?" Izuku ventured desperately, half-hoping just to save himself from her scrutiny. She paused in the middle of closing in on a quietly horrified Todoroki, flouncing over to lean in way too close to Izuku’s face.

"So polite! What is it, kitten?" The fondness in her voice was unsettling; as much as he respected and admired Pixiebob for her work as a pro hero, he couldn’t help but feel like earning her attention was a bad idea.

"U-uhm.." his eyes darted around the clearing when he realized he didn’t even know what he was asking, flickering over the quietly chatting forms of Mandalay and Mr. Aizawana before they stopped on the young boy he’d been curious about, still quietly glaring at all of them. “I-I was just c-curious… wh-who’s that boy you guys h-have with you? Is he s-staying at the camp too?”
Mandalay perked up at the sound of his question, stepping past Mr. Aizawa and towards the boy, who crossed his arms and glared off in the other direction. “Oh, this is Kouta! He’s my cousin’s son, he’s just living with us for the time being.” She placed a paw on the top of his head, mussing his hat and earning an annoyed noise from him. “You should say hi to the class, Kouta! They’ll be around all week, after all.”

Slightly delirious and stuck on the notion that he could try and make a good first impression, Izuku approached the boy, Kouta, with his friendliest smile, half hoping his scar wouldn’t scare or gross him out. “H-hi, Kouta! M-my name is I-Izuku Midoriya! It’s r-really nice to meet y-you!” He extended a hand to the boy while internally debating whether it would be rude to lean down or not (kids didn’t like that, right?), meeting the boy’s grit-teeth glare with unwavering goodwill.

He’d only just begun to wonder if maybe Kouta couldn’t reach his hand comfortably after all when the boy suddenly reared back, snapping his fist forward to jab Izuku directly in the—“Hnnngk!” Pain exploded between his legs in a torturous white flare, his eyes glazing over with tears and both hands immediately cupping his injured pride as an inhuman sound of agony slipped from his throat.

The only reason he didn’t collapse into the dirt came in the form of Iida’s speedy intervention, his jaw dropped in appall. “Such cruelty, such viciousness! Midoriya, are you alright?!” Izuku could do nothing but whimper in response, well prepared to just lie down and die after that final cherry on top of his awful day.

“Screw off, you wanna-be heroes,” Kouta sneered, stomping straight past an equal parts shocked, apologetic, and reproachful Mandalay, “Don’t try to play the nice guy with me.” He disappeared around the corner of the building in a huff while Iida stared after him, gaping speechlessly.

Kacchan grunted, his eyebrows pinched together in irritation. “Someone needs to teach that brat some manners,” he bit out, arms crossed over his chest. Todoroki ‘hmm’ed behind him, earning a sharp look. “What? Got somethin’ to say, Cinnamint Toothpaste?”

“Nothing. It’s just interesting to hear that from you of all people,” Todoroki replied in monotone, earning a twitch of tightly knitted brows.

“Allright, alright,” Mr. Aizawa cut in, interrupting a potential scuffle between two of the most destructive students in class, “enough dawdling, we’ve wasted enough time as it is. All of you head to the bus around back and grab your things. Once they’re in your rooms, you can head back to eat dinner and bathe. Don’t take this leisure time lightly, because the real training begins tomorrow.”

A groan of resignation went up from the class at large, but everyone obediently shuffled off to retrieve their things. Izuku ended up being practically carried by Iida (and soon enough, Kirishima) before he assured them he was totally and completely fine, once the painful throbbing died down to a dull ache at least.

Everyone chatted half-heartedly as they unloaded their things from the bus, most of them too wiped out for any rambunctiousness.

“Hey, you guys,” Ashido piped up as she pulled down a hefty suitcase from the overhead, “does it smell weird in here to you?”

“Wasn’t me-ow, hey!” Kaminari whirled around to swipe his hand at Jirou’s zipping earphone jacks as they retreated from the jab at the back of his neck, scowling at her murmur of ‘Stop being gross already’.

Ashido stuck her tongue out at him in disgust. “I don’t mean you boys being nasty! I mean
something else. I’m not the only one, right?” She glanced around, receiving a few half-hearted shrugs in return.

“We’re all pretty beat,” Satou offered up in consolation, “maybe you’re just… smelling things? That’s probably a thing that happens, right?”

It kicked up a conversation about weird smells that Izuku only half-listened to, struggling up on his tiptoes to reach the handle of his suitcase. It was shoved in near the back, and every swipe of his hand just barely missed the plastic grip.

He yelped as he was forcefully bumped aside, another hand reaching up beside his to yank the suitcase down practically on top of his head. He fumbled to catch it before it brained him, sighing when he caught it. “Th-thanks—” he glanced over, eyes widening at the sight of Kacchan’s brooding glare. “T-thank you, Kacchan,” he quickly amended, making sure his gaze didn’t linger on scar tissue.

“You’re overdue for a fuckin’ growth spurt, Izuku,” he muttered, breaking eye contact in a streak of red irises. “I’m sick of watchin’ you flail around like that.”

Izuku let out a squeaking laugh, a little nervy but genuinely pleased that Kacchan was actually speaking to him. He carefully flipped the suitcase over his head to properly set it down. “Y-yeah, a-any day now! H-hopefully I don’t o-outgrow my costume t-too—” he glanced up from where he’d been making sure he wouldn’t squash his own foot, only to find Kacchan halfway off the bus. “…S-soon,” he finished lamely, the tentative flutter in his chest impaled through the wings and left to rot in the pit of his stomach.

Sullenly, he slung his backpack over his shoulders and rolled his suitcase behind him, waiting patiently for everyone in front of him to exit the bus once they were finished instead of trying to push his way through. He emerged into what looked like a lecture, with Iida rapidly slicing his hands through the air.

“-need to remind you how dangerous of a weapon that is?! You must dispose of it immediately!” Opposite him, Shinsou clutched his grenade launcher protectively, looking particularly intimidating with a sneer on his face and his hair flattened from sweat and grime.

“And where am I supposed to put it, exactly? If it’s so dangerous and irresponsible, I can’t exactly throw it in a bush and hope nobody stumbles on it,” the general studies transfer retorted, looking reluctant to actually part with it. “Besides, you act like we don’t share a classroom with Captain Explosion himself.”

“The difference,” Iida stressed extremely strongly, “is that Bakugou possesses an admirable amount of control and discipline regarding his Quirk. And I mean no disrespect when I say I would trust very few of you to run around with a dangerous weapon!”

“Maybe we could melt it with Mina’s acid?” Asui ribbited thoughtfully, only for Yaoyorozu’s slightly guilty expression to light up in alarm.

“Or maybe we should just bring it to Mr. Aizawa and ask him what to do with it,” she cut in hastily. “We shouldn’t take the risk of disposing with it ourselves.”

Shinsou rolled his eyes, and abruptly thrust the launcher in Yaoyorozu’s direction. “Fine, you take it to him. You’re the one that made it, after all.” He about-faced and headed off back towards the main buildings, hands shoved into his pockets.
Kirishima whistled a short note, stepping up to clap a hand on Izuku’s shoulder. He was proud of himself for not jumping out of his skin. “Boy, he really wanted to keep that thing, huh? Should we be… concerned by that?”

“Mr. A-Aizawa will probably handle it,” Izuku mumbled with a little less enthusiasm than he’d intended, earning a quick, concerned glance in his direction. He tugged his lips into a tired smile before Kirishima could ask after him, not in the mood to talk about it. “S-sorry, I’m j-just really tired. A-and hungry,” he tacked on, endeared when Kirishima just barely parted his lips in understanding.

“Oh man, me too,” he agreed easily, linking their arms together and heading back as the rest of their classmates began to trickle, considering their entertainment was over. “I feel like I could eat for a week straight. I hope the grub is good.”

Izuku hummed in agreement, practically dozing off on Kirishima’s shoulder as they walked. Really, it was just his hunger, the dirt caked on him, and his aches and pains that kept him awake enough to keep going. He felt like he could sleep until noon, but doubted Mr. Aizawa would allow any such luxury.

They loaded up all their baggage in the boy’s sleeping quarters, which was a lot roomier than Izuku had been expecting. He wouldn’t have put it past Mr. Aizawa to just stick them in a matchbox, though more out of practicality than cruelty. Regardless, it would be a perfectly fine room for him to pass out in after dark.

The comfortable silence he and Kirishima had fallen into was swept away as they entered the dining hall, trampled over by a wall of chatter and drowned out in a tidal wave of the heavenly, mouth-watering aroma of food. Izuku caught the tiny, breathless gasp that escaped Kirishima, and turned to find him starry-eyed and practically drooling.

Honestly, Izuku could hardly blame him. For once, he was ravenous, but he doubted his appetite could ever match Kirishima’s in intensity. He scanned the tables quickly to find an empty spot for them to sit, and brightened when he saw that Todoroki and Uraraka had a spot between them just big enough for two people. He tugged on Kirishima’s hand to lead him over and stop him from simply diving on top of the table and gorging himself, and raised a hand to wave when Uraraka glanced up to spot them.

Izuku just about melted into the seat beside her, mumbling a greeting as she placed a bowl of food and a pair of chopsticks in front of him. He began eating mechanically, humming in pleasure as his empty stomach was finally satiated. He emptied his first bowl before he even realized what he was eating, and quickly began heaping spicy noodles into the empty vessel for seconds. However, his tucking in was practically modest in comparison to Kirishima’s absolute massacre of any and all things edible, actual tears tracking down his face as he just about threw his food between his teeth.

Honestly, as far as Izuku was concerned, if the showers were as luxurious as the food, then he was more than prepared to deal with training in the morning.

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Izuku stood frozen in the middle of a pristine locker room, voice punctured and dragged into the depths of his chest as his male classmates chatted back and forth, and the light t-shirt and sleep shorts he’d brought along clutched in his white-knuckle grip as everyone else changed out of their grimy clothes. He stood frozen in indecision, the scars hidden under his shirt throbbing with phantom burns, the ghosting of hot irons across his flesh.

Of course the camp had a hot spring.

It was… it was fine, he assured himself falsely. It was all okay. He’d just… leave his shirt on, and if
anyone questioned it, he’d just dance around the issue. Fine, perfectly fine, it was all okay. He was away from everything, now. The past was over and done with. He was safe, and he had friends who would protect him. He wasn’t alone anymore. Living Nightmare was just a Quirk, and nothing more.

He ignored the itch that etched his torso into geometric quadrants and set his change of clothes in the locker, quickly shrugging out of everything that wasn’t his shirt and wrapping a clean towel around his waist. Months of changing in the same room as other people may have dulled his shyness a little, but being nude in the same room as anyone else was still well off the table.

He took a few slow, deep breaths as everyone began to file out of the locker room, sticking to the rear of the pack to avoid any awkward inquiries for as long as humanly possible. He did end up having to remove his shirt when actually scrubbing himself down in the bathing room outside of the onsen, but he managed to at least secure a secluded corner, and it wasn’t like anyone would be looking at one another while bathing anyway.

Once he was sure he had thoroughly rinsed the suds from his skin and out of his hair, he slipped his uniform shirt back over his head, the fabric sticking to him in wet patches. He glanced down discreetly, breathing a sigh of relief when he found that, even when wet, the shirt wasn’t exposing his scars. He stood up from the stool he’d been perched on and carefully set aside the shampoo and scrub brush he’d been using, hoping to just slip outside and into the water before anyone-

“Hey, Midoriya!” Kirishima, one of the last few still lingering near the door, glanced back at him with a concerned and slightly confused expression. “Whyyyyy d’you still have your shirt on, bro?” He dragged the vowel out long enough for Izuku’s ears to burn in blood flushed shame.

“I-I just don’t f-feel comfortable t-taking it off,” he mumbled, wrapping both arms around his torso and averting his eyes from Kirishima’s softening gaze.

“Aww, bro…” Kirishima’s tone dripped with thick strands of syrup-thick sympathy, wrapping his arms around Izuku and squeezing him in a tight hug. “You’ve got no reason to feel ashamed, bro! You’re totally handsome, and you don’t have to worry about being super jacked or anything!”

Izuku’s blush staked its claim on every centimeter of skin above his collarbone, burning a bright, obvious red. K… Kirishima thought he was handsome?! “N-no, it’s not th-that! I… I’d j-just really rather k-keep it on, o-okay? N-not because I’m a-ashamed or anything! I…j-just because.” His lie-by-omission brought a curdling wrongness to a boil in his stomach, urging him to reveal the truth of the issue to Kirishima.

But the moment passed, his friend offering a soft (if slightly concerned) smile and giving him one last squeeze before parting. “Alright, if it makes you more comfortable. Not used to hot springs?” He headed for the exit to the onsen proper, and Izuku followed at his heels.

“A-ah, not really,” he admitted truthfully. “T-this is my first time. I-I’m not exactly a… p-public nudity, k-kind of person.” He earned a bright laugh from Kirishima, and the blush on his face was more pleased than anything.

“Yeah, I guess I that makes a lot of sense. You were pretty skittish at the beginning of the year about changing together, too.” Kirishima slid open the door leading to the onsen, exposing the (admittedly beautiful) natural hot spring that awaited them. The stone underfoot was slick with condensation, the heated water layering cloudy steam over the entire sectioned off spring. The massive wooden wall that boxed them in was slightly odd, but Izuku didn’t pay it much mind; rather, he noticed that he and Kirishima were the last to arrive, and only a few other people hadn’t actually begun to soak yet.

They slipped into the water without much trouble, though Izuku’s hiss as he made contact with the
steaming water did turn a few looks his way. A few eyebrows raised at the sight of him still wearing a shirt, but thankfully nobody said anything.

“Finally joinin’ the party?” Sero asked with a cheesy grin, snickering when Kirishima just groaned in response. “Yeah, I hear ya. Pretty sure we’re all headed to an early grave if training is even worse than the forest!”

“Aizawa’s probably gonna wake us up at four thirty like a sadist,” Kirishima predicted, and Izuku found himself privately agreeing. He knew Mr. Aizawa was secretly kind under his prickly exterior, but the man certainly pulled no punches when it came to pushing them.

At least the water was starting to do its job, the previously uncomfortable heat beginning to envelop him in a warm, encompassing embrace. Izuku hummed low in his chest and settled at the edge so that he could sit, eyes half lidded.

“Oi, purple mop head.” Kacchan’s rough timbre carried over the light chatter hanging around the spring, pulling Shinsou’s attention away from the stars he’d been deeply contemplating. He raised one thick eyebrow in Kacchan’s direction. “What happened to your fuckin’ grenade launcher? Did the hobo toss it?”

“Nnnnah,” he sighed out, looking too relaxed to be snarky. “I’m in talks with him about having it, or a similar armament, added to my hero kit. I doubt I’ll convince him, but hey, at least he’s humoring me for the moment.”

Kacchan snorted, his lips twitching at the corner. “Still can’t believe Ponytail bought your bullshit. Should’a been smart enough to realize givin’ you anything more dangerous than a toothpick is bad news.”

Shinsou shrugged lightly, pulling a sardonic grin. “What can I say? Guess I’m just a real smooth talker.” Kacchan rolled his eyes and leaned back against the rock he was sunbathing (moonbathing?) on.

“So, you guys…” Kaminari began in a conspiratorial stage-whisper, a smirk playing at his lips. “How likely do you think it is that that wall has a hole in it wide enough to see through?”

A few groans and titters followed his comment, and he laughed when Ojirou used the end of his tail to flick water at him. “Don’t be a pervert, man.”

“Kaminari!” Iida’s disapproval was practically a physical force, his narrowed eyes boring straight into Kaminari. “I should hope you aren’t planning to engage in any lurid or disrespectful behavior!”

“Course not, class prez,” Kaminari soothed, his grin a touch more nervous. “I wouldn’t dream of doing anything like that. I was just curious.”

Iida glared him down for a moment longer before he released the squirming Kaminari from the weight of his crushing gaze. “See to it that you continue to behave with proper conduct.”

The sound of lapping water slowly approached Izuku’s sleepy little corner of the spring, and he cracked open an eye only to find Kirishima slowly wading towards him. For a single, infinite moment, every knot of tension, every wrinkle of stress, every overwhelmed rip in the universe seemed to smooth over. It was through some perfect combination, he imagined: the platinum embrace of moonlight, the loosening heat of the water, the slow bleed of tension and pain. They all culminated in that moment, and Izuku could do nothing but stare.

Slowly, cherishingly, he drank in the sight of fiery red hair softened and straightened by the weight
of water, darker at the roots and flowing outward in a crimson curtain. He nearly simpered at the sight of an earnest grin, spreading soft, petal pink lips and exposing perfect mirror shard teeth, the elements of ferocity softened and smoothed and folded into something sweet enough to make his chest ache. Without question, he lost himself in Kirishima’s eyes, oxidized iron trapped in amber, every shade of the sunset blended together in an all-encompassing warmth that he could simply sink into for the rest of his life.

And, of course, it was all accompanied by a body composed of powerful, sculpted muscles and kind, handsome features so often turned Izuku’s way that he was starting to worry he’d develop heart palpitations. He could only be grateful at the heat of the spring had already brought heat to his face, because otherwise it’d be painfully obviously that he was…

…It would become completely, painfully, unbelievably obvious that the reason Izuku was blushing at the sight of Kirishima being naked in a hot spring, as well as nearly every other time the boy got close enough to him, was that he had a crush on him.

“Yo!” Kirishima greeted him, as if he wasn’t currently having the most mind-destroying revelation of his young life. “Enjoying the hot spring, Midoriya?”

Izuku gaped at him, open mouthed, and used every ounce of strength he possessed to not say anything blatantly incriminating. “…Y-yeah. I, uhm… it-it’s just r-really hot, is a-all. I th-think I need to s-step out for a bit.” Well, that wasn’t technically a lie, at least; Izuku felt so overheated that he genuinely feared the possibility that he’d just faint dead away and drown.

“Oh, alright. You want me to come with you-“

“N-no, that’s fine, p-please stay a-and enjoy the sp-spring!” Izuku cut in hastily, scrambling to think of his next step, he needed an excuse, he needed advice-he needed a coffin so he could just bury himself already and get it all over with. “A-actually, I needed to… t-talk to Todoroki and T-Tokoyami about so-something! P-please excuse m-me!”

He guiltily abandoned a bewildered Kirishima in a hurried rush through the water, sloshing through it as quickly as he could without splashing everywhere. He zeroed in on Todoroki and Tokoyami, who were both near-ish to each other and both appeared completely relaxed. He’d have to feel bad about ruining that later.

“T-Todoroki, Tokoyami, I n-need you g-guys to help me with so-something. In p-private,” he tacked on, earning a small confused hum and a cracked open eye respectively. “P-please, it’s important,” he practically begged, eyes wet with desperation.

They both exchanged a look that he couldn’t decipher, before Tokoyami nodded. “If you desire assistance, I am glad to offer it.”

Sagging in relief, Izuku hauled himself over the edge of the hot spring, dripping water everywhere as he clung to the towel plastered to his lower half with one hand. He led his friends out of the onsen as quickly as he could manage without slipping, ducking into the bathing room and groaning in despair once he was sure they were alone and out of earshot of anyone else.

“What exactly did you need help with?” Todoroki questioned, mild confusion marring his serenely blank expression.

Izuku sniffled, fat tears rolling down his cheeks as his emotional dam (more like a paper cup holding back a river) burst open, turning Todoroki’s mild confusion into moderate alarm. “I….” his voice wavered and wobbled, and he raised a hand to try and indicate that he was fine and trying to collect
himself, “I th-think I like Kirishima,” he whispered, the entire situation cementing itself in reality once he’d spoken the words out loud.

Tokoyami regarded him coolly, not offering any immediate response, while Todoroki’s confusion returned with a vengeance. “…Yes?” He voiced hesitantly, clearly unsure of why he was there or what was going on. “I thought that had been well established by now. You two appear to be very close.”

Izuku bit his lip, unable to properly wring his hands when he was holding his towel up. “I-I mean l-like as in… I w-want to d-date him,” he admitted weakly, his tears already stemming but his humiliation gladly filling the space left behind.

Todoroki continued staring at him, the silence between them hanging in the air. “…Were you not already?”

Izuku groaned and sank down onto a stool in defeat as Tokoyami sighed, massaging his forehead with a hand. “Midoriya,” he spoke up suddenly, drawing Izuku’s attention away from his own intentions to throw himself off the top of the mountain, “I cannot say I am well versed in matters of the heart, but it is clear to me that both you and Kirishima care for each other deeply. I would not suggest hastening towards a relationship, considering you have only just realized your feelings run deeper than once thought, but I do advise you keep in mind that admitting your affections when you are ready is the most obvious course of action.”

“But how am I s-supposed to tell him?” Izuku ran his hands through his hair in frustration, the wet locks hanging limply over his fingers. “I-it’s not that easy,” he mumbled at his knees, which knocked together with nerves.

“Well…” Todoroki spoke up again, his words flat but containing undercurrents of both hesitation and sincerity, “I doubt Kirishima would react poorly to a confession, no matter what his answer is. If that’s what you’re worried about, then I don’t think you should be.”

Tokoyami nodded in sage agreement. “Todoroki is right. You simply have to speak honestly, and from the heart. Everything will fall into place from there.”

Tokoyami’s smooth, unwavering confidence and Todoroki’s sincere, if slightly awkward attempts to help did do their share to take the edge off of Izuku’s jittery nerves, and he sighed out a long breath. “…T-thanks, you guys. I-I don’t know… wh-when I could tell him, b-but… I’ll w-wait until I’m r-ready, and be h-honest about it.”

Tokoyami nodded firmly, looking pleased. “Good to hear. Now, shall we return to the spring before we are required to turn in for the night?”

“Y-yeah, sure. S-sorry for dragging you g-guys away out of n-nowhere like that,” Izuku apologized, only to receive assurances that it was no trouble. He sighed and stood up from the stool, keeping a careful hold on his towel as he headed back to the spring. Right, back to the spring, where he could sink into the hot water and let it ease all his worries and pains away before he went to sleep. …Back to the spring, where an unfairly pretty Kirishima was probably waiting for him, and would be curious as to where he had gone.

Izuku whined in dismay. Forget a long day in the woods; he had a feeling that this training camp would be the longest week of his life.
In the dead of night, in the moments between the hour of the wolf and the witching hours, Ochako Uraraka was suddenly awoken by an odd sound. Months of living on her own had ingrained in her a healthy paranoia of strange noises in the middle of the night, and had thus made her into a much lighter sleeper than she used to be.

She unlatched her limbs from the extra pillow she’d been clutching in her sleep, sitting up and squinting through heavy lids to try and find the source of the noise. Dim as the room was, she had to rely on the sparse moonlight coming in through the window, which painted geometric streaks across sleeping faces as it was bisected by wooden slats.

She hummed in the back of her throat when the source didn’t make itself immediately obvious, prepared to simply lie back down and sleep, when she heard it again. Uraraka strained her hearing, picking up on the small, choked utterance. It sounded like it had come from… out in the hall?

Worry began to creep in along her sleep-addled curiosity, bringing enough wakefulness to the forefront that she could bring herself to slip out from underneath her warm blanket and stand up from her bedroll on silent feet.

Ochako tiptoed across the room and slid open the door as quietly as she could, glancing back over her shoulder to make sure nobody else had been disturbed by her impromptu midnight investigations. Satisfied she hadn’t woken anyone up, she slipped out into the hallway, where the small noises she’d picked up on immediately became more apparent.

A stifled sob pulled her eyes down the hallway, towards what appeared to be a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, suspended against the wall and filled out by some invisible force within them. “Hagakure?” She whispered, only to receive a hitched, startled breath in return. Maybe she’d been too quiet.

“Hagakure, what’s wrong?” She voiced again, concern seeping into her words. She gingerly approached, settling on her knees a few feet away from her classmate.

“I…” Hagakure trailed off for a moment, but just that single syllable steeped in upset was enough to send a pang through Ochako’s heart. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake anyone up,” she continued hoarsely, voice thick with tears that Ochako was unable to discern in the dark.

“Don’t worry about that,” she soothed, even as her eyelids fought to obey the call of gravity. She did her best to make eye contact, unwilling to just leave her friend crying in the dark. “Did you… want to talk about what’s wrong? I won’t force it if you don’t want. We could just sit here for a bit.” Ochako already had an inkling as to what the issue might be, but it was best not to assume.

For a moment, a sniffle was the only answer, before a soft, hesitant voice eased out of thin air. “…I can’t stop thinking about it,” she whispered. “If… if I’d just invited him instead of being petty, maybe this never would have happened.”

Uncertainty crystallized into guilt, the reason for Hagakure’s distress becoming all too clear. “You can’t blame yourself for what happened to Bakugou. Any one of us could have invited him—”

“No,” Hagakure interrupted, her tone of voice stricken. Ochako could imagine her shaking her head in vehement denial. “It was my idea, I was the one inviting everyone.”

“That doesn’t mean he was your responsibility,” Ochako stated firmly, careful not to raise her voice and instigate an argument. She softened, biting her lip as her own remorse bubbled up to the surface.
“...If it’s your fault, then it’s my fault too. All of our faults. But it isn’t. None of us knew it would happen; and even if we had invited him, we can’t be sure it wouldn’t have just happened the next time he was alone. We couldn’t have known,” she repeated, trying to convince herself just as much as Hagakure.

Another sniffle answered her, and for a moment she thought she saw the glint of wiped away tears. “…I tried to talk to him, on the first day back. I wanted to-ask how he was, or apologize, or something. He didn’t even look at me.” Privately, she wondered if Bakugou had just not seen her, but figured that saying such a thing out loud would hardly help with the current situation.

“I don’t think Bakugou is the kind of person that handles direct confrontations very well,” she worded much more sensitively. “Or apologies, for that matter.” Ochako drummed the pads of her fingers against her knee, trying to think through the fog of sleep. “Maybe when camp is over, we could get together as a class and do something for him? Something he can’t just refuse or walk out of. A present, maybe.”

“Yeah.” Hagakure’s sleeves moved slightly, though Ochako was unable to tell exactly what she was doing. “That might be a good idea. Thanks, Uraraka.” Her voice was still rough, but her upset wasn’t nearly as prevalent.

She smiled softly, hoping it was visible in the dim hallway. “It’s no problem. But we should really get back to bed; Mr. Aizawa’s probably gonna torment us as early in the morning as he can get away with.” Ochako yawned and wobbled to her feet once the rustle of Hagakure’s clothing confirmed that she had done the same, turning to quietly slide open the door to their sleeping quarters. Though, even as quiet as she was being, it nearly drowned out the murmur that left Hagakure’s invisible lips.

“I still feel guilty.”

At first, she wasn’t sure what she could say, if there even was a correct response. It was all so twisted up and confusing, a dozen different emotions tangled in a frustrating knot. It was difficult for her to reconcile the bully that had irreparably harmed her friend with the one that yelled encouragements and treated her with respect, as an equal opponent. She wasn’t blind to how he had changed, either; for better or worse, Bakugou had withdrawn, his insults dulled and culled and his outbursts reduced to zero. After the USJ, he’d stayed with Izuku longer than anyone, and took every insult and accusation that came his way without retaliation, almost resigned to them.

Ochako wasn’t quite sure how she felt about Katsuki Bakugou… but she was sure of how someone very important to her felt about him. She couldn’t even pretend to ignore the hopeful shine in Izuku’s eyes when Bakugou was around him. The memory of his almost obsessive need to make things right between them still felt fresh, juxtaposed as it was against her own bitter uncertainty at the time. Ochako could blame Bakugou for mistakes he had made in the past, but she wouldn’t begrudge his stumbling attempts to make up for them. When she saw his face, molten by scar tissue and set with a slumbering hatred turned entirely inward, it wasn’t satisfaction that welled up with in her. No, she only felt…

“Yeah,” Ochako whispered, before they stepped into the room. “me too.”

--

Izuku Midoriya’s jaw split apart in a yawn that allowed the exhaustion clogging his head to leak out into his ears. Mr. Aizawa had woken them up at 4:45 sharp, and even in the forty-five minutes he’d been given to wake up, get dressed, and eat, Izuku still hadn’t managed to shake off the last vestiges of sleep. It clung to him, filmy and sticky, dulling every sense but his vision, which was stinging from the dawn light breaking over the mountain.

At least he wasn’t the only one that was tired; nearly everyone in the class looked about dead on their
feet, save for maybe Tokoyami and Shouji, who remained as stoic and inscrutable as ever. He almost envied that ability, well aware that his lack of energy was apparent on his face.

He’d been lying awake much longer than he should have, once they’d all left the hot spring and dried off. Uncomfortable tatami mats and bedrolls were one thing, but the endless, cycling thoughts orbiting each other in his head had made sleep practically impossible. Overall, the chaos that regularly consumed his life at U.A. seemed have begun lessening, but that hardly erased the worries that still burdened him.

He was nervous about what Mr. Aizawa’s training would entail, let alone the supplementary lessons he’d be taking for failing the final exam. He was uncertain about his ability to earn a provisional license, as well how he’d actually go about strengthening his Quirk overall. He was worried about All Might, about how recklessly his normally considerate and empathetic teacher had treated them during the exam. More than ever, he was worried about Kacchan, aching with the need to make things right, to help him, to ease him past the suffering they’d both dwelled in for far too long.

And, of course, the sudden realization about Kirishima hadn’t exactly been easy to ignore. Izuku knew he shouldn’t dwell on it—the timing was poor, he needed to be ready for that kind of emotional impact, needed to figure himself out first-

“Morning everyone,” Mr. Aizawa greeted calmly, easing Izuku out of his half-asleep contemplations and drawing a collective groan from the class. “Welcome to your first day of training. Get all your whining out of the way now, we won’t have time for it later.” He paused for a moment, and when no grumblings were forthcoming, nodded slightly. “Good. The next six days will be spent on strength training, in an effort to exponentially increase the output, duration, and effectiveness of your Quirks. Our aim is to prepare you all to acquire your Provisional Licenses, so as to gain more practical experience in the realities of hero work.”

Mr. Aizawa dug into his pocket, retrieving a familiar looking baseball that he tossed at a bleary eyed Kacchan. “Throw this for me with your Quirk again, will you?”

Kacchan blinked down at the ball half a second before Izuku realized what was happening. Mr. Aizawa wanted to provide an example of their growth, right? That made sense. It was probably the best way to go about it too, a simple and immediate means of immediately marking off the improvement that had taken place since their first day. He wondered if Mr. Aizawa had thought of that just for their class or if it was something he’d done before, he was more convinced of the former considering the summer training camp as a whole seemed fairly unorthodox in comparison to their schooling to begin with-

A round, dense object suddenly whizzed at Izuku’s head, and he broke from his thoughts with a yelp of shock as he fumbled to catch it. Rather than slapping it with flailing hands and probably smacking it into his own forehead, as he might have done a few months ago, he managed to actually catch the ball that had been thrown at him. He glanced down at the testing baseball, and turned a bewildered look up at a scowling Kacchan.

“How’s about you make him do it? Doesn’t seem too fair that he got to skip out, right?” The smoldering caverns boring into Izuku were certainly not lacking in any of the intensity he’d come to expect from Kacchan, but rather than aggression or annoyance lurking under molten depths, he looked almost… curious.

Mr. Aizawa sighed through his nose, but rather than admonishing Kacchan for his brash behavior, he instead flicked a lazy hand Izuku’s way. “Fine. You’re up, Midoriya. If you damage the ball with your Quirk, you can expect your lessons with me tonight to last a few more hours.”
He blanched, stomach dropping at the thought of Mr. Aizawa keeping him until the middle of the night (maybe even until sunrise), and stumbled forward with the ball in hand. He glanced back over his shoulder, finding a preciously small sample of encouraging smiles cropping up from the field of exhausted students, and flinched at the impatient look on Mr. Aizawa’s face.

Izuku bit his lip and glanced down at the suddenly fragile-looking baseball, turning it over in his hand as he turned the issue over in his head. Obviously, he wouldn’t be able to use his Quirk on it directly, considering it would either explode into fiber dust and black fumes, or catch on fire and melt into slag. So he’d just have to use it… indirectly, then. Both forms of his direct output created explosive force, and his thinnest wire was the one he had the most fine-tuned control over, but he doubted Mr. Aizawa was looking for him to provide anything less than maximum force. So he’d have to use multiple wires, but he’d only have one shot, and he’d have to adjust his angle, distance, and timing to both avoid vaporizing the ball as well as propelling it in an arc with sufficient force.

With gears clicking rapidly beneath his skull, Izuku turned to meet Mr. Aizawa’s gaze. “C-could I take a test t-throw, sir?” He smiled nervously, the corner of his mouth twitching, and somehow he must’ve managed to convey enough confidence, or… whatever it was that more capable people possessed, for Mr. Aizawa to nod in response.

He gently tossed the ball up once, just getting a feel for the weight, and picked a direction to throw it in. Opposite from everyone was probably his best bet, even though that was the shortest end of the clearing. Though, he figured a basic pitch with his level of physical strength wouldn’t go too far. Making a mental note to do more upper body exercises, Izuku wound up, mentally mapped out his trajectory, and pitched the ball at a 63 degree angle. It whistled through the air in a sharp arch, tumbling end over end as it began succumbing to gravity, and Izuku carefully tracked it while committing the peak height of his throw to memory.

He jogged after the ball, scooping it up off the ground and hurrying back to his starting position. He watched Mr. Aizawa pointedly clear the distance off his phone, before Izuku took a deep breath. He reached deep within himself, the imagined projection of fingertips removed from his thinnest wire to instead grasp the entire bundle that ran through his arm, up from his chest. Idly, he wondered if he’d ever be able to use both levels of his power simultaneously. Probably just wishful thinking.

Izuku grasped a handful of wires, and Living Nightmare came to life within him, reconstituted from oily bones as if waking from a slumbering death. It felt eager, jumping between his nerves in burning hot anticipation that itched to puncture through his very skin and achieve escape velocity. Faint curls of fumes rose from his knuckles, and Izuku held tight to the cutting wires as he reared back, and flung the ball.

It twirled through the air, rotating from his poor technique, but that was a negligible flaw in his execution. Izuku flung his hand back a second time, wires thrumming and attempting to twist together as he restrained them, latent power simmering in his bones as he waited for the exact moment to strike, calculating the minimum safe distance to avoid turning the ball into smoldering ash-

Izuku thrust his hand through the air with all the subtlety of a spike capped battering ram, the surge of Living Nightmare’s power flashing through his white-hot bones and ejecting from his fingertips in a silent shriek. In a split second, the air just a few careful centimeters behind and below the ball violently expanded in a quasar of glass-boiled particles, the outward force propelling the baseball with an ear piercing whistle. It seemingly vanished without a trace, departure marked by the delayed release of black fumes from Izuku’s arm, venting through his pores in swirling clouds.

He gasped as his legs suddenly turned to jelly underneath him, struggling to stand on knocking knees.
while clutching at the phantom burns underneath the skin of his arm. He firmly massaged the skin of his arm, thankful that the backlash was so mild.

“That, class,” Mr. Aizawa began with the sort of inflection that suggested he was unveiling something of great importance, “is the result of technical training.” He held up his phone, drawing gasps and whispers of astonishment, and Izuku stared at the flashing 2400m uncomprehendingly. “Three months ago, Midoriya would have exploded that ball in his hand. In one week, if your training goes as planned, he’ll blow this distance out of the water.”

Mr. Aizawa slid his phone away, and the shadow cast by his gaze eclipsed the summer heat and sent a cold chill down Izuku’s spine. “Make no mistake; this training camp will be the worst hell you’ve ever experienced. We’ll rip your Quirks apart until they grow back stronger than before. You will be worked, mind, body, and soul, until you’re longing for your previous training.” Mr. Aizawa grinned, square teeth sectioned off in an unsettling crescent. “So, all of you make sure to stay alive until the end of this, okay?”

All the rampant nerves and twitchy energy in Izuku’s veins suddenly died cold, lonely deaths, and his twisting stomach finally made impact in the glacial abyss of fear lurking below it. He could almost taste the dread and unease coming off his classmates, Mr. Aizawa’s warning stubbornly haunting the air above their heads.

He… he should be optimistic, right? Even if the training would be difficult, it was important! The benefits would be well worth it. And… maybe it wouldn’t even be so bad! --

“Come on kitten, you call that a swipe?! Put your back into it!” Pixiebob’s admonishment crashed against the top of Izuku’s bowed head, louder even than the sound of his overheating heart and quick, wheezing breaths. The earth underfoot rumbled, nearly knocking him off his numb, static infested legs. He couldn’t see anymore, but he had become intimately familiar with the vibration signaling the formation of one of Pixiebob’s earthen constructs.

Izuku blinked rapidly in an effort to clear away the steel insects swarming on the surface of his eyeballs, his vision returning in sputters of blurry color. Trembling, he raised his left arm as if on puppet strings, his fingers limp and his joints loose. He felt like his muscles were burning away, held over an open flame until they shriveled and curled and smoked. The air around him was thick with fumes, and he could only cling to the small mercy that they didn’t seem to inhibit his breathing.

He blinked hard, practically feeling the electric pop of his optical neurons coming back online, and stared, unfocused, at the solid block of hardened earth that Pixiebob had formed in front of him. “Y-yes ma’am,” he answered much too late, the thick lethargy possessing his tongue making him slur his words. He staggered towards the block, swinging his arm forward and gently resting his knuckles against the cube. He swiped for his familiar bundle of wires, which were surely frayed and shedding layers in his grasp, and gave them a weak tug.

A strangled noise escaped his throat as Living Nightmare’s power discharged for the nth time, Izuku having long lost count of the number of times he’d used his Quirk. It scraped agonizingly through the burnt out hollow of his forearm, exiting through his knuckles and infesting every atom of the block in front of him with overwhelming orders to self-destruct. It crumbled apart into dust so fine that it choked the air, mingling with the delayed burst of fumes ejecting from his skin in bursts, black rings trailing up his arm until they reached just below his shoulder.

Izuku’s bleary eyes widened as his stomach heaved, lips pursing reflexively as bile roiled in his gut. He pivoted to face the bucket he’d been given earlier that morning, crashing onto his knees and emptying his breakfast into the metal container. He choked and gagged miserably as the contents of
his stomach were violently expelled, and his tense posture went even stiffer when a hand rested on his hair.

“Just let it all out, kitten,” Pixiebob cooed in a more soothing tone of voice than Izuku had imagined her capable of, and he relaxed minutely as he realized she was just holding his hair out of his face. He shuddered and spat into the depths of the bucket, coughing to clear his throat of burning gunk once his gastrointestinal system had calmed down.

“Th-thank you,” he rasped, glancing up only to have Pixiebob shove a chilled water bottle in his face. He accepted it gingerly, fingers trembling as he fumbled with the cap before managing to take a drink and swish the foul taste out of his mouth.

He closed his eyes reflexively when Pixiebob ruffled his sweat-drenched hair, dislodging it from where it had been plastered against his head. “It’s no trouble! Not like we’re trying to kill you kids, after all.” She beamed down at him, the corners of her lips curving with mischief. “Even if it feels like it.”

He nodded gratefully regardless, too busy guzzling water to actually form words. Behind him, he could feel the groaning earth producing more targets for him; a dozen smaller cubes, about the size of an average cardboard box, held up in a straight line by earthen posts.

“Time to swap over!” Pixiebob instructed him, and Izuku obediently made the mental adjustments required to access his thinnest wire. It brought an immediate wash of relief, slightly dulling the drawbacks of his overuse.

“So,” Pixiebob continued unexpectedly, once Izuku had finished capping his water bottle and remembering how to stand on two legs, “have you figured out why I’m training you the way I am?” She leaned over an unburdened pillar of earth, paws holding up the sly smile on her face as her tail swept back and forth.

“U-uhm.” Izuku glanced carefully between the targets and his instructor, unsure of which he was supposed to devote the most of his brain power to. When the end of Pixiebob’s tail flicked in the direction of the targets, he resigned himself to training and answering questions at the same time.

“W-well, you’re t-trying to help me i-increase the upper l-limits of my Quirk, right?” He conjured forth a writhing handful of plasma, Living Nightmare’s power diluted and purified from cruel and overwhelming deconstruction into raw energy. He channeled it into a single projectile rather than a continuous output, half because he figured the purpose of the multiple targets was to train him in increasing target penetration, as well as because he was kinda afraid he might pass out if he pushed himself too hard.

Pixiebob ‘tsk tsk’d, though the smile never left her face. “Sure, that’s the gist of it, but it’s deeper than that! Can you think of why you’re practicing on these cubes, instead of, say… fighting more of my earth monsters?”

Izuku considered the question as he flung forth a plasmatic projectile, actually putting his arm through the motions of throwing. It came out a little smoother than the ‘automatic’ projectiles, but didn’t move quite as quickly. He’d have to note that down later, but for the moment he clutched his weakly spasming hand as the projectile reduced the first three targets to molten sludge, which dripped down the posts they were set on and pooled in the containing rings that Pixiebob quickly erected at the bottom. The fourth was hollowed out by a deep, melting crater as his plasma cooled, not quite piercing through the other side.

While he waited for the targets to be repaired, Izuku offered forth the answer he’d clumsily put
together. “B-because it would b-be more inefficient?” Izuku wiped a line of sweat from his forehead, the morning sun having long since risen high enough in the sky to bake him to a crisp. “I-it would co-consume more stamina that i-isn’t strictly b-being used to t-train my Quirk, so I w-wouldn’t make as much progress?”

“Hmm. Getting close!” Pixiebob offered him another of her seemingly infinite water bottles, and he sipped from it carefully. Faintly, he could hear the sounds of Tiger ‘encouraging’ some of the students from class 1-B. It was accompanied by… crying?? “In your case, the most important thing to train you in is endurance! You’ve got a powerful Quirk already kitten, so increasing the upper limit isn’t as important as improving its overall efficiency.”

Pixiebob slinked over to ruffle his hair with an oversized paw again, and he figured that meant his training would be postponed for a moment. “There’s two things that every hero needs,” she began with more enthusiasm than he could possibly hope to match at the moment, “wits, and toughness! This year’s litter has already proven themselves a clever bunch, which is why we’re focusing on toughness! But toughness isn’t just about hitting hard, y’know.”

With an idle flick of her wrist, the four damaged targets sunk into the ground, only to be replaced a few moments later by fresh ones. “It’s also about being able to dish out the damage as long as you need to! If, for example, you threw a big punch but broke every bone in your arm from the impact, that wouldn’t be too useful, would it?”

“P-probably not,” Izuku agreed between sips, intent on immersing himself in the life giving relief of cold water as long as Pixiebob would let him. “S-so you’re t-training me to endure the b-backlash of my Quirk?”

Pixiebob hummed in consideration and tilted her head back and forth. “Essentially, but it’s more nuanced than that. Every Quirk has some sort of drawback, and generally more powerful Quirks have more powerful drawbacks. Pro heroes especially deal with a lot more drawbacks than the general population. TV might have convinced you kids that all you gotta do is suck it up and soldier on,” Pixiebob puffed out her cheeks and flexed her arms in a mock strongman pose, “but it’s not that easy. Building up a tolerance is important, of course, but understanding your hard limits is even more important. Right now, the goal for you is to build up to your maximum natural limit, so that you can operate safely as a hero. Does that make sense?”

Izuku’s arm went slack as his concentration ebbed, struck by Pixiebob’s words. He’d known, of course, that their field trip was more than just a glorified boot camp; it was important, and was meant to help them stay safe and advance their goals. He just… it hadn’t really sunk in, how much thought had been put into making sure they could work towards being their best selves.

“Y-yes ma’am,” he stuttered out, bowing his head gratefully, “i-it does. Th-thank you for your c-consideration—” he yelped as his gratitude was interrupted by a light bop on the head, Pixiebob snickering at the bewildered look on his face as she retracted her paw.

“If you wanna give your thanks, kitten, then work as hard as you can! Show a little ‘plus ultra’ spirit for us, okay?” She looped around the other side of him, off towards where most of his classmates were training. “I need to go make sure nobody’s tumbled off the mountain. When I get back, I expect you to be able to hit five targets with one shot, okay?” She winked at him as she departed, tail swishing through the air.

“Y-yes m-ma’am!” Izuku snapped his arm back up to begin channeling his Quirk, feeling reinvigorated by Pixiebob’s (pep talk? Explanation?) encouraging words. Maybe, by the end of the week, he’d be able to hit all twelve targets. Maybe even without losing his lunch in the process.
“I would ask that you do not make me repeat myself again, Tomura. Your Vanguard Action Squad will retrieve the target, and if you prove you cannot be trusted to behave, I will bar you from what follows. Am I understood?”

The slight, static crackle of the monitor’s cheap speakers served to partially cloak the rich, dark voice that seeped out so coldly into the bar, lashing with measured authority onto the hunched, agitated figure of Shigaraki. Near every head in the room was turned awkwardly askew from the, frankly embarrassing, chastisement.

“Yeah, I get it,” the titular leader hissed through his teeth, trembling fingers plucking, spiderlike, at the hem of his worn t-shirt. The ring of lesions and scabs around his neck had begun dulling with age, healing over into angry, puckered scars.

The monitor blipped out without another word, leaving a heavy, awkward silence to layer over the bar’s inhabitants. Kurogiri was the only one who dared to move, quietly polishing down the bar top despite it already being spotless.

“…Is that gonna happen often, or—” Spinner yelped as a heavily scarred hand yanked on the excess fabric knotted at the back of his eye mask, Dabi’s sallow frown deepened into a scowl. They both waited with baited breath as Shigaraki’s agitated mumblings formed a swarm of instability around him, but showed no signs of actually hearing Spinner’s comment.

Dabi released his grip on the scaly villain’s mask, earning an ire filled glare in return. He shrugged, more concerned with not provoking the unstable maniac they were all working for than playing nice with his ‘co-workers’.

Shigaraki abruptly spun around, nearly kicking over a barstool in the process. His scarred, wrinkled face was screwed up in rage, and he jutted a bony, accusatory finger towards the occupied booths on the other side of the bar. “What the hell are you all sitting around for?! You’re supposed to be an action squad, not an idle squad! Go do something useful!” He stormed off without waiting for a response, stomping up the creaky staircase winding behind the bar and slamming the rickety door at the top behind him.

“Be more careful about when you open your mouth, will ‘ya?” Dabi muttered, leaning back in the uncomfortable seat and picking at a patch of loose skin on his lip.

“Sound advice,” the bartender spoke up before Spinner could get a word in edgewise, setting down the rag he’d been using to instead circle around to stand closer to the barstools. “Tomura Shigaraki is not one who takes well to snide remarks. I suggest you hold your tongue in the future, lest you garner violent retribution.”

“You guys heard the boss man: sit around and do nothing!” Twice’s tone of voice fluctuated from boisterous to crass and sneering as seamlessly as if someone else had begun speaking for him, the fabric of his mask giving nothing of his expression away. “But how exactly are we supposed to prepare when all our equipment is already secured, and the plan isn’t until tomorrow?”

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“Strategize, perhaps,” Kurogiri suggested with weary patience, his solid yellow gaze lingering on the steps leading up to Shigaraki’s personal room. “Your individual roles are all clearly defined, which leaves room to focus on achieving peak synergy. Discuss the use of your Quirks, your preferred means of operation, and how best your fellows may help you be most effective.”

A deep, bellowing laugh escaped the largest of the villains in the room, and Muscular slapped the bar top with enough force to make the glasses on the back shelf rattle. “You’re a real funny guy, smoke man! But I ain’t here to play nice. If you wanna ‘help me be most effective’,,” he mocked, “then stay
outta my damn way!” He barked out another laugh, seemingly oblivious to the less-than-impressed looks he was garnering.

“‘Sides,” he continued unprompted, the feral grin on his face falling into annoyance, “I ain’t dancin’ to the tune of no brat that can’t even act like the man in charge. All that yammerin’ and whinin’ to the big man behind the screen ain’t doin’ him no favors.”

“That should be something of a relief, I’d think,” the youthful voice of Mustard sounded airily, the teenager sat as far away from Muscular and the silent, drooling Moonfish as the bar’s geometry allowed. “I for one feel much more comfortable knowing that there is someone more… capable and rational, orchestrating this whole event.” He swept dull, limp hair out of his face, and muttered more quietly, “Thanks should certainly be given to the presence of a cerebral force where it is most dearly needed.”

The busted jukebox that had, until then, faded into the background, skipped at the moment of Mustard’s snide dig, parting the airwaves sufficiently enough that the scowl on Muscular’s face became something warped and dangerous. “Pretty big mouth for such a tiny brat. You got somethin’ to say, pipsqueak?” He made to rise from his barstool, prompting an immediate reaction.

Magne, who had been watching the proceeding events with some small sense of amusement, quickly reached down to uncover the cloth-wrapped magnet sitting at her feet, less than willing to allow their loose cannon to explode on another member of the team-

“Nah, but I do,” Dabi rasped with none of the cool, laissez faire attitude he’d been exuding thus far. He’d slid to his feet before Muscular could even lift a single leg off the barstool, one palm half-cocked at his side, eyes narrowed in a black-and-blue glare. “Sit down and keep your nose clean, big guy. Save all that for the kid we’re actually after.”

Muscular stared him down with an unreadable look in his single manic eye, and Dabi did his best to meet that challenge evenly despite how damn gross the guy’s glass eye was. Apparently, he’d said something that got through to the meathead, because Muscular grinned slowly and settled back into his seat. From the corner of his eye, he could see Mustard’s rigid frame sag with relief.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Gotta be a ‘team player’ and all that crap.” Muscular idly traced the metal bracings of his false eye, and Spinner quickly glanced away in revulsion. Muscular laughed low in his chest, the demented look on his face, at least, not aimed towards any of them. “Those fuckin’ brats ain’t gonna know what hit ‘em. An’ I don’t envy whatever you freaks got cooked up for the one we’re after.”

Satisfied that he’d adequately defused a potentially volatile situation, Dabi settled back into his seat, smirking to himself. He wasn’t really one to revel too long in wanton violence and destruction, but he allowed himself to take a little pleasure in knowing what their mission would unearth. At the end of the day, it was exactly the push they needed to give.

“Might be a few days early,” he began with dark amusement, toying idly with a piercing and relishing the uncomfortable tug on his skin, “but that kid’s gonna have a hell of a birthday party.”

The moon hung high and cold in a twilit patch of purpling sky, a pale beacon surrounded by only the brightest pinpricks of starlight that could penetrate the lingering sunset. The sun’s retreat left fiery tendrils in its wake, slashing streaks of red and pink through lingering clouds and bathing a quarter of the world in an orange flood.

Far beneath the silent battle of cosmic forces, Izuku Midoriya clutched a bowl of hot curry between two hands, standing atop a cliff side overlooking a forest so vast that it appeared a tumultuous green
ocean, frozen in time. He breathed in the night air, warm and muggy and saturated with the song of insects, and lightly scented by rich, steaming curry.

He was, in truth, exhausted. Hours and hours of continuous training had wrung him out, left him a pile of ragged skin and hollow, dusty bones. He’d been ravenous at dinner, downing food so quickly that he had almost emptied his stomach for the umpteenth time that day. But rather than bask in the tired warmth and company of his classmates before he was dragged away for Mr. Aizawa’s lessons, something had brought him out into the woods, and up the mountain’s path.

Izuku carefully watched the boy perched at the crest of the slope, at its widest point, sat atop the stone and staring broodingly across the treetops. By some chance or twist of fate, Izuku had seen Kouta leave the camp on his own, uncaring of Mandalay’s calling of his name. Izuku wasn’t quite sure what compelled him to follow, clutching a bowl of food and utensils as he trailed after the boy, save the quiet, driving urge to help, to ease pain, to offer comfort. He could hardly live with himself if he stood by while a child forced himself to go hungry, when Izuku had the means to do something about it.

“K-Kouta?” Izuku called out, quiet and hesitant in his attempts to not spook the boy. Despite his effort, Kouta jolted to his feet and turned a wild-eyed look his way, before realization sunk in and tugged it down into a ferocious (well, for a child) scowl. “Y-you weren’t at d-dinner, so I th-thought I’d bring you s-something to eat.” He held up the curry as a peace offering, affixing the gentlest smile he could muster.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Kouta sneered, arms crossed defensively over his chest. His attempt at intimidation was undermined by the growling of his stomach, and Izuku took a slow, cautious step towards him. “Shouldn’t you be off playing hero or something stupid like that?”

“I-I don’t have anywhere to be j-just yet,” Izuku dismissed, his smile still firmly in place. He didn’t quite understand the root of Kouta’s hostility, but he wouldn’t let it dissuade him. He had a feeling it wasn’t him in specific that Kouta was angry at. He closed some of the remaining distance between them, allowing a few generous feet to remain so as not to make Kouta feel skittish or threatened. He sat down without preamble, reaching into his pocket for the cloth napkin he’d snagged, and used it to cup the bowl of curry before he carefully set it on the ground.

“Y-you should eat before it g-gets cold.”

“Shut up,” Kouta snapped petulantly, still glaring him down from a safe distance. He seemed almost confused, as if he were expecting some other hidden motivation. “You can take your crappy food and stuff it. I don’t want anything to do with you or your loser friends. Showing off your stupid Quirks like you’re so cool, like they’re so important… just go away already!”

Oh. So, Kouta has some sort of problem with Quirks in general? He’d said something about ‘wanna-be heroes’ the other day, and Izuku could only take that to mean his distaste of heroes was somehow linked. He itched with curiosity, wondering exactly why Kouta would be so hostile in the face of things most children were obsessed with, but he didn’t think it wise to push too much. Spouting off his own opinions and misconceptions on a child wasn’t a very kind thing to do.

“S-sorry if I did anything to m-make you mad,” he apologized, making up his mind. He’d make sure Kouta ate, probe just enough to see if he could help without being yelled at, and if the boy genuinely wanted to be left alone, Izuku would grant him that wish.

Kouta squinted at him again, his glare losing some heat in favor of confusion. It quickly hardened, however, the boy’s hostile hackles rising again. “Don’t flatter yourself! AS if you would be important enough to be the reason for-“He quickly cut himself off, eyes narrowing as he turned away
with an agitated huff.

Izuku’s smile was dulled by a sorrowful edge, and he carefully bowed his head. “Sorry. That was a bit presumptuous of me. I-I’m just curious, I g-guess. I get the f-feeling you don’t l-like Quirks or h-heroes very much.” Kouta’s gaze snapped back to him, dark and alarmed. Feeling that his time was almost up, Izuku thought it best to offer some (hopefully helpful) parting words. “I-I can understand that. Q-Quirks are… th-they aren’t always a g-good thing, and h-heroes are never p-perfect. B-but the truth is, our s-society is built around Quirks and h-heroics, now; they aren’t g-going away anytime soon. A-and sometimes… it’s h-hard to know if that’s a g-good thing or not.”

The response wasn’t immediate. Kouta stared at him in silence as if he was unsure of what he was even looking at, the bulk of his frustration stowed away for the moment. When he finally did speak, it was after he’d huffed and sat back down, staring out at the stars beginning to peek out behind the moon.

“…Whatever. Just leave me alone,” he muttered, lacking the sneering disdain he’d spoken with before. Instead, his words carried finality. It was time to go.

“Right. S-sorry for bothering you. I h-hope you enjoy the c-curry.” Unwilling to overstay his welcome, Izuku stood back up and offered a dim smile, which only earned him a brief flicker of a look before he was back to being forcibly ignored. He turned away, shoes crunching loose bits of rock as he headed back down the mountain path. He couldn’t be sure if he’d made any difference or not, without even knowing the reason behind Kouta’s upset. But… maybe he’d helped, even a little. It was the most he could hope for.
Izuku ejected a wrathful hellstorm from his numb, trembling palm for what must have been the hundredth time that day. He felt the rumble of Living Nightmare ripping apart the rising earthen wall to his left, unable to see it through the temporary blindness that stole away his vision. He was reacting only to the vibrations underfoot, having been stuck in the miserable loop of turning in place and striking down walls for the better part of two hours. He was drenched in sweat, breaths rattling and noisy as he struggled to suck in enough air to keep going. He really should have done more to prepare himself physically outside of class. Going on morning runs clearly wasn’t enough to build the stamina he needed to withstand his Quirk.

And speaking of, he was starting to feel faint and woozy, his head swimming even with his eyes shut, and a strange, weightless feeling welling in the pit of his stomach. “M-Ms. Pix-Pixiebob,” he wheezed out, trembling on the spot and on the verge of collapse, “I-I think’mgonnapassout,” he gasped out the words in a single block of noise, and immediately it was followed by the shaking of the earth flattening back out, the faint breeze striking his face uninhibited.

“Alright kitten, we’ll cool off for a bit. Take a sit if you need to,” the hero’s voice rang out, approaching him more loudly than he knew she normally moved. She tapped his shoulder with a paw, gently steering him off to the side as his legs quivered with each step. He settled down onto the sun baked ground, ready to simply flop over, only to find a gentle, supporting slope of loamy soil had risen under his back to keep him mostly upright.

A paw cleared the sweaty hair from his forehead, and he uttered a weak groan of thanks. If he squinted, he could almost make out the faintest streaks of color, a sure sign that his vision was slowly but surely returning. “We’re close to finding your hard limit, I’d say. You’re a lot feistier than I expected, kitten!” Pixiebob’s praise was a little odd, but Izuku couldn’t help but feel relieved to know he was making some sort of progress in her eyes. He nodded weakly in acknowledgement, not trusting himself to speak without puking, and focused only on regaining his vision and ignoring the deep burns that streaked under both of his arms. He’d been tasked with the challenge of making sure he was never surrounded by more than two of Pixiebob’s earthen walls at once, with the added twist that the speed of their reemergence ramped up slightly each time. Alternating arms had at least kept one of them from turning into meat confetti, but they both still burned worse than he could brush off.

Lost as he was in exhausted musings, Izuku didn’t realize the world was only dark due to his eyes being closed until Pixiebob’s voice made him blink them open to catch sight of her kneeling next to him. “…Your Quirk is pretty hard on you, isn’t it kitten?” He glanced up wearily, and felt something stiff in his chest begin to creak and twist on itself at the strangely sad look on her face. Pixiebob had only shown herself to be either off the wall or enthusiastically helpful, and the sight of such naked concern struck Izuku with the irrational sense that he’d done something wrong.

Unsure of exactly how he was supposed to respond without either denying the truth or sounding self-
“More than a bit, I’d say.” She peered down at him with an unreadable look for a long moment, one that Izuku couldn’t decipher in his addled state. But it was quickly replaced by a smile, and her paw came down to ruffle his hair again. “Alright, you just sit tight, kitten! I’ll get some food in you, and once you’re recharged we’ll go again!” She hoped back onto her feet, leaving a water bottle that she’d procured seemingly from nowhere in his grasp.

Izuku clutched the bottle close, the cold penetrating his skin just deep enough to combat the lingering burn. “B-but aren’t we supposed to c-cook for o-ourselves?”

“Illegal, but I doubt anyone will miss a bit of leftovers. Besides,” she continued with a wink, her lips pulled into a pleased smirk, “nobody said I couldn’t play favorites.” Pixiebob hopped away before Izuku could sputter in embarrassed protest against the favoritism.

Left to his own devices, Izuku groaned and slowly sat himself up a little more, grateful that the earthen slope he was resting against was covered in enough grass to hopefully not just streak dirt all over him. He sipped carefully from his water bottle, unwilling to puke it back up in a few minutes if he drank too fast.

“Izuku?” Izuku jerked upright and splashed himself in the face with his water, the freezing droplets just about hissing on his overheated skin. “Woah, sorry, didn’t mean to startle you, bro.” Kirishima revealed himself as the source of the voice that had come from behind him, looking sweaty and dusty but otherwise beaming with can-do energy. Izuku found himself thankful that heat and exertion made good excuses for the color staining his face.

“I-it’s fine, I j-just wasn’t expecting a-anyone else to be t-taking a break. Where’s Ojirou?” Izuku sat up a little further to actually make eye contact, though that came with the challenge of keeping his eyes open when the warm, dense ground was so comfortable to lie on.

Kirishima winced and ran a hand through his drooping spikes, expression warring between guilt and sympathy. “He’s in the infirmary. He hit me at a weird angle when we were training, sliced his tail open pretty bad. Mr. Aizawa walked him back to look it over.”

“O-oh gosh, that sounds s-serious. I-is he alright?” The possibility of injury was always something to keep in mind while training, but Izuku hadn’t expected anyone to get hurt, let alone so soon into their time at the camp.

“Yeah, I think so. It wasn’t a super deep cut or nothin’, but apparently his tails bleeds a lot anyway. Just gotta wrap it up and make sure it doesn’t get infected.” Kirishima quirked his lips into a shining crescent that helped chase away the gravity of the conversation. “But enough about me. How’s your training? You holdin’ up okay?”

Izuku bit back a squeak when the other boy plopped down into the dirt next to him, arms rested over his knees and his gaze rested squarely on Izuku himself. “A-ah, it’s b-been… tough,” he admitted honestly, unable to hide the exhaustion in his voice. Staying up until 2 in the morning for remedial lessons and then getting up four hours later to train until the point of collapse wasn’t something he could easily brush off.

“No kiddin’,” Kirishima commented sympathetically, reaching out with a comforting (if slightly sweaty) hand to pat Izuku’s knee. “Pixiebob is puttin’ you through the wringer, huh? I saw that stuff with the walls-straight brutal, bro.”
Too tired to be flustered by Kirishima’s affectionate touches, Izuku merely bobbed his head in agreement. “I’m s-so tired,” he whined. Driven by the urge to seek physical reassurance, Izuku gracelessly tipped over to lean against Kirishima’s side, kept from wholly collapsing into his lap only by the mound of dirt rested against his other shoulder. “I j-just want to sleep again.”

Kirishima wrapped an arm around his shoulders, tugging him into a half-hug that ended up supporting most of his limp weight. “How late is Aizawa keepin’ you guys for the lessons?” Izuku’s groan of ‘2 AM’ had Kirishima hissing through his teeth, and lead to a more proper hug that mostly involved Izuku sprawling across Kirishima’s torso while the redhead held him up with both arms. “Damn, man, that’s rough. No idea how he expects you guys to function on that little sleep. Y’even gonna be awake for the courage test tonight?”

“I-I doubt I’ll have a c-choice,” Izuku mumbled, though it transitioned into a yawn halfway through. He blinked, colors beginning to run in his vision for a reason that had nothing to do with overuse of Living Nightmare. With the last few neurons still firing off in his head, Izuku managed to craft an idea out of chemicals and electrical impulses. “W-wake me up wh-when Ms. P-Pixiebob gets back,” he mumbled, leaning against Kirishima with his legs sprawled over the ground and his upper body flattened against a firm, comfortable torso.

“I think that’s a good idea. …Midoriya? Midoriya?” The emphatic pressure Kirishima put on his name with teeth and tongue and laryngeal vibration was as soothing as the summer breeze, and the rustle of the forest’s countless leaves. Izuku’s thoughts flickered out one by one, bulbs given time to cool and dim as their housing was set to hibernate. Eventually, he could feel the warm weight of one of Kirishima’s hands on his back, soothing and familiar. Sure, in a little while he’d be woken up again, likely by Pixiebob’s admonishments, and he’d be forced back into using his Quirk more in a single day than he had in the last month…

But for the moment, he was safe, and comfortable, and tired. And Izuku intended to take advantage of that for as long as he was able.

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“Alright, is everyone ready?” Mandalay’s voice carried over the clumped together mass of 1-A students, fresh from grueling hours of training and a lunch they’d had to cook themselves. The premise of a test of courage seemed to raise the majority of flagging spirits, competition and a chance to unwind something the majority was both familiar with and longing for.

Except for Izuku Midoriya, who was merely a stiff corpse that hadn’t realized it was supposed to be buried in the soil quite yet. He stood propped against Uraraka, who seemed more amused by the situation than anything. He blinked hard and yawned, the heat of fresh food in his stomach compounded with his lack of sleep and fatigue from training doing wonders to lower the teasing promise of sleep just out of his grasp.

“Are you listening?” Uraraka whispered, gently digging her elbow into his ribs. He jolted upright, realizing that he’d zoned out completely for the first half of Mandalay’s explanation of how the test of courage actually worked. Though, honestly, he couldn’t imagine it being that complicated.

“I d-doubt Mr. Aizawa w-will actually let us p-participate.” And that was the other issue, as well. Rather than a fun event with both classes and the promise of dinner and sleep, Izuku could only foresee another series of lessons that stretched on well into the early morning, leaving him just enough time to not get enough sleep before training began again in the morning.

“Unfortunately, that’s correct.” As if he were summoned by the implication of hopes and dreams being crushed, Mr. Aizawa seemed to melt out of the dim forest around them, stalking towards the particularly rambunctious trio of Kaminari, Sero, and Ashido. His impassive stare as their excitement
shattered into abject despair sent a shiver down Izuku’s spine, and reminded him that Mr. Aizawa could be pretty unsettling sometimes.

“C’mon, you can’t be serious!!” Kaminari shrieked, clutching onto a hysterically mournful Ashido, who looked like she might actually be crying?

“We just wanted to prove our couraaaage,” she blubbered, drawing a sizeable quantity of sympathetic attention their way. Sero attempted to nonchalantly creep away while they made a scene, only for Mr. Aizawa’s scarf to snap out and catch all three of them around the wrists.

“We don’t have time for crying, so let’s get a move on,” their teacher droned, his flat gaze sweeping over to single out Todoroki and Izuku. “I trust that the two of you can actually do as you’re told?” He questioned rhetorically (at least, Izuku thought it was rhetorical), raising an eyebrow.

Too tired to protest and resigned to his fate besides, Izuku pulled himself away from Uraraka’s side, smiling weakly when she pouted in sympathy at him. He had to cover his mouth to stifle a laugh when Kirishima belted out a soulful “I’ll never forget you bro!!!” that echoed at least twice, and waved back at him as he left. Todoroki joined him without a word, looking more relieved to skip the test of courage than anything.

It was only once they’d left the clearing behind that Izuku realized something very, desperately important, something that had somehow managed to slip his mind until that very moment. Every muscle in his body went rigid, urgency crashing through him in a swirling tidal wave.

“M-Mr. Aizawa, s-sir?” Izuku earned a flat look from his teacher, whose nerves already seemed grated from Ashido and Kaminari’s whining. Izuku almost considered keeping it to himself in the interest of not garnering any ire, but… it really couldn’t wait. “I-I, uhm… h-have to use the bathroom.”

The soul crushing exasperation that Mr. Aizawa managed to convey with a single half-lidded stare was enough for Izuku to seriously consider just dumping himself off a cliff. “We’re five minutes away from the facility, Midoriya. Can you wait until then?”

Izuku’s face reddened in shame, and he shook his head hastily. “I-I really c-can’t.” It was embarrassing that he’d forgotten in the first place, honestly; he’d been hydrating like crazy all day, after all.

With a deep sigh, Mr. Aizawa broke eye contact and resumed walking, raising a hand in a dismissive wave. “Fine. You’ve got ten minutes. For every minute over, you’re spending another half hour with me. Got it?”

“Yes sir,” Izuku squeaked out, well aware that Mr. Aizawa wasn’t someone who made idle threats. He ducked his head and trotted away from the group, figuring that just heading into the woods out of view for a moment would be sufficient.

It was a pleasant night, at the very least. The air wasn’t quite warm enough to be uncomfortable, and the sky was completely clear, exposing the moon and the twinkling smear of the Milky Way to the quiet valley that housed them. It wasn’t quite pitch black out, either; the moon was full and luminous, lighting Izuku’s way well enough that he at least wouldn’t trip over anything. Though, he could easily imagine the dark ambient lighting would help quite a bit with creating a spooky atmosphere for the test of courage. A small part of him was disappointed that he wouldn’t get to participate, simply for the sake of being able to do things with his classmates. But on the other hand… using his Quirk to scare other people was kind of the exact opposite of what he wanted to be doing, so maybe it was for the best that he didn’t participate.
A few minutes later, relieved and ready to return to the rest of the remedial group, Izuku’s sigh and the hiss of zippered metal teeth clicking together were the only sounds to be heard. He… couldn’t hear any insects, or the rustle of the wind in the trees. It was just a lull, really, in the symphony of the night, but the realization prickled at the back of Izuku’s neck, insect-fine legs that dug and twitched upon his flesh. A knot coiled in his chest, tendrils of flesh and tar suspended by wire all twisting together into the hot sludge of anxiety.

A chill swept over him, flesh coaxed into pinprick points, hair standing on end. Izuku couldn’t bring himself to move. Trees lurched in the darkness, warped figures yawning in petrified hunger. The moon shone cold and unfeeling, shafts of light piercing through the canopy in sheets of glass cut geometry. His eyes darted back and forth, the majority of his vision swallowed by the wooden trunk in front of him. He could only truly see in his periphery, see the shadows swell and magnify as unease wriggled and squirmed into the tender meat of his pounding heart.

He was shaking, a minute tremble as every sense that was not his own buzzed and chittered that something wasn’t right, not right not right not right. Izuku swallowed, forcing his panic to remain at a smooth simmer, and reminded himself that everything was alright. He was just… alone in the forest, where it was safe. He just needed to get back to Mr. Aizawa and be bored to tears by remedial lessons. That was all.

Izuku took a single step backwards to turn and-

“I would suggest that you remain still, and calm.”

Time ground to a halt. Memories rose, snapping rattling chains apart into bent and broken links as they swallowed Izuku’s unconsciousness. He was trapped, trapped in the bleak and frigid world of steaming blood, crumbling asphalt, and milk white moonlight. A noise of terror slipped from his throat, a vocalization that was desperately, horribly alone in the gnarled grasp of the forest.

He knew. He knew who had spoken, he knew it but he couldn’t turn around, it was impossible, it couldn’t couldn’t couldn’t couldn’t-

Dead plant matter crunched and crumbled beneath the weight of a footstep, and the gridlock that had frozen Izuku’s muscles into a standstill splintered apart. He whipped around, Living Nightmare howling in his chest in duet with the horrible, deafening buzz of terror and anxiety. Izuku saw him. Izuku saw him, a phantasm streaked in deathly white by the frozen caress of the unfeeling moon. Deep, cavernous eyes regarded him balefully, inhuman and aberrant as they peered from ghoulish, stygian iron. Izuku could never forget that look, no matter how desperately he wished to.

“Izuku Midoriya,” Mincemeat spoke, his utterance a haunted, unfeeling rattle of sonorous indifference, “I am not here to harm you. I cannot speak with you long. There are those who wish you and your fellow students harm advancing on your camp as we speak. They will not spare you as I have.”

Izuku staggered backwards, the terror in his chest that had ebbed by the slightest fraction at the realization that Mincemeat wasn’t holding a weapon surging forth tenfold at the sound of his (warning? Why would the villain warn him? Why wouldn’t Mincemeat kill him while he was alone?!) words.

“I-I…” He barely even managed to produce the suggestion of speech, eyes darting wildly from the villain’s horrible iron mask to his empty hands, which rested relaxed and unthreatening at his sides. But Izuku knew better—he knew what those hands could do, even without a blade in their grasp. The memory of splitting, tearing flesh and explosions of gore stirred his stomach into a nauseating boil.
Mincemeat didn’t move. He didn’t even seem to breathe, a statue of deadly muscle wrapped in a casing of molted scar tissue. Izuku could see his knives, glinting and glittering on either of his hips. “The cliff side, upon the mountain. There is a child there, who will be killed if you do not act. Go, and protect him from the villain advancing upon his location.”

Oh god, Kouta-this villain knew about Kouta, knew where he was. “H-h-how am I s-sup-posed to b-believe you?” He choked the words out through the haze of fear induced static that was beginning to suffocate him, Living Nightmare’s stability degrading rapidly in the monstrous villain’s presence. Izuku quashed the urge to unleash that power and disable Mincemeat long enough to get help, to spread warnings of his presence.

Mincemeat crossed one arm over the other in a slow, deliberate movement. Corded muscle bulged and writhed beneath his twisted skin in serpentine waves. Hyper focused and shaking with anxiety, Izuku couldn’t help but notice the absence of his left ring finger. The skin was smoothed over his knuckle, as if no finger had existed there at all. “If I am lying, and you believe me, the boy will be alive. If I am truthful, and you do not believe me, the boy will die.” Passionless and disaffected, Mincemeat’s decree nonetheless sent icy shards crawling through Izuku’s organs. As if sensing his intent to speak again, the man continued on. “There is not time to argue. I have no need of falsities. If I had wanted to kill you, or anyone else, it would be done.”

Izuku trembled, the dull horror of Mincemeat’s words slowly sharpening against his bones. He… he wasn’t lying. Izuku knew it, with every rotting fiber in his body, in every cell of his thickening, tarry blood, that Mincemeat was telling the truth. The villain could have killed them all in their sleep, before they even knew what had happened. It would have been easy.

But more important, more important was that Kouta could be in danger, some other threat (more villains, the League, how could they know how did they find them how did Mincemeat find them did he tip them off why would he warn Izuku of their attack) could be advancing on them, and now only Izuku was aware of it. And if he went to warn Mr. Aizawa, or Mandalay, then he might be too late to save Kouta. He wasn’t fast enough to do both. Helplessness and fear rose through his chest, vile pillars twisting and entwining in their efforts to spear him through.

Driven by his overwhelming emotion, Izuku backed away from the terrifying presence of the villain, a silent gargoyle branding his gaze into Izuku’s skin. He didn’t have time to figure out what Mincemeat wanted, what his plan was or why he was trying to help. “P-please, do-don’t h-hurt anyone,” he begged, even as he yanked off his shoes and socks with cold, trembling fingers. He couldn’t risk them melting or catching fire.

“I do not intend to harm anyone who does not deserve my punishment,” he intoned, his hollow voice making Izuku feel like his spine might crawl out from under his skin. Once he was finally free of his shoes and socks, he tossed them aside, and reached carefully for the frayed, frazzled presence of his thinnest wire. The villain uncrossed his arms, seeming almost pleased behind his expressionless mask. “We will meet again soon,” Mincemeat said mildly, and Izuku had to swallow down a sob of terror.

Sufficiently strummed and plucked, the thinnest wire of Living Nightmare came to life, and Izuku rushed out of the small clearing and into the thick of the forest as he poured the starlight fury through the soles of his feet. Panic consumed him, a sinkhole that pulled voraciously from within, capable of crushing him into useless, quivering meat if he let it take hold. Fortunately, having a goal to rush blindly towards was enough of a focal point for him not to completely fall apart. He had to find Kouta, keep him safe, and warn the pro heroes that villains were attacking. And if he could, he’d try to stop whatever it was that Mincemeat was planning as well.
Unsettled and hopped up on frothing adrenaline, Izuku activated his Quirk and hurtled through the forest faster than his unaided muscles could have hoped to take him. Each bounding footstep flashed with brilliant white light, painting the forest in still shots of illumination. Izuku’s footprints remained a glowing, molten trail behind him, and he took care not to accidentally light anything on fire as he navigated through the forest.

Even through the interlocking canopy, Izuku could make out the dark mass of the mountain against the backdrop of the starlit sky, a clear beacon in the dark for him to chase. For each moment he spent dashing between the gnarled trunks of trees and leaping off the shockwaves of explosive exhausts of plasma, Izuku came to second-guess himself further and further. Should he have gone to Mr. Aizawa first, and led his teacher to Mincemeat to erase his Quirk? Should he have warned Mandalay, and had her send out a telepathic message that would reach Kouta as well? Should he have fought? Was listening the right thing to do? Would he even make it there in time? Was it already too late?

It was too late to wonder, though. Tendrils of time slid through his clenched fingers with each step he took, the mountain magnifying as he approached the sheer cliff face beneath Kouta’s brooding grounds. The path to climb up was minutes away, and Izuku didn’t bother slowing down as the weathered wall of rock loomed before him. Instead, he leaped straight up, a firecracker propelled by cosmic fuel. He channeled power through his hands as well, slapping them against the cliff face as his ascent ended in collision.

His fingers burned straight through the stone, carving glowing red pinholes that he used as handholds to catch himself with each burst of propulsion. He grunted and panted through his teeth as each burst took him higher by ten, fifteen, twenty feet. It took all of his concentration to focus on not accidentally melting away his handholds or launching himself headfirst into the rock face, which was a sufficient distraction from the hysterical alarm threatening to eat him alive.

After what felt like hours of climbing, though it had barely taken thirty seconds, Izuku hauled himself over the knife-fine edge of the cliff with a gasp, blinking rapidly to try and re-adjust his eyes to the darkness.

“W-what the hell are you doing?!” Kouta’s cry of shock drew his eyes, and the sheer overflow of relief at seeing him alone and unharmed almost forced a sob from Izuku’s throat. Kouta stared down at him, bewildered more than upset, and Izuku wasted no time in forcing himself to his feet. Just because Kouta was safe for the moment didn’t mean the threat was gone.

“Izuku, y-you have to listen to me! I n-need you to go back to c-camp, right now! Th-there are villains a-about to attack, y-you’re not safe here!” Izuku didn’t have time for broody behavior. He leaned forward, eyes dull and grave as he attempted to convey the true severity of the matter. “Kouta, listen, th-there isn’t time. M-Mandalay doesn’t k-know yet, and I c-couldn’t warn her before coming for you. Y-you have to go, now.” Some gravitas in his tone must have broken through, for Kouta’s scowl fell away in shock. The hairs on the back of Izuku’s neck stood on end, and he hastened to speak again. “I-is there another way o-off the mountain? If s-so, you need to use it, r-right now. It’s t-too dangerous to go down the m-main path, understand? Just g-go back to camp, Eraserhead and Vlad King w-will protect you. W-warn them for me, if I d-don’t make it back in t-time.”
Izuku’s words left him in a panicked rush of syllables, his eyes twitching away from Kouta to instead frantically scan the path leading up to the cliff, as well as the dense, inky forest at the base. The serenity of the night only served to agitate him further, his fingers clenching and unclenching and his breaths coming in uneven pants.

“..There’s a cave that leads back to camp. Pixiebob dug it out for me,” Kouta relayed carefully, an odd timbre in his voice almost giving Izuku pause.

“G-good, that’s good. U-use that cave, and r-run as fast as you c-can, okay?” A coherent thought slipped through the haze, and Izuku fumbled through his pockets for a moment before he produced his phone, unlocking it through muscle memory before he offered it forward. “T-there’s no reception out here, b-but use this as a f-flashlight if you need to, o-okay?”

“A-aren’t you coming with me? What kind of hero just leaves someone in danger by themselves?” Kouta’s voice wavered dramatically enough for Izuku’s vivisected attention to snap back together, regret spilling forth. He struggled to put on a smile that didn’t look like a grimace, keeping it aloft with delicate wires.

“I-I have s-something important to d-do, first. O-once I’m sure you’re s-safe, I’ll come back, o-okay?” He pressed his phone into Kouta’s hands, All Might’s grinning visage peering up from the background. He lowered his voice into something he hoped was soothing and gentle, ironing out the anxiety and apprehension lurking underneath. “I p-promise you’ll be okay. I w-won’t let anything happen t-to you.”

“…Whatever,” Kouta muttered, accepting the phone in both hands as he glanced away. “…Don’t get yourself killed, you stupid wanna-be.” He turned to patter towards the crinkled stone that bordered the vantage point, slipping between the cracks that had, at first glance, seemed only deepened by the shadows. Relief pulsed in Izuku’s chest at the sight, assured that no villain would be perceptive enough to realize it was a cave’s entrance.

Okay, okay okay, Kouta was out of harm’s way, and there wasn’t any sign of villains. Either Mincemeat had been lying or he had warned Izuku with enough time to spare. Either way, he had to find Mandalay and warn her about-

“Everyone, listen! The camp is under attack, a pair of villains just arrived, and there might be more on the way! Everyone who is in a position to retreat to camp, do so now! And do not engage! If you encounter a villain, run away!”

Izuku gasped as Mandalay’s words resonated inside his skull, static snapping in their wake with enough ferocity to disorient them. She already knew, the villains were already attacking? His blurred vision faded back into clarity, and Izuku swallowed a mouthful of ash caked fright as he spotted thick, dark clouds of smoke rising into the sky and blotting out the stars, just barely able to make out a flickering, cerulean source down in the depths of the forest. He needed to run, he needed to find Mandalay and warn her about the presence of another villain, if Mincemeat was allowed to roam while other villains provided a distraction-

“Huh, well look at that. It must be my lucky day.” Izuku whipped around with a strangled gasp as the deep, darkly pleased words swept over the cliff top, splinters of panic impaling him at the sight of the hulking figure cresting the slope. Cloaked in black robes, Izuku couldn’t make out any defining features, save for the dull white hockey mask worn underneath the ragged hood. It wasn’t a villain he recognized, wasn’t anyone he’d seen before.

“W-who are you? A-are you with the L-League of Villains?” Izuku injected his words with a demanding edge, trying desperately to caulk the cracks that ran them through. Living Nightmare
writhed and swelled within him, and he allowed it to leak through his flesh in tendrils of crackling white plasma that curled around his fingers. He doubted he could actually intimidate a villain without using the stare, but he was already backed up against the cliff’s edge. As long as the villain kept his distance…

“For now,” the villain answered easily, reaching up in a swirl of robes towards his mask. His billowing sleeve slipped, revealing tanned flesh and thick, bulging musculature. “Figured those losers would let me run wild, and cover for me. I was hopin’ to put off work for a bit, maybe crack a few skulls in the meantime… but lucky me, you’re the first one I see, Midoriya.”

Izuku’s blood flash froze, a red slurry hardened into crimson steel that locked him down from the inside out. In the time he was reeling, the villain ripped off his mask and cloak in the same motion, tossing them both to the ground in a flick of his wrist. Chiseled musculature, buzzed blond hair, a wide jaw-realization struck through Izuku in forks of lightning at the sight of the villain’s savage grin, and the mangled crater of flesh surrounding the false eye on the left side of his face. Terror and despair collided in eruptive geysers of toxic tar, the villain knew his name and Izuku knew his-

“M-Muscular,” he choked out, flinching as it earned the full attention of the criminal’s gaze.

“You know who I am? How flattering. I must be makin’ waves.” Muscular exposed his teeth in a smug widening of his lips, taking a sudden step forward that almost send Izuku reeling over the cliff’s edge. “So, this is the part where I say ‘give up, come with me quietly, and you won’t get hurt’.” A moment of silence passed, the rush of blood in Izuku’s ears and the crackling hiss of his Quirk the only things he could hear, before Muscular burst out into laughter. The rough, jagged sound seeped between his savagely bared teeth, the bloodshot surface of his false eye boring into Izuku’s skull. “But that sounds pretty boring to me.”

Izuku didn’t have time to blink before Muscular crossed the gap between them, ribbons of glistening muscle fibers exploding through pinholes in his skin to wrap around his forearms in a fleshy pink casing. His world went sideways as the villain tossed him up into the air with a hand in his collar before crashing a glistening fist into his side, pain exploding over his torso. All his breath left him in a violent expulsion, and he crashed, wheezing and gasping, against the rock wall opposite the edge.

“Jeez, is that it? You took that hit like a bitch. Get up!” Muscular barked, his voice pelting against the curve of Izuku’s spine. He gasped desperately for air even as he rose on shaking feet, the dull ache in his side becoming a stabbing pinch. “I can’t believe that fuckin’ hand guy could ever be scared of you. He must be a bigger wimp than I thought. Now you got two options, Midoriya; show me some guts, or show me your blood!”

The sound of boots on gravel was warning enough that Muscular had no plans to relent. Survival instincts took over in a surge of adrenaline, the protests of his surely cracked ribs fading into static as Izuku thrust his hand out in an eruption of starlight, plasma pouring from between his fingers in furious waves, a chain reaction of explosive molecules that filled the space between himself and the advancing Muscular in an instant.

The sharp scent of ozone and the searing flashes of white light impeded Izuku’s senses for a moment, but his thundering heart reminded him that he didn’t have time to wait. He turned and pumped a micro-burst of power through the balls of his feet, glassing the gravel beneath them and propelling himself to the side. He flung out his right arm to maintain his momentum, white flares leaping from his palm and propelling him in a full rotation. In the span of ten heartbeats, he’d landed his attack and repositioned to put an escape route at his back. He curled the fingers of his left hand and effused another handful of plasma, prepared to launch it as a projectile through the white haze of his previous attack-
“Oh, now that’s what I was lookin’ for!” Muscular crowed, refocusing in Izuku’s spotty vision. The musculature wrapped around his arms had bloated and interlocked, forming a wall of meat that took his plasma straight on. His forearms sizzled, red hot embers and blackened skin peeking through the revolting smoke that rose off of them. “That’s a damn good burn, kid. Gimme another!”

Muscular lunged toward him with all the force of a cannon, the grotesque, oblong thing this was his arm reeling back for another blow. Panic shrieked and Living Nightmare wailed, Izuku’s bolt of plasma splashing and dissipating against the unstoppable bullet train of muscle and bone. It crashed into the center of his chest, bones creaking and agony gushing forth from the blow.

Tossed like a ragdoll, Izuku was left weightless as he hurtled through the air, before crashing and tumbling into the dirt. Dazed and broken, he could only choke on the breath that lodged stubbornly in his battered sternum, the sparks between his fingertips fizzling out.

“C’mon, that was weaker than the first time! Gimme some fire, Midoriya. Before I get bored,” Muscular taunted even as Izuku wheezed and fought to pull himself to his feet, waving out the melting, burning muscle coating his fist as if he were extinguishing a match. The putrid scent of burning flesh hung around him, even as he retracted the muscle back into his body and replaced it with another set, blood flushed and untouched.

“Y’know,” the criminal continued, a demented glee seeping into his voice as he approached, slow and unconcerned, “the only thing anybody ever said was to bring you back alive. Wanna help me find out how far you can ride the line?” He cracked his knuckles in deliberate malice, a titan of charred flesh and unstoppable muscle that hungered for spilled blood. Terror whipped long, serrated tendrils through Izuku’s chest cavity, constricting his organs in needlepoint prisons that squeezed and squeezed and squeezed.

“Don’t m-make me hurt you,” he whispered, a plea warped by the shell of a threat. Swaying, unsteady, Izuku rose to his feet. His chest flared with each shaking breath, and he could feel his ribs creaking. If Muscular gave him no choice.. if Muscular gave him no other options…

The villain paused in his approach, his eye burning into Izuku’s skull as the menace on his face became something else. “You… you gotta be fucking kidding me,” he barked out in a bray of amusement, teeth parted to release deep, shoulder shaking bellows of hysterical laughter. “Holy shit you’re funny,” Muscular wheezed out, the last of his laughter leaking out in foul currents as his grin returned, a cudgel of chipped teeth that delighted in breaking.

Izuku didn’t have time to think. In the single instant it took to switch his grip from his thinnest wire to an entire handful, Muscular rocketed forward and enveloped his hand in a meaty gauntlet, wrenching it up and away from his shoulder in a wet, sickening crack that pulled a scream of agony from his lips. A knee sunk into his gut, a surge of pain and nausea gushing upwards as Izuku’s silhouette snapped out around him, a negative film of reality that exposed the hideous hatred boiling just beneath the surface. Muscular forced him to the ground as a counterweight for his arm, ripping and tugging on it until Izuku could only think of it coming out, coming apart, broken ripped gone gone-

Living Nightmare infested the world, summoned forth by the desperate smash of Izuku’s fist against Muscular’s bulging shoulder as overwhelming pain and hysteria drowned out every thought other than the obsessive mantra playing on repeat through a mind haunted by static. Izuku couldn’t kill him, he couldn’t kill couldn’t kill couldn’t kill-

The vacuous horror slithered forth, a hideous wyrm of dark energy and entropy that hungered endlessly for every molecule, every atom, every quark that composed the universe it sought to devour. Izuku’s flesh and bone were its prison, as well as its catalyst. It ejected through his arm in a
searing legion of rot, seeping from his knuckles and exploding into the hulking, inhuman mass of Muscular’s Quirk-born meat. Fumes hissed out of the pores in Izuku’s burning forearm, a steaming exhalation that devoured all light that dared stray in its path.

In an instant, Living Nightmare’s thoughtless hatred silently flashed through Muscular’s upper body, reducing hundreds of pounds of densely packed muscle into carbon dust. A wretched, inhuman sound seeped from Muscular’s slacking jaw, the left half of his torso withering into dust even as his Quirk poured forth in a bloody tide, as incapable of quenching Living Nightmare’s hunger as a pond was of extinguishing the sun.

Incoherent sounds of rage and agony billowed from Muscular’s gnashing teeth, his opposite hand squeezing around the delicate bones of Izuku’s hand and wrist until they began to pop and crack, blood pouring from the fissures splitting his skin apart. It jarred Izuku’s connection to Living Nightmare so severely that it ceased channeling through his right hand entirely. The villain was left with half a torso of shriveled, pockmarked flesh, devoid of his grotesque, Quirk fueled musculature, save for a few feebly twitching ribbons that hung in tatters from his blood weeping wrist.

Muscular panted and wheezed through gritted teeth as Izuku writhed beneath him, breathless screams rattling out of him as the villain slowly mangled his arm with the remaining half of his Quirk. Izuku could hear the creak of his forearm as it was slowly bent backwards, radius and ulna cracking and splintering as they were twisted at an unnatural angle. Blinded by tears and patches of void black static and deafened by the senseless white noise in his ears, Izuku could only feebly twist and frantically reach for his Quirk, feeling the wires in his arm fray and bend and snap-

Living Nightmare sounded once more, wires shrieking and splitting apart as destruction was forced through them, erupting from Izuku’s bent, misshapen fingers in a wild discharge. Muscular’s howl of pain was drown out by a critical sensory failure, every nerve in Izuku’s body lighting up in fits and surges before going completely numb. His connection to voluntary muscle control was severed entirely, his tense, twitching form collapsing into a heap like a puppet with cut strings.

He watched, limp and immobile, as one of the flares of Living Nightmare’s power carved a deep furrow through Muscular’s arm, erupting against his shoulder and popping the bloated muscle in a shower of gore. The remainder of his muscle began to drip and sizzle, sloughing off his trembling arm like wet clay. The villain swayed and toppled silently to the ground, one arm steaming and smoking as it slowly melted and the other stripped apart until only ribbons remained.

Vomit dribbled from his slack lips, and a distant, detached remnant of Izuku’s consciousness was at least grateful that he’d ended up on his side instead of his back. He watched in numb, hazy detachment as blood trickled lazily from his ruined arm, black whorls of fluid mixing with crimson pools like oil on water. Vaguely, Izuku wondered if Muscular had managed to split open an artery or not. He wondered if he would die there, slowly bleeding to death while his limbs refused to move. His hazy vision turned wet, the only indication he was aware of that tears had begun dripping down his face. Despair seeped from him as readily as his lifeblood, and regret swelled in the hollow of his bones. Had he even made a difference? He didn’t want to lie down and die while his friends were still in danger, while their lives still hung in the balance. He was supposed to be a hero, he had to save them no matter what, he had to, he had to had to had to-

The slow drip of Izuku’s panic thoughts froze over at the sound of a boot crunching through gravel. He strained his ears, barely able to do more than sluggishly blink and drift his eyes back and forth. Who… who was-?

“Hello again, Izuku Midoriya. It appears you have succeeded. Well done.” Mincemeat’s hollow intonation plunged a meat hook into Izuku’s lungs, his already labored breathing tightening into
desperate gasps. Mincemeat had come to kill him, hadn’t he? The criminal would slip a knife between his ribs, or hack him apart, or stomp on his head until it cracked like an egg- “I am here to congratulate you on your victory. As well, I must deliver you your reward.”

The confusing, incomprehensible villain stepped into Izuku’s line of sight, lower legs hidden behind rubber boots and a stained apron. A belt of shining knives was hitched around his waist, and the flat head of his cleaver was unstained. A single thread of panic unwound in Izuku’s chest; at the very least, Mincemeat had not begun his grisly work. Instead, the villain walked right past him, to loom silently over the unconscious-but-breathing Muscular.

“Revolting,” Mincemeat hummed, a low, unsettling metal sound, “to see such power and technique wasted on a mindless animal. What is it you have accomplished with that strength, I wonder? Destruction? Torment? Thoughtless bloodshed?” With a vicious kick, he forced Muscular to flip over onto his side, before forcefully pushing him over once more, back exposed to the open air. “Worthless. The same as your fellows, that League of Villains. With the death of Stain and the decline of All Might, waters that once ran still now grow turbulent. You believe yourselves predators. You believe you have crested the food chain.”

Slowly and methodically, Mincemeat unhooked a knife from his belt. A simple butcher’s knife, unadorned and maybe an inch longer than the man’s open hand from finger to wrist. A choked noise escaped Izuku’s lips as he sluggishly realized the man’s intentions, sinking on to one knee beside the insensate Muscular.

“Fear not the violence perpetuated by these wastrels, child,” Mincemeat sounded tonelessly, his knife gleaming in the moonlight, “these are not predators. They are merely pond scum, risen to the surface.” In a single moment, he had slid the knife into the ruined flesh of Muscular’s back without resistance, wine-dark blood running in unbroken streams from the puncture point. Izuku’s heart fluttered and pounded erratically as Mincemeat emotionlessly snuffed out the life beneath him, only a sharp and final breath from Muscular marking his passing.

“But they are not why I am here,” Mincemeat continued, the murderer rising from his knee and leaving the handle of his knife to jut from Muscular’s back, “indeed, I had not known of their arrival until moments after it had happened. But it provided an opportunity for the both of us, Izuku Midoriya.” He turned, and if Izuku’s muscles still worked he would have shuddered at the unnatural motion; Mincemeat did not move as any living man should. “You are surely confused and upset. I understand this. You wonder, perhaps, why I would go to such lengths to speak to you. Why I should warn you to begin with.

“It is because I had come to test you. I seek those with power and promise. That is the purpose I have undertaken. I find them, and test them. If I believe them impeded, perhaps by ego, or hesitance, I will take something precious from them. If they can grow beyond their loss, then they are worthy to face me once more, retrieve what I have stolen, and earn my gift. Some, like the hero Ingenium, find their way to me. Like you as well, child. You found your way to me, and showed me incredible power and promise.”

Mincemeat’s words echoed through Izuku’s skull, mere fuel for the horror raging within him. The villain had followed him, followed him to camp and avoided detection by six pro heroes, but how? Izuku’s gaze drifted frantically over the villain that swallowed his vision, eyes catching on the space where his finger had been. Mincemeat’s Quirk, the manipulation of flesh… could a single finger have been enough to track them?

He snapped back into hazy focus when the villain stepped forward, one hand drifting towards the cleaver on his hip. “Your struggle with the villain Muscular is over, and you have emerged the
victor. It was not the test I had devised for you, but it was more than sufficient. It has left you broken
and ruined, but that is a small matter. I will heal you, and impart my gift."

The cleaver slipped noiselessly from its leather loop, and Izuku could barely breathe at the sight of it.
He wanted to scream, to fight, to run, to do anything that would stop the inevitable, but he was a
prisoner in his own body, Living Nightmare had gone haywire and snapped apart and now he was
going to be cut up like common livestock, incapable of doing anything but watching it happen.

It was only the sight of the ground suddenly disappearing that clued Izuku into the criminal’s grasp
on him, gently lifting and turning him with one hand. He was pulled away from the pool of vomit
and Muscular’s body, placed in the unhindered light of the cold moon. For the first time, he could see
his right arm, and almost wished he could vomit again at the sight of it. Living Nightmare’s power
had ripped through it hot enough that it was roasted from the inside, unnatural splotches and smears
of necrotic black pushing up just underneath the top layers of his skin. His fingers were peeled and
burnt, a deep, throbbing red torturing nerves that he was no longer connected to.

Mincemeat carefully set him down onto his back, head propped up on something he couldn’t see.
“Fear not for your injuries. My power will soothe them. The process is quick, though you may
experience some distress. But take heart.” Mincemeat lifted his cleaver from his side, the warped
mass of steel too tarnished to reflect the moon’s light. Rather, all Izuku could see in it was his own
overwhelming fear. “It will all be over soon.”

There was no outward feedback, when Izuku’s arm was chopped off. It was merely there one
moment, a useless hunk of meat, and then gone the next. A clean cut with minimal blood, performed
by an expert of the craft. Internally, Izuku could hardly think around the urge to scream, to scream
his throat raw and bloody as Living Nightmare’s wires snapped and severed, a hideous roar of agony
ripping his chest open in a black hole of sickening horror. He could see it in Mincemeat’s grasp, a
broken cadaver held aloft even as the torn flesh closed over like clay, trapping the blood inside.

“Fascinating. Your anatomy is more intimately connected to your power than I had first imagined,“
Mincemeat mused, a background noise to total internal collapse. “And yet it causes you such harm.
A shame, that this power would damage the vessel that contains it. No matter. That shall be my gift
to you, Izuku Midoriya. Your power will be made congruent to your flesh, improved to reduce the
damage it brings to you. You will not be without drawbacks, of course. My power is not enough to
modify the innate nature of Quirks. But you will find it a boon nonetheless.”

Mincemeat’s droning washed over Izuku like a wave of static, his attention split between desperate,
all-consuming fear and the grotesque sight of his arm in the villain’s grasp, scarred hands turning it
end over end as the skin sealed over, bones setting and blood seeping back into knitting veins. He
could only lie there, silent and numb, and wish for it all to go away. He barely even noticed when his
right arm was taken as well, burns flushed from the inside. He just wanted to get away, he wanted
to run, he wanted to stop the League, to protect his friends, he wanted the nightmare to end, he had to
get away, get away get awaygetawaygetawaygetaway--

Mincemeat carefully affixed the unsealing flesh of the boy’s repaired and improved arm against the
stump of his shoulder, overseeing intently the melding of flesh and bone into its housing. It was
second nature, the symphony of meat and bone. His Quirk was sharper than any blade he carried,
whetted against his own body a thousand times over until the particulars of human anatomy were as
instinct to him. His failures were carved into his skin, a constant reminder of all he had sacrificed in
his desire to be more than he had begun as.

And so too would this young man, one of the most promising individuals he had ever found, become
more. Interestingly, his power had gone inert the moment Mincemeat had gently severed the
connection, suggesting any severe physical damage would do the same. A weakness he would remember, should it ever become a necessity. Though, he doubted such a thing would ever come to pass. This Izuku Midoriya was not the sort to use violence as a cudgel. It was admirable, his staunch refusal to harm others until the moment it was his only choice, though it was helplessly naïve.

And perhaps that is why Mincemeat had seen such promise in him. Villains so rarely caught his eye for the very opposite; they viewed power as a tool to subjugate, rather than a means of prosperity and growth. Heroes were always so much more deserving of his attention.

He carefully straightened out the final kinks in the boy’s remaining arm, one eye confirming his progress and the other monitoring the state of him. He was a doll of meat, unable to do more than blink and drool. Truly a tragedy, to endure such a brutal price when using his power for noble means. But he would be rewarded for his sacrifice. Personal growth should always be rewarded.

With flesh made whole in his grasp, Mincemeat knelt once more, welding arteries and blood vessels, tendons and ligaments, muscle fibers and fatty tissues. A simple puzzle he had solved long ago, though the addition of Quirks always gave him something interesting to look forward to. The invisible connection that coupled power to neurons, and the one hurdle he could never truly clear. He watched dispassionately as prickling rings of scar tissue formed at the point of connection, the price paid for manipulating the flesh of those possessing Quirks. Though, he had taken more care with Izuku Midoriya than he usually bothered, so perhaps the boy would not pay that price so steeply. Only time would tell.

His work nearing completion, Mincemeat connected the final links of the boy’s Quirk, so that it and he would both be given life once more. With the final piece in place-

Terror, gripping, mindless, animal terror ripped through Mincemeat, from core to appendages, a low groan oozing from his mouth without permission. It was only his Quirk, his iron clad grip over his own flesh that kept him standing, gaze frozen as he stared through the slats in his helmet at the form of Izuku Midoriya. The boy twitched and writhed, limbs dragging through the gravel as a sudden light grew beneath his clothing, a deep red drenched in malice that burned incomprehensible lines and geometries across his flesh.

The light seared Mincemeat’s retinas as it grew to full luminosity in the span of a breath, the body going still before abruptly arching, black smoke pouring from his flesh in a burst that obfuscated him entirely. The light flashed once more, piercing through the opaque fog in an explosion of force that pushed him away, forcing him against the mountain’s breadth so that he would not be flung from the cliff and into the forest below. He could only watch as something emerged from the darkness.

The fragile trappings of reality and sanity were sundered in a skull rending wail, the phantasms of every hate and every demise combined in a legion of sound that brought Mincemeat to his knees. It vibrated through his very cells, reverberating within his helmet until he was sure his teeth would turn to powder.

Knotted, oil-black flesh emerged as if from between the stars themselves, a monstrosity of primordial evil and a harbinger of the Final Death at once. Crimson meat pulsed and writhed between the cracks of its outer layers, magmatic veins of unconquerable power. A forest of bristling needles jutted along the length of the broad back and long, slithering spine, dripping with fluid in their puckered housings. It balanced low on all its limbs, sleek and hulking, nearly too large for the clearing they stood upon. Thin, insectoid legs coiled with power, as unalike to a slender, curving arm sprouting a bouquet of bony fingers as said arm was to its counterpart. From the opposite shoulder bloomed a titanic mass of rippling muscle, a crude cudgel bearing four thick, double jointed digits.

And atop its shoulders sat a barreled stump of a neck, the lodgings for a primeval maw of curved,
interlocking teeth, bone yellow and bristling out of the lipless snout. The hammer-blunt head was thrice again as long as its neck, crocodilian perhaps only for no other creature baring even the slightest resemblance. Its forehead rose in a squat, blocky protrusion upon which small, pitted divots rested in rows, glaring blind and malignant.

It was overpowering, overwhelming, a beast borne of night terrors and dark matter, its mere presence clouding Mincemeat’s mind with screaming instincts to flee. For the first time in decades, he could almost feel his dead nerves sing in fear, crawling and writhing beneath his skin. For the first time in so long, he could almost feel.

“Magnificent… predator,” he choked out through the crushing presence of the beast, larynx strangled within him. He grinned, unseen behind his helmet, as gnarled teeth parted in a head splitting, miasmatic wail and the living nightmare leapt from its perch, turning stone to dust beneath its short, hooked claws and meaty forearm and disappearing into the shadows of the forest.

Now… now that his task was complete, he could finally get back to work.
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

Here's some cool art I've gotten! Be sure to check out the artists!

https://marenwithanm.tumblr.com/post/175256825541/a-drawing-for-chapter-six-of-daymare
https://king-of-doots.tumblr.com/post/17555798814/starburst-is-on-patrol-more-daymare-fanart-for
http://sweetcloverheartdraws.tumblr.com/post/175858689641/im-sorry-for-these-scarves-caused-you
https://welcometohelck.tumblr.com/post/176074085173/so-i-started-reading-daymare-by

All things considered, Eijirou Kirishima couldn’t profess to having had a very fun night so far. He’d been max hyped at the announcement of the Test of Courage, galvanized by the opportunity to goof off after training and prove his manliness. That had been diminished significantly when Aizawa came to drag away his group for remedial lessons, a large chunk of his friends no longer allowed to participate. He’d been so excited to help Midoriya scare the pants off of Class 1-B, but tried not to let his disappointment show. He wanted to have as much fun as he could regardless.

And then he’d been paired with Bakugou. Eijirou hadn’t ever thought of himself as someone that was prone to holding grudges—he was much more inclined to laughing off slights and talking through problems—but it was different with Bakugou. Just the sight of him was enough to cake Eijirou’s goodwill in grimy resentment and put an edge on any smile he wore.

For Midoriya’s sake, he’d done his absolute best not to bring it up. He didn’t pick fights, he didn’t glare or sneer or overtly avoid, he’d never even said a bad word about Bakugou once it was all said and done. But those emotions still hadn’t gone away. It was easier to ignore with everyone else around, a simple matter of putting it out of his head and focusing on the things that were important, the things that made him happy. Of course, that was significantly harder when he was alone with Bakugou in the woods, with only the occasional scare from Class B to break up the uncomfortable monotony.

He crunched deliberately through twigs and underbrush, itching for any sort of noise that would drown out the stifling silence between them. Part of Eijirou wanted to just give up on the test of courage and go back to camp, but that wasn’t very manly behavior. He’d just stick it out, no matter how awkward it was, and forget about it by morning. Hopefully there were other events planned that
Midoriya would actually be able to participate in, something that would overshadow the 
disappointment of the test of courage-

“If you got a fuckin’ problem, just spit it out already.” Eijirou jolted in surprise when Bakugou’s 
voice broke the silence, whipping his head around to stare incredulously. Bakugou wasn’t looking 
back; he stared resolutely at the forest floor, shoulders hunched, head bowed, and hands stuffed deep 
into the pockets of his baggy pants. Eijirou might have called the posture defensive, but he knew 
well enough that Bakugou’s ‘defensive’ was pure aggression. Instead, he just looked… defeated.

Eijirou opened his mouth, but thought better of whatever accusatory thing was going to come out of 
his mouth. He licked his lips and shrugged, doing his level best to tamp down the embers of dislike. 
“It’s nothin’, man. Don’t worry about it.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” Bakugou snapped out, voice cracking less like a whip and more like 
ceramic. “I know you fuckin’ hate my guts. I’m not an idiot. So either spit it out, or quit acting like a 
broody moron.”

“What the hell do you want me to say?” Eijirou retorted in disbelief, annoyance seeping in molten 
trickles through the cracks of his patience. What was Bakugou even after? Was he trying to pick a 
fight, or something?

“I’m fuckin’ sick and tired of everyone pussyfootin’ around.” Bakugou didn’t answer, agitation clear 
in the set of his shoulders. “Especially you. If you hate me, then you better fuckin’ say it to my face. 
Pretty ‘unmanly’ of you to keep actin’ like a bitch about it,” Bakugou sneered, finally turning to level 
a glowing coal glare at Eijirou, lips curled in a scowl. If Eijirou had been paying a little more 
attention, he would have realized that the nasty, crowing tone Bakugou had spoken in at the 
beginning of the year was gone, replaced by something hollow and crumbling.

But the words cut deep enough on their own, bringing an angry flush to his face as his insides locked 
up in anger. “Don’t call me that,” he metered out carefully, swallowing back the mouthful of steam 
rising from his scorching insides. “What exactly am I supposed to say, Bakugou? No, I don’t like 
you. I think you’re a jerk.” He struggled to keep anything else from slipping out, but the heat was 
softening his throat, anger rushing forth in a hazy plume. “After what you did, I can barely stand to 
be in the same room as you. You-” Eijirou bit down on something toxic, something he was sure he’d 
regret letting slip past his teeth. “What the hell is this about, Bakugou?”

Baleful, smoldering eyes remained steadily locked on Eijirou’s unrelenting stare, Bakugou’s jaw 
visibly clenching and unclenching. “…If someone’s gonna hate me, I’d rather they say it to me than 
pretend I don’t exist,” he muttered, so low it was almost a whisper. “I can’t stand it. I can’t stand 
nobody lookin’ me in the fuckin’ eye anymore… nobody but him.”

Eijirou furrowed his brows in confusion, trying to decipher Bakugou’s bizarrely roundabout 
statements. Was he talking about-? “Is this about Midoriya?”

Bakugou snarled soundlessly, ripping his gaze away and twisting his hands in his pockets. “Of- 
fuckin’-course it’s about him. Isn’t everything?” His voice dropped into something bitter and 
regretful, the first utterance Eijirou had ever heard from him that wasn’t tinged by anger in some 
way. It gave him pause, quashed his own anger with cold, smothering uncertainty.

“What, man,” he began, stowing away the insults and hurt that could have easily tumbled from his 
lips, “it can’t keep going on like this. It-it’s fucked up. What happened to him is fucked up, and what 
happened to you is fucked up.” He carefully considered the coiling tension in Bakugou’s shoulders, 
as liable to snap as it was to simply give way. Eijirou bit his lip, and decided that his own grudges 
weren’t important. “You have to talk to him. None of this is gonna get any better until then.”
Bakugou huffed, rankled and conflicted even as he slowly bled tension. He took off at a slow, ponderous pace, bringing Eijirou to realize they’d stopped walking altogether. “What the hell do you care, anyway? Shouldn’t you be tellin’ me to stay the fuck away, or somethin’?”

“It’s for Midoriya’s sake.” Eijirou’s response came in a moment of clarity, illuminated by the hunched, miserable form of someone he’d thought himself only capable of feeling spite towards. “I want him to be happy. He deserves to be happy. And if that means that he needs to work things out with you… then I’ll trust his judgement when he says you deserve a second chance.”

Bakugou went rigid in mid-stride, and for a moment Eijirou’s heart dropped at the thought that he’d said something wrong. He opened his mouth to apologize- “I smell something burning,” Bakugou rasped out, a low growl of suspicion rumbling in his throat.

Bewildered, Eijirou came to a halt at Bakugou’s side, too surprised by the sudden change of topic to try and get the conversation back on track. “Something burning? S’not like anyone’s having a barbeque. C’mon, let’s just get to Ragdoll and head back to camp-“

“Everyone, listen! The camp is under attack, a pair of villains just arrived, and there might be more on the way! Everyone who is in a position to retreat to camp, do so now! And do not engage! If you encounter a villain, run away!”

Mandalay’s message zinged through Eijirou’s skull, sharp and urgent, and the fingers of chaos ensnared him before they had even ceased echoing. The acrid stench of ash and char overwhelmed him, slinking through the trees as blots of cloying smoke rise above their canopies, choking out the stars above them. Alarm pulsed through him, galvanized by adrenaline and purpose. He opened his mouth, a suggestion to retreat to camp on the tip of his tongue-

“We need to find Ragdoll,” Bakugou growled out, all the tension and vulnerability he’d been showing up ‘til that moment replaced with a carefully controlled fury, a low fire just waiting to blaze out of control. “If Mandalay saw the villains first, it means they’re at the beginning of the trail. We’ll be fucked if we run into more villains on the way to camp.”

Eijirou swallowed, a stubborn lump clinging to the inside of his throat at the thought of how many villains they might be up against. He could only imagine it was the League again; would it be like the USJ, just a bunch of thugs with two or three dangerous people? Had they brought one of those Noumu things with them? He banished his fears from his mind with stubborn determination, reminding himself that he could worry after it was all said and done. For now, they had to find Ragdoll.

“Yeah, smart thinkin’. Let’s hurry and find her.” He didn’t waste a moment, and neither did Bakugou. They took off down the forest path, soil and underbrush crushed beneath their shoes. It wasn’t long before a thought occurred, one that brought dread to sit heavy and leaden in the pit of his stomach. Class-B had been waiting deeper in the forest to scare them. But there wasn’t anyone running in their direction, no sound other than their own locomotion and the distant crackle of forest fires. Eijirou grit his teeth and shoved that fear into the bottom of his heart—he had to believe that Class-B was safe with Ragdoll. Anything else, he’d worry about after. They just had to keep moving, and stay safe.

Something caught Eijirou’s eye a few dozen paces in, forcing him to squint into the darkness ahead of them. It was a shimmering smear of something on the forest floor, and he reached out to clasp a hand on Bakugou’s shoulder to bring him to a halt. He earned a full body jolt and a murderous glare, but he spoke up before the blond could yell at him.

“Wait a second, man. You see that?” He jutted a finger out into the darkness, marking the still pool
of something too thick to be water. When he looked closer, and angled his head at the right angle, it seemed to lead off further down the path.

“Yeah,” Bakugou bit out, the single word wound so tightly with tension and uncertainty that its echo crawled down Eijirou’s spine. “Forget it. We need to find Ragdoll. Don’t fuckin’ freak out.”

“I-I’m not freaking out,” Eijirou countered with a distinct tremor in his voice, deeply disturbed at the sight of what could only be a pool of fresh blood, just lying on the forest floor. Something had happened, it had to have. If another student had gotten hurt… if Ragdoll had gotten hurt, then what the hell were they supposed to do? He could remember the USJ in vivid flashes, the gnawing dread of seeing Mr. Aizawa lying twisted and broken in a pool of blood, the crushing weight of his own terror at the sight of Midoriya’s loss of control-

Oh god, Midoriya. Eijirou snagged Bakugou by the sleeve and took off at a dead run, panic and desperation smoldering like coals in his lungs. He ignored Bakugou’s snarl, thoughts consumed by the image of Midoriya cornered by a villain, pushed to the brink, hurt and afraid and losing control. He-he was with Mr. Aizawa, but he’d been with Mr. Aizawa at the USJ too.

The trail of blood went cold halfway down the remaining path of the forest, and Eijirou had just barely managed to put it out of his mind when he and Bakugou emerged into the clearing that marked the halfway point.

“Ragdoll!” The name left his lips in a breathless shout, only to be met with cold, dead silence. The clearing was empty, a circle of dirt bearing only a metal table. He shared a nervous glance with Bakugou, who was gritting his teeth so hard that they looked liable to crack, and took a few tentative steps towards the table. Off to the side, he could see pieces of paper, candles, and the tablecloth had been hastily dumped onto the ground, carelessly left in the dirt.

Bakugou’s shoes dragged in the dirt behind him, and he approached the table with Hardening crawling from his fingertips to his shoulder blades, both to prepare himself for the worst and to mask the trembling of his hands. Moonlight gleamed off the grimy metal surface, pools of liquid white illuminating the unmistakable splashes of blood smeared across it. Horror coiled within him, a needle point serpent prickling against every inch of his insides.

“R…Ragdoll?” The word was drowned out by the thunderous strikes of his heart against his ribs, so loud that he almost missed the dripping, blood curdling gurgle that answered him from the darkness.

“Wooork… have to wooooork…”

“Must be real concerned about your students, huh? You’re breakin’ my heart, Eraserhead.”

Shouta Aizawa’s world was consumed by fire and smoke before the first breath of alarm could squeeze past his throat. Apocalyptic erupted from the palm of his assailant’s hand, outstretched fingers delicately shaping the blinding blue flames that ballooned outward in screaming fervor, vaporizing the moisture in the air and just about stealing the oxygen from Shouta’s lungs. It was only by the foresight of his capture weapon already being in his grasp that he was not incinerated, the whip-crack of alloys and fabrics pulling taut against a tree branch lost in the roar of the flames.

Heat lingered on his back, smoke billowing from his singed clothes and the embers in his hair that were quenched by the rushing pressure of the air. He would have been faster before his injury, fast enough to escape the blaze and strike the Erased villain before he could even blink. But he was not the man he had been, and so he crouched low and wheezed, forcibly drawing in air even as his constricted lungs rebelled.
“Maybe you old timers should take it easy. We’re not here for you,” the villain mocked, addressing the cloud of smoke and unnaturally lingering flames, the cerulean glow exposing him to Shouta for the first time. It was a face that put an itch of familiarity in the back of his head, all purpled scar tissue and grisly staples on a sneering, irreverent face still soft with youth. But putting a name to the face could wait until after the punk was neutralized, and even in the face of his weakness Shouta’s technique remained adequate.

He leaped in a spring-coil dive, Erasure burning behind his retinas in the ghoulish red smear that had so frequently struck fear into his quarries, snapping out the ends of his scarves in whip-crack strikes. It took all of an instant, binding impotent wrists and pulling them taut with another loop against the villain’s throat, ensuring that even were Erasure to run out, he’d only be incinerating himself. Shouta followed the motion in an inky blur, his foot cracking between the fourth and fifth vertebrae in a strike that would avoid crippling, even if he’d like nothing more than to snap this greasy, smug villain in half.

The criminal went down with a grunt of air whooshing from his lungs, Shouta’s weight pinning him into the dirt with no chance of recovery. “Numbers, locations, objectives,” he barked, feeding in a few drips of the cold anger that nestled within him to, hopefully, wring this little punk dry of any pertinent information.

“What’s got you in such a hurry, Eraser?” The punk grit out, voice thin as Shouta continued slowly pressing the air out of him. “Real worried about your kids, huh? Or maybe it’s cuz’ your freak on a leash got loose-“ his voice cracked into a splutter as Shouta cracked a heel down on the center of his back, emptying his lungs for the second time.

‘Freak on a leash’. After the debriefing of the USJ incident, there was only one student he could imagined had garnered such a reputation among the League of Villains (who else would be bold or organized enough to carry out this sort of attack), and the flare of urgency and self-flagellation for letting his student wander off into the woods only stoked his temper.

“I’ll ask one more time before you start losing ribs,” Shouta metered out carefully, pulling his scarf tight enough for the villain’s own hands to constrict his windpipe. “How many of you, where are they, what are they after-“

His words turned to dust of dust, the vibration of his voice, the pounding of his heart, the whistle of his lungs drowned out in a typhoon of wailing upset that came from everywhere and nowhere at once. Shouta’s blood ran cold, and he could feel the villain shuddering under his heel. That—shit, that had to be Midoriya.

“Freak’s on the loose,” the villain rasped in a sing-song tone, wheezing laughter given a nervous edge by the aftershocks of that bone rattling explosion of noise. Patience worn to fibers, Shouta lifted a heel to start cracking bones-

“Mr. Aizawa!” Shouta’s head snapped up. Two three four heads—Iida, Ojirou, Shinsou, and Kouda burst out of the underbrush, the naked terror on their faces sending a cold lance into his belly. They doubled back at the sight of the villain under his heel, but his moment of distraction was enough to create an opportunity.

The villain twisted and bucked, throwing him off balance and leaving him open for the vicious kick that glanced off his solar plexus, a move meant only to create distance that, nonetheless, sent a reverberation of pain through his chest. He reeled back, his grip slacking on his capture weapon long enough for the villain to stagger to his feet, his tightly bound hands glowing with cerulean heat in the split second where Shouta blinked away the painful itch in his eyes.
“Stay back!” He barked at his students, ignoring the sharp, breathless pressure in his chest to instead regain his grip on his scarf. That villain couldn’t escape his knots without burning his own throat to a charred husk, but Shouta wouldn’t chance him getting away.

“They certainly don’t skimp on talent at U.A., do they?” Rather than fight his bindings, the punk only craned his neck to offer a grisly looking smile, bearing the cold, deranged apathy Shouta had seen a few times before, in villains so far gone that they couldn’t care less what happened to them. Well, he’d be happy to teach this punk to care about the consequences of his actions.

Shouta pulled the capture weapon to restrict air flow and induce unconsciousness, the villain’s hands pressing tighter and tighter against his throat until they… slid through it, liquefying into sludge as the knots of his scarf pulled together into a single loop, cutting through the gunk. A breath caught in his ribs, his hold on Erasure fluctuating; what the hell was happening, he’d already erased the villain’s Quirk! Was this something else? Was it someone else’s Quirk?

“Run fast and run far, Eraser,” the villain rasped, his head slowly dripping and melting away into the indistinct sludge pooling beneath it, like a wax figurine left in the sun. “I wonder who your students should be more afraid of… us or the freak?” Even as his flesh ran in rivers and his mocking grin tilted off its axis, teeth melting and running together, the villain’s taunt managed to ring clear until the moment his shambling remains took a single step and collapsed into nothing more than a putrid puddle.

“What the fuck…” the hushed exclamation from Hitoshi Shinsou was enough to snap Shouta back into awareness, filing away the prickling dread in the back of his head. He glanced up at his huddled students, looking sallow and unsure.

“All of you, get inside,” he ordered with all the authoritative confidence he had left in him, jerking his head towards the classrooms, “stay there until I or Vlad King say otherwise. Now,” he punctuated, the verbal spark needed to have Iida naturally take over for him, herding his fellow classmates. At least he had learned to keep a cool head in a crisis situation.

Assured that they would listen, Shouta set off at a brisk run towards the clearing’s end, consulting his mental map of the campgrounds. He needed to find Mandalay—she was the only one capable of sending long ranged messages to any students that might still be in the forest. That villain’s last (?) words had been telling—whatever the League was doing, it involved his students, and not himself or any other pro heroes. He couldn’t chance their lives; he and the other pros were too scattered, spread thinly against an unknown number of assailants. Any repercussions from giving them permission to defend themselves were well worth saving their lives.

A sudden light breaking through the trees caught Shouta’s eye, and his first thought was a student with a flashlight, perhaps Yaoyorozu had provided one or more to other students. But it wasn’t focused enough, and the tint of his goggles made it impossible to make out identifying details in the dark. And while he doubted that a villain would be just wandering around in the woods with an identifying source of light, letting his guard down had almost gotten him burned alive a few minutes ago.

Melting into the shadows, Shouta waited with the end of his scarf held in a tight fist for the source to reveal itself, footsteps cracking over loose branches and leaves. He crouched low, coiled to strike and subdue if it proved necessary, only for the form of Rikidou Satou to step out through the underbrush, one hand cradling Kouta (how had he gotten lost in the shuffle, how could any of them have not made sure a child would be safe) against his shoulder, and the other bearing a cell phone with a strangely familiar phone case, the flash beside the camera lens emitting light.

Shouta had to squint when the light flashed over his face, only to hear Satou’s voice break the
silence. “Mr. Aizawa? Oh man, I thought you were a villain or something! I’m so glad I found you—“ The relief in his student’s voice was palpable, the phone angling away long enough for him to see that, while Satou’s face was wiped of all tension, the boy cradled in his arm looked sallow and haunted, tear tracks shiny on his cheeks and lower lip quivering.

“What happened, where did you find Kouta?” He interrupted Satou’s rambling, not begrudging his outlet for lingering fear and adrenaline but too aware of his limited time to let it go on.

“He was at the base of the mountain,” Satou replied with something cautious creeping into his voice, the edge of uncertainty sharpened, “I found him there on my way back. He… he said something about a monster, and he had Midoriya’s phone with him.” Satou lifted it up, and it was only then that Shouta realized it was a limited edition All Might case. The sour feeling in his gut bubbled in displeasure, dread and urgency a twin motivator. “He hasn’t said anything to me since.”

The quiet tremor in Satou’s voice forced his hand. “I’m escorting both of you back to camp. Did you see any sign of Midoriya near the mountain, any sign of where he might have gone, or his Quirk causing damage?”

“Just that super loud roar a few minutes ago,” Satou admitted uneasily, eyebrows knitted together in clear distress. “I’m worried it’s gonna be like the USJ again.”

“I’ll make sure that isn’t the case.” Shouta’s tone was one of finality, his plan of action firmly cemented; he would escort Satou and Kouta back to camp, relay his permission to engage in self-defense to Mandalay, track down Midoriya (and potentially even Tokoyami, if he was still out in the dark somewhere) to erase any out of control Quirks, extract his students, and neutralize any and all remaining threats with the Pussycats.

“Let’s go. Quickly,” he ordered, turning to retrace his steps and pausing only to confirm that Satou would keep up with him. They rushed through the underbrush in a silence broken only by the crunch of detritus underfoot and the distant crackling of forest fires. Though he was, as always, outwardly composed, Shouta wasn’t unaffected by the dire circumstances. Quick action and rational thinking had been drilled into his skull and beaten into him when he made mistakes on the field, but doubt and fear were not things that could be simply trained away. The thought of his students trapped by villains who likely wouldn’t hesitate to kill them was a sickening one, but he had to put it aside for the moment. When it was over, he could worry. When he wasn’t needed, he could allow that fear to take hold. But not until then.

The main facility emerged from a break in the tree line before too long, and there were no signs of the punk in the torn jacket lingering around, either. Whatever the hell had happened with him, Shouta had no doubt that he’d be back before long, likely an integral part of their plan to keep himself and Vlad King herded away from the main conflict by threatening the students inside. Whoever was behind it had thought things through, and had likely had some manner of reconnaissance on the camp before the attack.

Pushing the chilling thought of being stalked and watched without their knowledge, Shouta burst into the facility with Satou and Kouta in tow, knocking in a practiced rhythm on the locked classroom door to ensure that Vlad King wouldn’t mistake him for an assailant.

“I found some strays for you to look after,” he called through the wooden barrier, “one of my students, and Mandalay’s charge.”

The door clicked open, the lock that would surely not stop but would hopefully at least impede a determined villain turning and the door itself sliding open to reveal Vlad’s grizzled, scowling countenance. “Any sign of class B students, or contact with the Pussycats?” He was greeted gruffly,
and earned a slanting of brows when he answered in the negative. Vlad King slid the door the rest of the way open, allowing Shouta to step in with Satou trailing behind him. A few of his students expressed relief at the sight of him, unharmed, but unfortunately he didn’t have time to stick around for feel-goods.

“I’m heading back out. I’ll let Mandalay know to inform the students to act in self-defense, and I’ll be tracking down two of my students that might have lost control of their Quirks.” A hush of unease fell over his students, Mina Ashido and Denki Kaminari exchanging worried glances, and the piercing eyes of one Shouto Todoroki zeroing in on him. “Keep an eye on them—I was attacked by a villain on my way out, one with a fire Quirk. I think he’s working with someone else to send out proxies, he turned to sludge when I got rough with him.”

“Understood,” Vlad King replied in the sort of tone that let Shouta know he truly did understand (one of the reasons he could actually tolerate his fellow homeroom teacher), and that was that. He turned to leave-

“Mr. Aizawa, if you’re going after Midoriya and Tokoyami, then I’m coming with you.” The fierce whip crack tone of the normally neutral and subdued Todoroki combined with the screeching of chair legs on tile was enough of a shock for a few of his students to gasp aloud, Iida in particular turning white as a sheet and just about leaping out of his own chair in protest. Shouta raised an eyebrow and unlocked the door to leave.

“No. Stay put.”

“You’re at a disadvantage. You don’t know how many villains are out there, or their positions. Your Quirk is based on your vision, and the ambient light level is too low for you to erase a Quirk reliably. You aren’t very quick over open ground, unable to maintain a high level of speed with the use of your capture weapon for very long, especially after your respiratory damage. I can provide light with my fire and transportation with my ice, as well as serve as a backup to subdue Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow if you aren’t able to erase it.”

Shouta paused with his hand on the lip of the door, glancing over his shoulder with a practiced stare that usually had his students obediently sitting down and doing as they were told. “You can write me an essay on how unprofessional I am if you want, but you aren’t leaving this classroom.”

Todoroki met his gaze head on, the only sign of irritation being the twitch of his limp fingers. “I don’t enjoy breaking rules, sir, but I will if I have to.”

That little brat… it figured that his most ‘well behaved’ student would turn out to be so stubborn. “I’ll happily expel you once this incident is over with, but I don’t have time to argue with you—“

“I’m willing to face expulsion,” he was interrupted, Todoroki’s determined expression hardening into outright defiance. They both ignored Iida’s splutter of disbelief. “With all due respect, if being a hero means following the rules and letting my friends die, then I need to rethink my career path.”

“You don’t seem to understand that your life is my responsibility,” Shouta countered coldly, frustration hissing through the cracks of his carefully constructed barrier. “If I were to allow you to come with me, and something happened, that’s my fault. Get it?”

“Which makes it your responsibility if something were to happen to Tokoyami and Midoriya because you refused to use the means available to you!” Todoroki’s voice left him in a shout, his face screwed up and hands clenched at his sides in shaking fists. It was the first true loss of control that Shouta had seen from him. “I don’t care what you say. I’m going out there whether you allow it or not.”
Shit. The last damn thing he needed was one of his students going rogue because he couldn’t follow simple instructions. He was fairly sure that Vlad King could keep Todoroki under control, but having to deal with a headstrong teenager who didn’t realize how detrimental his behavior was as well as villain attacks would be a strain, and might lead to slip ups.

He didn’t have time for this. “You will be facing disciplinary action when we return to school,” Shouta stated with absolute finality. “I can’t have you thinking that endangering your own life and the lives of your classmates for your own selfish, naïve convictions is acceptable. Vlad, keep him in that chair-“ Shouta was cut off by the door sliding open in his face, eyes widening as an ashy palm bearing the first licking embers of an inferno and a bruised, stitched together smirk were leveled directly at him.

Shouta’s vision was bathed in red and blue, the writhing stream of flames engulfing a crystalline barrier of blood, Vlad King’s Quirk the only thing standing between him and a painful death by roasting alive. He leaped clear of the doorway as the wall of blood shifted, a shout rising to his lips.

“I need a sight-line-!”

“Todoroki, what are you doing?!-“ Iida’s cry of alarm was accompanied by the sound of splintering wood and a rush of freezing cold air, Shouta’s head whipping around in shock only to catch Todoroki’s retreating form disappear through the room’s other door, a jagged spear of ice having torn it off the hinges.

Another lash of fire jetted into the room, and he activated Erasure just in time to catch a glimpse of a scarred visage and reduce it to fading embers. “Get back here!” He roared, the situation deteriorating so rapidly that he barely had time to process it all. “Vlad-“ The other hero’s wave of blood narrowed and shifted into a set of restraints that could prevent the villain from sending the whole building up in flames, but before he could even use them the villain suddenly choked, his outstretched hand shaking as a frozen lance gored him from one end to the other, sludge leaking from around the entrance and exit wounds.

“Keep the kids inside,” Shouta barked, barreling through the doorway and past the melting villain without even a glance, his momentum carrying him into the opposite wall over the slick, frozen floor that Todoroki had left in his wake. He caught sight of the back of his head at the end of the hallway, managing to keep up Erasure for only a split second longer before Todoroki disappeared out the door.

God dammit, god dammit, god dammit. The mantra repeated at the back of Shouta’s skull like war drums, his thundering footsteps echoing it as he threw himself down the hallway, slowed by the layers of ice that threw off his footing. He burst through the double doors leading outside, only to emerge into a blinding cloud of white steam. He could hear the crackling of ice forming ahead of him, but without a line of sight he couldn’t erase that brat’s Quirk and drag him back.

Forget expulsion: Shouto Todoroki should count himself lucky if Shouta didn’t strangle him with his bare hands at the end of this.
Devouring, Overpowering

Shouto Todoroki was, in no uncertain terms, in a… fairly substantial amount of trouble. It was entirely by his own doing, and the situation at hand was several levels of urgency above the potential ramifications he’d face in the uncertain future. That being said, he couldn’t understimate how much trouble he was in. He was, most likely, going to be expelled for his explicit disobedience, but at the moment he couldn’t find it in himself to care. Being a hero was meaningless if he couldn’t even save the people he cared about. He knew it was reckless to run off the way he did, but the alternative was sitting and waiting for the news that his friends had been killed. The thought alone was enough to ignite his blood, to make his skin prickle with furious heat even as frost radiated from his right side, icing down the forest floor and allowing him to skate along it faster than his legs could ever take him.

He was reminded, suddenly, of the Final Exam, the weight of Midoriya settled against his back and pushing him further, faster, and stronger than he could be by himself. Even if their teamwork hadn’t been perfect, even if they had failed the exam in the end… he’d liked that synergy. He wanted it again, to move in sync with someone he trusted, to combine their efforts and their strengths into something new, something greater than the sum of its parts. He wanted that with all of his friends. He wanted the easy, meaningful rhythm of having a place he belonged.

Shouto Todoroki wanted to be with his friends.

He didn’t want to be alone anymore.

That sudden realization was the accelerant that Shouto needed, the surging slush of his Quirk lighting up like an inferno. His slick, shallow trail of ice erupted in a frigid cold snap, sinking into the earth like permafrost and propelling him up a ramp of ice that nearly cleared the trees.

Shouto’s momentum carried him up over the clearing in a shallow arc, high enough that he could immediately take stock of the situation. Mandalay and Tiger were both locked in combat with a pair of villains. One was a reptilian Stain wannabe, wielding a truly ridiculous greatsword composed of smaller knives and blades buckled together, and the other was nearly as overbearingly muscular as Tiger himself, weaving between his punches with disturbing ease and clearly heading in the direction of a massive hunk of steel that was likely related to their Quirk.

A sudden gasp from Mandalay prioritized Shouto’s target for him, muscles straining as he spun through the air to whip his left arm outward, sending forth a gout of searing flames that sent the villain reeling back, giving Mandalay the opportunity to retreat and recover.

“New orders!” He shouted, his voice already feeling hoarse from the unusual strain, “on the authority of the hero Eraserhead, all students are cleared for combat with villains!” Whatever response Mandalay called back was lost to him as he hit the ground, sending up a cushion of ice the moment his fingers skated the ground. It was a jarring, painful impact, but the instinctive molding of the ice at least kept him from breaking anything. Midoriya had taught them all an important lesson during the Obstacle Race.

Before he even had a chance to catch his breath and keep moving to avoid Mr. Aizawa’s wrath, the more casually dressed of the two villains sent a knife hurtling in his direction, shouting something to her partner that he couldn’t make out over the rush of blood in his ears.

More annoyed than threatened, he sent up a wall of ice that encased the knife in mid-air, and, while he was at it, he sent a wave of ice to lock down the bar of steel she had been heading towards as well. Before any more attacks could be made on his life (and before he could get in the way of the
professionally trained heroes more than he already had) he took off back into the woods, deliberately leaving a trail that Mr. Aizawa could easily follow, hearing only the faint shout of the villain mentioning something about a ‘kill-list’.

The implication sent a cold lance through his stomach, and the brief flash of fire he pushed through his left side did nothing to alleviate it. It was sobering, a dark reality that threatened to snuff the fire in his stomach. But… he already knew his friends would be in danger. It didn’t change anything, because he was still going to save them. They made sure he wasn’t alone, gave him security, and gave him a drive he had never had by himself. And he had to return that kindness in whatever way he could.

Even as the world split in half, his muscles turning to useless meat and his bones ringing with the awful, hungering wail that drilled dark promises into his skull. The creature that could level the trees, mountains, and sky screamed its upset, threatening to twist him into the human animal consumed by base fear. Even so, Shouto pushed on towards its source. He trailed that scream, the wretched, splintering thing, in single-minded pursuit of its voice, of the boy caged beneath terror incarnate.

He burned against the howling dark, because he had to be there for his friends no matter what.

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Eijirou Kirishima threw up a Hardened forearm just in time to avoid being skewered through the eyes by half a dozen stalks of bladed enamel, the ends that would have ended up excavating his skull instead snapping off on his jagged skin. He cleaved through as much of the stalks as he could with the narrow edge of his arm, snapping away enough chunks of enamel that he could resume his frantic sprint towards Bakugou’s retreating back.

“We can’t run forever, this guy’s too fast!” Eijirou gasped out, his chest beginning to burn from exertion. He risked a glance over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of the limp, restrained body lurching sickeningly through the air, suspended on stilts of his own wildly growing teeth. The airy gurgles of “Flesh, fleeeesh!” That drifted down from above did little to make the experience less harrowing. If he wasn’t making ample use of his Hardening, Eijirou was sure his skin would have crawled right off. And that was the clear issue—his Hardening made the villain's attacks an annoyance at best, at least short-term, but Bakugou didn’t have the luxury of not being vulnerable to getting gored. Eijirou couldn’t protect him from the dozens of enamel spears jutting down at them.

“You think I haven’t fuckin’ noticed?!” Bakugou barked over his shoulder, sending off a staccato of weak, contained explosions to shatter the lancing teeth that would have otherwise split him in half. Shards of teeth exploded in every direction, a handful of fragments scoring across the side of Bakugou’s face and cutting gashes into the skin. He barked out in pain, hands twitching as his explosions let up, and Eijirou’s heart hammered against his throat as the villain spotted his opening.

Spittle laden shrieks rained down on them in accompaniment to the gleaming white blade storm splintering out of the villain’s slack maw, and Eijirou’s feet kicked up clods of dirt as he threw himself between Bakugou and a violent skewering. Countless squared edges cracked off and shattered on his Hardened flesh, catching in the stony crags and snapping apart as he ripped an arm through them—and then his world became light and noise, heat prickling at the back of his head. The force of it sent him staggering on all fours into the dirt, and a handful of teeth that he hadn’t managed to destroy whipped past him.

Ears ringing and spotty vision so shot that the forest had become little more than a solid sheet of darkness, he barely had time to scramble to his feet and keep running before Bakugou’s voice bled back in. “-he hell do you think you’re doing, you fucking idiot! If your skull wasn’t a solid fucking rock I’d have blown your head off!”
Eijirou blinked hard to try and force his eyes to readjust, Bakugou’s shadowed face turned to glare at him. A sliver of his ear was painted with blood, and a long sheen of liquid darkness cut across the right side of his forehead. His words echoed in Eijirou’s ears, realization making some hot, molten force push up against the top of his chest. He… Bakugou had exploded him! Anger chugged through him, pushed into overdrive by extreme stress and absolute incredulity. That ungrateful bastard!..!

“You stupid jackass!” Eijirou snarled out, rage exploding past the weakened barrier of his rattled nerves, “I just saved your life!” His insides burned, engines glowing red hot as he pushed himself faster, gritting his teeth in frustration and bee-lining for a break in the trees where Bakugou might be able to aim an explosion at something that wasn’t him. A staccato of teeth shattered across his back, ripping the rest of his shirt to tatters. At least the impact of the damn teeth weren’t enough to crack him, even with prolonged hits, but sooner or later something would slip through Bakugou’s defenses.

They both tumbled out through the underbrush, the sky opening up above them as the treetops thinned, the misshapen form of the villain blotting out the stars as he skittered after them.

“Everyone, listen! On the authority of the hero Eraserhead, all class A and B students are hereby granted permission to engage in combat! Run if you can, but defend yourselves if you can’t!”

Before Mandalay’s words had even ceased ringing in Eijirou’s skull, he could feel the change in the air, aimless frustration crystalizing into focused rage, wild embers coalescing into a raging inferno. Instinct crashed through him, and he just barely managed to hunker down and cover his face with an arm when Bakugou’s scream rang out.

“FUCK OFF!” His voice was raw fury, piercing the night air and the shrieks of the villain in accompaniment with blistering explosions that decimated the darkness in blooms of white and yellow destruction. Eijirou could just barely make out the storm of explosions streaming from Bakugou’s outstretched hand, dozens of them filling the air and shattering the hail of knife edged teeth raining down on him.

The villain’s teeth crumbled in droves, falling apart faster than they could shoot out of his raw, drooling gums. His began to lose his balance, and his assault abruptly let up as he avoided the rest of Bakugou’s attacks in a stilted, swooping lurch.

“Give me your flesh!” the villain bellowed, slobber streaking down his face in glistening rivers. Eijirou shuddered in revulsion and fear both at the sight; even as he retreated for the moment, the villain’s teeth were growing back, an unending torrent of enamel.

Bakugou’s hands began lighting up for a second salvo, his shoulders set wide and his lips curled into a teeth-baring snarl. Eijirou nearly bowled him over in his haste to yank at his sleeve, teeth gritted in frustration.

“You can’t hold him off like that forever,” he snapped, “we need to get the hell out of here!”

“We’re not getting back to camp without this guy goring us,” Bakugou snarled, ripping his arm out of Eijirou’s grasp and sending him stumbling backwards, “we’ve gotta put this fucker down here and now!”

Eijirou boiled with anger, frustration bleeding through every crack in his skin, ugly words hissing out of him like steam. “And what happens if you light the whole forest up, you idiot?! You haven’t changed at all!” he bit out, “You’re still the same selfish, arrogant asshole you were since day one--“

Eijirou’s voice was swallowed whole by the deathly noise. Every molecule, every atom of his being froze over in the wake of Hell’s breath, a hideous birth of damnation fused into wailing hate. The
voice of entropy shattered him at his core, his limbs turned loose and gelatinous, barely containing strength to stand. That decaying howl sank into every crevice of his skull, all of his thoughts deteriorated save for one.

“Midoriya,” Eijirou choked as soon as that awful, awful sound had ceased crawling into his ears, his breath trickling back in laborious gasps. That—that had been so much worse than the USJ, so debilitating that he hadn’t even been able to breathe. He strained to turn his head, legs shaking beneath him.

He didn’t know what his own face looked like, but the naked fear scrawled across Bakugou’s was enough to give him a decent idea. Bakugou’s cheek was trembling, teeth grinding into the flesh of his lip and dredging up blood. The haunted, hollow depths of his eyes were something Eijirou never wanted to see again.

“T…the villain,” he gasped out, control of his body slowly coming back to him. He stumbled forward, shooting a wild look over his shoulder and up into the air, only for the sky to be completely empty. Had the villain…? He searched the ground instead, and was just barely able to make out a black lump near the edge of the clearing. He was already beginning to stir, gurgling and moaning as slivers of snaking white emerged from his gums.

“Bakugou, we need to leave, we have to run-“his urgent call was drowned out again by a sudden thunderous crash from the thickened woods across the clearing. Dread bubbled in his gut at the sight of treetops suddenly vanishing, thrown aside in the rapidly approaching crunch of splintered wood. Something else was coming, a villain, maybe a Noumu, and they had nowhere to run.

Eijirou fell two shaking steps backwards, his nerves completely shot and fear seeping in through the cracks of his resolve. Hardening spread across his skin unevenly, his grip on his Quirk faltering. They were fucked, they were so fucked-

“Kirishima! Bakugou!” The sudden cry of panic snapped Eijirou out of his spiraling terror, his gaze snapping to the edge of the rumbling woods to find Shouji sprinting at full tilt towards them, spattered in blood and soil with one of his tentacles ending in a ragged stump. “We need light, now! Dark Shadow-“

The trees at his heels exploded in a shower of splintering trunks and perforated leaves, titanic limbs of roiling shadows yanking them from the earth with ease. The sharpened, magnified bulk of Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow ripped into the clearing, dragging itself with earth-gouging claws and bellowing in rage. “Noisy insects, I’ll smash you all! ALL OF YOU!”

“Stay back!” Tokoyami hysterically shouted through gritted teeth, consumed up to his chest in Dark Shadow’s bulk, “he’ll kill you! ”

The dire warning in Tokoyami’s voice was enough for Eijirou’s legs to start moving again, carrying him in a dead run towards the still-frozen Bakugou, molten eyes staring hazily at the mass of shadows bearing down on them.

“Use your explosions!” Kirishima barked desperately, “I’ll keep the villain distracted!” The twitching lump of leather and teeth had begun rising again on enamel stilts, wild eyes zeroed in on Shouji even as he fled Dark Shadow’s wild rampage. Bakugou blinked once, hazy eyes brightening with pure, searing fury.

“Worthless fucking bird brain!” He screamed, hands lighting up with crackling explosions that drew Dark Shadow’s attention towards him. The colossal, serpentine mass of shadows roared and lifted a towering claw towards him-
“Miine, MIIIIIINE! GET AWAY FROM MY FLESHHHHHH! ” The villain shrieked, hurtling up into the air before Eijirou could reach him and sending a dozen spears of jagged enamel towards Dark Shadow’s outstretched claw, piercing through the shadows as cleanly as cutting through air.

Dark Shadow’s malicious red gaze burned into the villain like the beam of a lighthouse, the maddened Quirk roaring and snapping apart the teeth impaling his claw as though they were mere splinters. The wind pressure alone was enough to snuff Bakugou’s explosion and send him skipping across the clearing, unable to subdue Tokoyami’s Quirk in time. Ichorous darkness flowed from the ragged seam of Dark Shadow’s beak, rage billowing forth in a screaming fog.

It was enough of a distraction for Shouji to make distance between himself and Dark Shadow, his panting breaths dampling his facecloth. He made a beeline for Bakugou’s prone form, lying in a shallow divot of earth.

For the few moments the villain was distracted by Dark Shadow, Eijirou saw his opening. He pushed forward, pulling his hardened arms close to his face as he charged towards the recovering villain. His mind raced with thoughts of what he was going to do, how exactly he was going to drive this bastard into the ground by his teeth and knock his lights out! He tensed as the villain’s gaze flickered wildly in his direction. He choked out a gasp as a flash of white snaked between his legs, arching down to punch straight through the scarce meat of his shin and anchor him into the dirt. He went down in a heap in the dirt as his own flesh halted his forward momentum, the white hot sting-itch-burn of skin lifting from raw nerves surfacing through the numbing haze of adrenaline.

Dark Shadow’s warped roar of fury bellowed forth once more, his claw blackening the air in loathing pursuit of the villain suspended on stilts, formless talons wrapping around nothing but empty air. The villain lurched out of the way by mere inches, screaming and spitting in aimless bloodlust as he turned his sights on Eijirou.

True panic hammered against his insides, breaths coming in short gasps as the villain menacingly swayed above him, a broken toothy smile sprouting back with gleaming razor edges. His eyes widened, instinctively hardening, desperately hoping he could endure the blows until Bakugou took out Dark Shadow-- and hoping Dark Shadow wouldn't come after him, too.

He was given no more time to think as the black clad villain extended his teeth downwards, rushing towards the downed student. Eijirou clenched his teeth to brace for the agony of snapping the tooth apart inside his leg, fear thundering at the base of his throat as the villain screamed and Dark Shadow shrieked in response. Kirishima froze in place, eyes shaking as his mind raced, begging to know how he would survive, where Bakugou was and why wasn't he helping stop him--

The air swept past Eijirou’s prone form in a frigid blast, a thousand layers of creaking, groaning frost spearing across the earth and collecting in a subzero spire. His head whipped around to spot Todoroki skating into the clearing past Dark Shadow’s reach, vaporous cold radiating from him in twisting, serpentine currents. A moment after Eijirou registered his presence, the enamel lance speared through his leg suddenly retracted, the sharp pain of meat sucking on the retreating blade making him shout through his teeth even as he scrambled backwards.

Eijirou glanced up to track the tooth’s source, only to find the villain entirely encased in crystalline ice, save for everything above his upper jaw.

“Todoroki, use your fire!” Shouji cried out through one of his Quirk-grown mouths, instantly drawing Dark Shadow’s ire. A pair of claws crashed down on the location Shouji’s voice had come from, sending up an explosive plume of dirt that he barely escaped with Bakugou tucked under his arms.
Todoroki slid gracefully off the end of a trail of ice, his radiating cold melting away as his left side lit ablaze. “Over here!” he called challengingly, more than loud enough to pull Dark Shadow’s attention towards him. For the first time that night, Eijirou felt some small facet of relief crack open in the core of his uncertainty as he saw Tokoyami’s quirk retract from the sudden influx of light. Once they got Tokoyami under control, they could head back to camp, and regroup with everyone...

But it was not to be. The world split apart into chaos once more, a tortured wail gutting the night air and a wall of trees completely disintegrating on the edge of the clearing closest to the trail of destruction Dark Shadow had wrought. Entire trees simply fell apart into dust and clouds of black fumes as a swarm of massive, sickly black stalks shaped like fingers swept across their trunks. The moonlight curdled and shrank when the entity between the trees emerged, overshadowing the darkness of the forest. Curved, dripping spines surfaced above the canopy, a legion of needles heralding the alien construct of tarry, carapace-like skin and bloody rivers of pulsing red flesh.

Eijirou’s thoughts turned to static in the presence of Living Nightmare, billowing fear like a poisonous fog that pressed down on him until his bones creaked from the pressure. It was different from the USJ, his subconscious mind noted fleetingly. Sleeker, sharper, more deadly even in its deformed, misshapen existence. Where once flesh had knotted and folded over a missing limb, there was now a truly titanic limb that bulged with hideous strength, musculature pulsating as though it would pop between the cracks in the skin.

The hot blood trickling down his leg turned to ice, a scorching line of cold that wormed into his flesh and flash froze his blood into jutting needles. He could feel it draining from his face, his skin turned clammy and ashen and rising with a prickling static that threatened to burn him into a heap of char. Terror pulsed and flowed in a crushing miasma, blotting out the stars above with true emptiness. For a moment stretched like tissue, gristle ripping and wearing thin, turning transparent, the clearing was silent. Nothing moved. Nothing breathed. Existence achingly crumbled apart, succumbed to the maddening singularity of the Living Nightmare.

Dark Shadow shattered the cold tranquility with a bellowing howl, furious red streaks burning in the sides of its head. A shadowy claw blitzed through the air to shred Living Nightmare into ribbons, and was immediately met by over a dozen spear length, needle-point spines that skewered the roiling shadows from palm to elbow.

The ear piercing shriek that was ripped out of Dark Shadow was enough to turn Eijirou’s blood back to liquid, soil tearing under his feet as he bee-lined for Shouji and Todoroki. “Don’t just stand there!” He yelled, a note of hysteria high in his voice, “calm down Dark Shadow while Midoriya has him busy!”

The earth erupted behind him in an explosive shockwave that sent him reeling, his back instinctively hardened over-only to feel no impact. He glanced behind him to find a wall of ice just barely erected in time to capture a litany of branch-sized splinters and chunks of hard earth. Dark Shadow towered above it, bringing another claw hurtling at the obfuscated Living Nightmare.

“There’s no way we can get close to them-“Todoroki began to say, only for the shield of Shouji’s arms to suddenly part as Bakugou stumbled out of his grip, looking almost delirious with fright and fury.

“Were you fuckin’ sleeping during the USJ, asshole? That Living fuckin’ Nightmare would turn us all to paste in two seconds!” A bone rattling wail sounded from the other side of the clearing, and Eijirou had to fight against the sludge in his veins to keep himself standing. “Just wait until Dark Shadow gets his ass kicked,” Bakugou strained to get out, “then we’ll grab bird boy and get the fuck out of here.”
“We don’t need to confront either of them, I made sure to leave a trail for-“

Eijirou spoke up to refute Bakugou’s callous suggestion, barely even realizing he was speaking over Todoroki. “It doesn’t matter. Tokoyami’s in more danger than any of us. The longer Dark Shadow is fighting Midoriya, the more likely he could end up as collateral. We need to calm down Dark Shadow as soon as possible, before Midoriya accidentally hurts him!”

“Guys-“ Todoroki’s voice rose in volume, only for the brief seconds they had taken to catch their breath to be ripped away by the sudden destruction of his ice wall. Living Nightmare crashed through it with all the destructive force of a mortar strike, reducing tree trunk shards to sawdust and ice into powder. Eijirou threw himself at Shouji and Bakugou to shield them from the debris, another protective wall of ice already forming at the tip of Todoroki’s shoe.

The black mass ripped a massive gouge through the earth, misshapen limbs dragging it to a lurching halt in a spray of loose soil. Eijirou’s breath caught in indecision, the urge to flee so visceral that his legs shook uncontrollably. But Living Nightmare did not turn to attack them—it ignored them completely, gazing, eyeless, at Dark Shadow.

Despite the artificial terror hammered into his gut, Eijirou’s gaze was glued to the unearthly visage of the Living Nightmare. Those few, scant seconds were… bewitching. His thoughts slowed and swirled together, the glistening darkness tugging at something in the base of his skull that coalesced into a faint, electric whine between his ears.

He was ripped back into reality by the sudden hunch of Living Nightmare’s shoulders, the entire length of the inhuman construct compressing and compacting. Clawed heels dug into the earth, and the cracks in its skin drew closer together, the red flesh below bulging outwards as complex musculature tensed. The tendons in its insectoid legs drew together like the coils of a spring, a megaton shell loaded and primed-and fired.

In the span of time it took the nerves in Eijirou’s eyelids to receive the electrical impulse to blink, Living Nightmare had cleared the space between it and Dark Shadow, slipping through the weave of time and space, a cosmic predator that knew not the constraint of reality. Dark Shadow screamed as Living Nightmare’s weight sent it reeling backwards, the battering ram arm locked around Dark Shadow’s beak and driving it downwards, sending both creatures toppling to the ground in an earth shattering impact and a cloud of dust.

“Now, stop them now!” Bakugou’s mouth had just begun to open to refute Eijirou’s instruction, but the words were headed off by Todoroki gathering a handful of his collar and yanking him forward, a slick wave of ice forming underneath his shoe.

“You’ll have to use your explosions, I can’t switch reliably from ice to fire in time,” Todoroki shouted calmly over the cacophony of tearing earth and splintering trees, snaking towards the epicenter at an angle that allowed his ice to reliably absorb most of the shockwaves and debris.

“Get your fuckin’ hands off me you peppermint bitch-!”

Eijirou cried out as an ear piercing shriek from Dark Shadow heralded a collision that buckled the ground beneath his feet, and sent up a wave of dust that engulfed his classmates whole. “Todoroki, Bakugou!” He made it five harrowed strides before Shouji shouted his name in alarm, his head whipping around and his Hardening instinctively turning flesh to stone.

“Kirishima, we’ve got another problem!” He gestured with a stack of tentacles, and Eijirou’s chest seized as the pillar of ice holding the villain prisoner began to crack, the ice peppered with chunks of stone.
He skidded to turn and sprint in Shouji’s direction, gritting his teeth as the wound in his leg flared with renewed agony. “Shouji!” He yelled over his own rattling heart and thudding footsteps, forcing himself not to stumble at the sound of a guttural wail behind him, “you’ve gotta get me up there, I have to take him out before he gets free!”

“F…fleeesssh… I'll p…put YOU ON ICE!” The villain howled, blued lips parting for jagged blades of enamel to begin slowly sprouting from his half-frozen gums.

Eijirou pushed his legs harder, forcing his burning muscles and rent, spasming flesh to move faster. He barreled towards Shouji at full speed, lungs clenching on each hysterical breath. “Throw me!” Shouji’s eyes lit up in realization just moments before Eijirou threw himself at him, three of his corded, powerful arms catching around his middle. His stomach lurched as Shouji spun to maintain his momentum, rotating him around just in time to watch the ice encasing the villain explode in a shower of frozen shards.

The strength of Shouji’s throw snapped the tethers of gravity holding Eijirou to the earth, sent hurtling towards the limp, bound figure that plummeted for mere inches before stalks of teeth sprouted and anchored in the earth. Eijirou bared his own teeth to quell the fear quickening his pulse into overtime, drawing back an arm to shatter the enamel blades spilling out towards him. He braced himself, squeezing his eyes shut before he would be engulfed in a fanged vortex meant to peel him apart-

Eijirou’s eyes snapped open when, instead of crashing through a wall of jagged teeth or being forced back by piercing lances, his fist met the villain’s midsection with a meaty, muffled crack. The impact was shortly followed by the rest of his Hardened form, smashing through the unmoving stalks of teeth and into the villain. All of the momentum stored in Eijirou’s body transferred into the villain’s unsupported frame, and for a brief instant he could make out eyes bulging out of their sockets before gravity snapped up to catch them in its jaws.

He spent all of an instant wondering why the clearly panicked villain wasn’t trying to skewer him, why his teeth were no longer supporting his weight, why it had suddenly been so easy to take him down when he’d been such a terrifying force. Then his train of thought was violently interrupted by something-fabric?-winding around his midsection in a lung compressing coil and yanking him away from the villain, a gasp leaving his lips even when his Hardening kept his insides from being squeezed.

Eijirou’s vision became a chaotic blur was the thing wrapped around his waist spun him around, landing him on his feet even as he stumbled under his own weight. His eyes snapped up before the world had even stopped spinning, taking in gravity-defying hair, black clothes, yellow goggles-

“Mr. Aizawa?!” He blurted in shock, half a second before the villain’s body hit the ground with a dull thump behind him, in the time it took him to glance back, Aizawa had already rushed past him, coiling his scarf around one arm.

“Both of you, contain the villain!” He ordered with deep, chilling urgency, which became only more commanding when an impact from obfuscated combatants sent the earth rippling in heaves and jerks, dust blossoming outward in blinding waves. “I need to stop Midoriya and Tokoyami.”

As quickly as he had arrived, Aizawa took off in a flurry of scarves, across the moon soaked clearing and towards the slowly migrating maelstrom of violence. Eijirou could do nothing but watch him advance and heed his order, uselessness clinging in a grimy film against the walls of his throat. He wasn’t strong enough to get close, couldn’t do a thing to help his friends, to stop Dark Shadow-- to protect Midoriya.
Mr. Aizawa would have to be enough.

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Shouto Todoroki choked on an influx of particulates that clung to every crevice of his esophagus, and seemed to steal the very air out of his lungs; it was something that would normally be a moderate concern, but he couldn’t find the opportunity to give it much thought when a steel wall of air slammed into him. The ice beneath his feet crumbled as the oxygen was punched from his lungs, and his grip on Bakugou’s collar was lost when the shockwave of force threw him aside.

He was weightless, blind and breathless, until he met the shattering earth in a bruising impact, a skipped stone buffeted by the whistling dust. The physical pain was distracting, but manageable—he’d taken stronger blows before. He focused on drawing breath through his convulsing throat, pressing as low to the ground as he could manage.

When the air ceased whipping past him, returned from violent turbulence to a thick, shifting haze, he willed a rush of cold through the tips of his fingers, buried in the dirt. A sheet of ice formed ahead of him, a curving buffer to block the dust and absorb further blows. It was only then that he felt safe enough to try and open his eyes, sanded over with grit that he gently rubbed away.

“Bakugou!” Shouto coughed out, voice a wheezing thing swallowed by the intermittent shrieks of Dark Shadow and Living Nightmare. He squinted, vision watery, into the dark haze that the moonlight failed to penetrate, searching for any sign of a human silhouette, a dark lump, some abnormality in the formless darkness-

“Fuckin’ idiot, I’m right here,” a raspy voice choked out from directly behind him, a groping hand landing on his leg and making him jump. He glanced back and found red, squinted eyes glaring at him, Bakugou looking equally as painted in dust as Shouto felt. “What’s your next plan, asshole? We can’t light shit up with all this dust.”

“I left a trail through the forest for Mr. Aizawa to follow me, he was supposed to be the one to handle Tokoyami and Midoriya—“Shouto’s words were erased from existence, every particle in the air and every molecule in the earth vibrating from a blow that birthed another maelstrom. Dust whipped past them at speeds that could flay flesh, and the shrieking whistle in Shouto’s ears was nearly deafening. It was all he could do to drag Bakugou closer to his crumbling shield of ice, pouring layers and layers of reinforcement into it until he could feel his own skin budding with frost.

And as soon as it had come, the whipping dust storm slowed down to a ponderous billow, and Shouto could release the iron-grip on his Quirk with a shiver. His shield of ice, meters thick, had been worn down into a pitted crag that barely stood under its own power. It was a realization that filled Shouto with resolve—they couldn’t wait around any longer.

“Bakugou, I need you to help me clear as much of this dust as we can! Use the biggest explosions you can without hurting anyone, displace as much as you can in a straight line!” Shouto tapped into the once-reviled half of his power, skin igniting from the tips of his fingers and wreathing up along his left arm. “I’ll use my fire to—“

“Todoroki!” A grave, anticipated voice sliced through the haze of dust and carved a deep, accusatory furrow in Shouto’s back. “I know you’re in there! Use your fire to create an updraft, I need line of sight to Erase Dark Shadow and Living Nightmare!”

“Does anyone,” Bakugou began with a tremor in his voice, thick and ragged with fury and purpose both, “ever,” Shouto glanced back, eyes wide as the dust caked figure raised a popping, sizzling palm to point behind them, “SHUT THEIR FUCKING MOUTHS?!” A geyser of explosive power
erupted from between Bakugou’s fingertips, a focused cone of destruction that thrummed with concussive force, only worsening the ringing in Shouto’s ears. The signature blooms of heat and dark smoke he had come to associate with Bakugou’s explosions were… lessened, all his power poured into explosive displacement that tunneled through the thinner dust clouds behind them.

In moments, Aizawa was completely visible, and Shouto whipped back around to bring the low, warming crackle of his fire up into a roaring blaze. Out, he visualized carefully, focusing on the image of his fire fanning out as far as it would go, lifting the dust away. He reached for the ignition, and his flames raged forth in a rising tide, an undisciplined lash of power that, nonetheless, managed to do what he needed of it. Clouds of dust lifted away in pluming pillars, countless motes engulfed and lighting up into embers that swirled up into the slowly emerging night sky. For the briefest moment, something in his chest seized up at the thought of those embers carrying on the wind, touching down, lighting up the rest of the forest in an inferno—but he couldn’t think of such things. He had to focus on one problem at a time.

And as the cloak of dust was ripped away, Shouto found that all his worries, all his uncertainties, his fears and deepest terrors-overshadowed. A deep, poisonous chill snap froze every moving part of his anatomy, the blaze at his fingertips snuffed as all his oxygen was pulled out of his chest. That moment of fear months ago, in the sport’s festival, paralyzing and suffocating, was nothing. Everything was nothing, all existence squeezed into a singularity of insignificance when placed in the presence of personified null.

Shouto Todoroki could see the Living Nightmare, its presence in waking reality an error that seared across the back of his orbital floor and branded itself into his grey matter. The instant clawed inside his memories, a parasite squirming into its host. Dark Shadow, having gone oddly quiet for the majority of its clash with Living Nightmare, had been speared in a jagged line by numerous yellowed spines, puncturing first through the base of the throat, then up along the underside of the curved beak. The dripping ends of the spines jutted out in a macabre mohawk, cruelly nailing Dark Shadow’s beak closed. The rampaging Quirk wept dark, filmy fluids from each wound, unable to reform around them.

The source of the devastating impacts was revealed as well by the clearing dust. Dark Shadow’s claws raked through the treeline and the earth, producing sturdy, broken tree-trunks and boulder sized clawfuls of earth. Each was brought to bear to smash against the monolithic Living Nightmare, only for them to be either shattered to dust by its hideously overgrown arm, or to break apart against the unyielding, unearthly hide.

“Move!” Aizawa’s voice sent a crackle of electricity up Shouto’s spine, his horrified stupor dripping away just enough for him to spot the truck-sized hunk of earth Dark Shadow hurled. He turned to yank on Bakugou’s limp arm, the tip of his shoe scratching through the dust and radiating the first frozen breath of his Giant Ice Wall, the only thing that would block the debris from hitting Aizawa in time-

He felt it before he heard it. His ice began to split the earth in a jagged lance, Bakugou twitched as if returning from the dead under his grasp, and his bones rattled as though they might rip from his skin as the impact came. All he could see of Mr. Aizawa was his hair shooting up and the barest crimson flash of his goggled gaze. A fraction of a second later, a fragment of debris struck the edge of Shouto’s barely-formed ice wall and shattered it apart, sending a chunk of ice hurtling directly towards Aizawa.

For all his training and reflexes, Shouto could do nothing but uselessly outstretch his hand, and watch the glimmering chunk of ice, as big as his torso, clip off the side of Aizawa’s chest and send him flying off his feet and rolling through the dirt. The ice spun off from the point of impact, crashing
against a tree and cracking apart into pieces.

“Mister Aizawa!” In the dull numbness of encroaching panic, Shouto had forgotten about the presence of his other classmates. He watched blankly for a moment as Kirishima rushed towards their prone, unmoving teacher, crouching down at his side to assess his status. There was a wet, shimmering heaviness on the right side of his chest, but Kirishima didn’t seem overly panicked as he checked for breathing and a pulse.

“He’s still breathing,” Kirishima relayed with something approaching relief, and those words were the trigger that allowed Shouto to suck in a lungful of air, “but he’s not very responsive, and probably has broken ribs. One of you check on Midoriya and Tokoyami, we need to get them all back to camp.”

Shouto went rigid as Bakugou elbowed him aside, his numb haze eroding rapidly. “Fuck,” he snarled aimlessly, having clearly shaken off the effects of Living Nightmare now that it was gone. “Are you deaf, Half’n Half? Help me round up Birdfucker and Crybaby.”

The not-quite hostility in Bakugou’s words brought locomotion back to Shouto’s limbs, and a frown to his lips. He rounded the lip of his partially formed ice wall at Bakugou’s side, stepping out to face the ravaged edge of the clearing that Dark Shadow had turned into a wasteland of splintered tree trunks and gouged earth. In the center of the destruction, where the two unstable powers had clashed… was nothing.

“What the fuck?” Bakugou barked, the disbelief on his face mirroring the one thing keeping Shouto’s alarm at bay. “Where the hell did they-“

“Not to worry, dear children. They are in safe hands now. Certainly safer than your own, from the looks of this mess.” Shouto’s head snapped up towards a smooth, insufferable voice-- there! Stood on a precarious branch at the top of a half-stripped tree, a lean, flashy figure in a mustard yellow peacoat and a bizarre black-and-white facemask stared down at them, mockingly tipping a top hat in their direction. “That is to be expected, though. You hero types are famously incapable of handling Quirks that do not fit into your neat little molds. Luckily, your burden is our boon, little heroes-to-be. Tokoyami and Dark Shadow, a truly spectacular pair with a magnificent mastery of violence; they will be right at home with us.

“And young Izuku Midoriya...” The villain pulled something from his pocket-a gleaming, cyan marble. “Well, we have something very special planned for him. A shame none of you will be present to witness the finale!”

An infinitesimal splinter of shock, lodged deep in Shouto’s nerves and responsible for his frozen muscles, snapped. He staggered forward, grinding his foot into the soil as his core plummeted to absolute zero, every ounce of will pushing his Quirk into overdrive. A glacier was germinated by his power, rocketing through the air, swelling and pushing and towering above the trees, a cleaving blade of ice a dozen stories tall that nearly cut the forest in half.

“How brutish! While your strength is admirable, you certainly require more than simple tricks to pin me down!” A flash of yellow soared through the air, higher than his fire could reach-and vanished among the treetops.

“Au revoir, heroes! This show is over!”
Chapter 54

There was a burning in the air, a deep, smoldering char that blazed and belched smoke in defiance of the cold, luminous visage of the moon. Mincemeat could taste the rancid heat behind his teeth, through the iron filter of his mask. He savored it, the smoking warmth, for the fire was his prey... or rather, its progenitor was. He could sense it, regardless of his numb flesh—the cerulean trail that gnawed on curling trees and dribbled ash and cinder upon the ground would bring him to his targets, the silver-skinned parasites that thought of themselves as hunters.

The League of Villains would march, one by one, into his iron jaws. Mincemeat would cut them apart, remove their blight from the world as was his duty. A crop may not grow from the weeds that strangle their roots, lest they be wrested free by blade and diligent hand. He would not allow those parasites to damage the bounty of his harvest.

A scream split the night air, clearly human, frayed at the seams and shrill with panic. Not his quarry, but perhaps it was a victim? Mincemeat stoically pushed through a copse of tightly-wound trees, branches snapping off against his unyielding shoulders. There was no need to avoid leaving a trail. If he was lucky, a silverfish villain would find it, and venture thoughtlessly into his blade.

Barely more than a minute had passed before he was joined by another. A boy he did not recognize by sight, stumbling through the trees with blood soaking into the sleeve of his shirt. His pupils were dilated, breaths tight and hurried with the animal fear of the pursued. Not one of his targets, but perhaps the boy would lead him to them.

Mincemeat did not speak. He waited, patiently, to be noticed. A trained hero would spot the glint of moonlight off his blades, or the dulled sheen of his mask, but this was a child still. A few months of schooling could not erase the panicked instinct, or the closing walls of tunnel vision. But soon enough, soon enough for adequacy, dark eyes turned his way, and panic was funneled into a new purpose.

“Stay the hell away!” The boy’s voice cracked with his obvious fear, but the ferocity of his yell was almost admirable. Mincemeat did not move, unafraid of the retaliations of a teenage novice; the potential information he might glean from observing was more valuable than meaningless preservation. The boy inhaled, a great heaving of breath, and hissed out a flowing, shimmering vapor that hardened into... a barrier, that surrounded Mincemeat on three sides in a transparent shield. Interesting; he rarely saw Quirks so suited for defense.

The boy seemed adequate, clearly prepared to bolt in the face of a stronger opponent, but Mincemeat spoke before he could. “The villain you are running from... tell me where they are.” The boy froze, confusion visibly washing over his face. Still inexperienced-- it was a weakness to reveal thoughts to an enemy.

The boy hesitated, wary but unsure. A mistake that, while helpful, was painfully amateurish. Mincemeat could hardly imagine how poor a teacher the boy must be stuck with. “Y..you’re not with them?” He measured the words carefully, convincing himself of them even as he spoke aloud.

Mincemeat slowly shook his head, sacrificing small moments to gamble on the time he might save. He raised both hands in a placating gesture, palms open and gloves empty of weapons. “I am here to remove the threat.” It was not a difficult ploy. The boy was frightened, desperate, poorly trained, and undisciplined; Mincemeat simply had to tell him what he wanted to hear. Conveniently, it was the truth.
“I..” Distrust was clear, expected and appropriate, but deeper beneath, Mincemeat could sense relief. His ploy was adequate. “There was... a girl, with some weird, creepy mask and-and a knife,” on closer inspection, Mincemeat could see a rip in the fabric of his blood soaked sleeve, and surmised that there was torn flesh beneath it, “and she had some kind of... monster, with her, like the ones on the news.”

The cold, methodical purpose that Mincemeat had carved inside of his skull ignited all at once, into a burning fire that gnawed on fatty oils and belched searing, sulfurous smoke into his cranial cavity. Of course they had brought an aberration with them. Miserable creatures, pitiful wretches, gutter waste! Those excuses for villains would have to burrow back into the muddy beds of their scum blighted ponds to escape his cleansing fire.

“I will see to it that they are dealt with,” Mincemeat muttered, jaw grinding words into dust like cutting stones into silt. It would not do, to lose his temper. He still had a job to complete. “Return to your camp,” he ordered the wide-eyed student, who wasted no time in bolting through the trees, footsteps deadening as the foliage swallowed the vibrations. Mincemeat sidestepped the walls of solid air that remained in place, turning his gaze towards the harried path the boy was on before their encounter.

With righteous purpose, he set off back through the twilit wood, tracking branches broken in haste, and desperate, skidding shoe prints on the forest floor. His pace was swift, unrelenting, purposeful; he could feel the whispers crawling across his senseless skin, promises of blood spilled and mistakes corrected by his own hand, his own blade. With one such hand he reached for the wrapped handle of the tool fastened to his hip, reassuring even though he could no longer feel the bite of duty, nor the weight of righteousness. He was reborn, but the Carcass Splitter remained unchanged, perfection wrought from steel by his own fallible flesh. Faithfully, he wielded it as his own, the milk-light of the moon soaking into a blade that hungered for purification.

Before long, the trail he followed bore fruit, a partial clearing nestled aside a withered oak, signs of dirt overturned and deep, flat-footed prints in the soft soil. They were inhuman, of twisted flesh folded over and over into a warped titan that he was tasked with slaying. They guided him further into the forest, towards the sapphire blaze and falling ash.

A noise pricked his ear, amplified by the acoustics of his helmet as he dutifully trailed the beast’s lumbering path, and he paused to discern it. A labored sound, exertion, effort, pain; the sound of battle. No, it was the sound of an attack.

Preparations had to be made, before any other action could be taken. His flesh must be ready. Mincemeat raised his Carcass Splitter from where it had been dragging in the dirt with a solid heft, the blade rising until it stood pin-straight, before a slight twist of his wrist and the gentle tug of gravity brought it down, falling to slide into the meat of his offered forearm with a muffled squelch, parting a tide that couldn’t spill. The bone beneath shook from the force, but did not break. If the threat was significant enough, he would fully sever it, but for the time being he held his blade aloft and tracked the distant, muffled voices as he approached.

“-ave such pretty hair, Tsu! I hope you don’t mind me borrowing your style for an itty-bitty while!” The girlish, breathy voice leaked between the tree trunks like fog, teetering on the edge of laughter and mania.

From between the oaks, he bore witness to the scene. Three girls, two clearly UA students, one a villain, populated the small clearing. The villain bore a strange device upon her back, a gunmetal grey eyesore sprouting tubes that hooked around her petite torso. A knife glimmered in her hand, stained with a slash of blood and held tauntingly close to the girl pressed into the dirt under her shoe,
green hair tangled and matted from the struggle. Across the clearing, backed against a tree and breathing tightly through her nose, was someone Mincemeat recognized from his research. Ochako Uraraka, in possession of a versatile gravity Quirk, had potential.

He did not expect her life cut short, faced with such an opponent. The villain was not yet his target, regardless; he hunted the beast, the foul creature that deserved nothing more than to spill its toxic blood in the soil and breathe its last.

“Awww, don’t make that face, ‘Chako! It’s not cute at all! Just be patient, I promise I’ll play with you in a little bit,” the villain taunted, and Mincemeat turned his attention elsewhere. It had to be close, if it was at her beck and call. He could not say for certain why she did not simply order it to slaughter the two girls, but the villain’s motivation wasn’t his concern. He scanned the tree line with a careful eye, searching for deep shadows, for sickly skin...

The moonlight glinted off of something partially hidden in the trees, a strange purple metal that caught the edge of a moonbeam. There it was, the hideous golem of putrid clay, fit with a bit like an animal, standing silent and stoic as its functionless brain awaited orders.

It would receive none.

Even as righteous fury dug splinters into the base of his skull, needing what nerves remained with the agony of inaction, Mincemeat did not yet attack. He watched as the confrontation escalated, the girl with the gravity Quirk disorienting the villain with a handful of loose soil, utilizing the moment of vulnerability to wrench the knife from her hand and tackle her to the ground.

“Noumu, get her!” The villain’s shrill voice pierced the night, and Mincemeat acted. The Noumu came to life, a Frankenstein of meat made ambulatory by a jolt of lightning. It bellowed in its broken voice, muffled and drooling, as ropey limbs erupted from its back in pairs, ending in wicked instruments of violence. The rev of chainsaw motors guttered and growled in symphonic rage, steel teeth ripping at the air in hunger for flesh.

The Noumu took one step, and Mincemeat drew his blade under his own skin, peeling fat and muscle and sickly silver tendons from his bones, shearing it off like hot rubber. His blade sung free into the night air, the severed flesh warping and twisting into a coiling tendril of bulging, serpentine muscle and blood hardened into hooked spines. He raised his cleaver over his head, steadied the breath of exhilaration burning in his lungs, and send the blade whistling through the air towards the beast.

With unerring accuracy, the Carcass Splitter landed true. The blade cleaved open a gaping wound in the abomination’s turned back, valleys of leprous green flesh ripping open and gushing a tide of brackish blood and soft tissue. And beneath the chemical tide, the unyielding steel had shattered the fist-thick vertebrae of its spinal cord, shards of broken bone held in place only by the gummy flesh surrounding it. The creature’s arms went slack at the same time, a ponderous gurgle escaping from its forced-open jaws as it stumbled, collapsing under its own weight into the dirt.

A moment later, Mincemeat threw his other arm forward, the coiled tendril snapping out through the trees, unwinding his very fibers to cross the twenty-odd paces between himself and the Noumu, and wrap around the handle of his blade. The villain screamed in frustration as her Noumu failed to arrive, unable to spy its bulk being slowly reeled in by the very weapon that had disabled it.

As much satisfaction as Mincemeat would have taken in hacking the hideous thing apart into chunks, there was yet more business to be done. When the drooling thing was within his reach, he moved to retrieve his blade, wrenching it from the sucking meat that had so tight a hold on it. With little fanfare, he retrieved a knife from his belt and knelt down to plunge it between the creature’s blank
eyes, shattering the orbital floor and carving apart its shriveled grey matter.

The creature died as it lived, tortured and worthless. It was a mercy to end its wretched existence. Mincemeat left the knife buried in its skull, a reminder for any villain that might stumble upon the body. They would all be his victims.

It was only a matter of time until he hunted them to their last. Patience was the key, despite how his blood boiled with the urge to cleave the whole forest in twain to sever their heads. He would avoid undue attention while he was yet able, and practice caution when faced with danger. But he would not stand idle. Mincemeat ran a thumb down the handle of a knife, recalling the sensation of smooth, worn wood beneath his calloused skin.

If an opportunity was presented, he would not hesitate to take it.

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“My dear fellows, I’ve acquired the target! Let us bid this stage adieu.”

“Well, it’s about damn time.”

Dabi sighed through his nose and reached for the radio hung carelessly from his sagging belt, thumbing at the plastic buttons on the side until it clicked, and brought it up to his mouth. “Alright. Everyone, get to the rendezvous point. You’ve got five minutes.”

“Boy, Compress sure came through for us, didn’t he?” Twice spouted the moment Dabi had clipped the radio back onto his belt, his somewhat-pitiful, but mostly just annoying two-sided rambling drowning out the sound of their footsteps moving through the underbrush. “It’s about time- I was gettin’ real sick of that heat!”

At least that was something Dabi could agree with. Sweat had been pooling at the base of his neck and dampening his collar for the better part of an hour, the billowing flames that engulfed the forestry around them putting out massive quantities of heat. He wasn’t used to his fires burning so long.

“I’m freezing over here!” Twice continued blithely, and Dabi took a moment to remind himself that, as annoying as the maniac was, he was twice (heh) as useful. With his Quirk, Dabi had been able to send out nearly half a dozen clones to wreak havoc, herding the pros away from the other members of the Vanguard Action Squad. And clearly, the effort had paid off. They’d snatched the brat, caused a little carnage, and now they were home-free.

Well, maybe not all of them..

“No gas,” Dabi observed, glancing through the shadow-cast trees towards the clearing Mustard had claimed as his own, “guess that brat bit it. We should hurry.” Even as he said it, he didn’t really pick up much speed. It was hard to feel urgency where all this bullshit was involved. Sure, he’d decided that working with a bunch of fucking lunatics was the price he had to pay to avenge Stain and start offing false heroes in the Hero Killer’s memory, but he couldn’t shake the queasy feeling in the pit of his stomach at the thought of it. Shigaraki, as much of a brain fucked freak as he was, wasn’t even the worst of it.

Dabi was worried about the big man behind the screen, the shadowy entity pulling all their puppet strings. The attack might have been Hand Boy’s plan, but ‘Sensei’ was clearly the one that had led him to that conclusion. He didn’t like it. He didn’t like not knowing who he was working for, what kind of person he was maiming, burning, and spilling blood for. Sure, he was hardly a model citizen, and he had been surrounded by the grimy dregs of society even before the League, but something
just felt… off.

Villains were a dime-a-dozen. Any shmuck down on his luck could kill somebody, no matter what his Quirk was. You didn’t need superpowers to gut someone with a knife, or hit them with a brick, or blow their head off with a gun. But if he had, somehow, unknowingly stumbled into playing pawn for some kind of… supervillain, the kind of maniacal masterminds that had only ever been seen in old comics and cartoons, well..

“Daaabiiiiiiii!” The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps and a high, girlish yell of his name pulled Dabi from his musings, his cold gaze leveling on the steaming-mad Himiko Toga stomping towards him. Huh, he hadn’t realized she was capable of being anything but giggly and obnoxious.

“What?” He rasped, squinting past her towards the edge of the forest she’d emerged from. Where was…?

“That stupid Noumu you gave me sucked!” She berated loudly, her flushed cheeks bright with anger and puffed out in a disgusting little pout. “It didn’t come when I called it, and someone killed it!”

“The hell do you mean, someone killed it?” Dabi felt like a moron for repeating her words back, but… it was unbelievable. Sure, maybe if all the little school brats worked together they could take out a Noumu, but they were scattered all over the forest. The only, single student who might be able to do it would be… “What happened? What did you see?”

Toga spat a raspberry at him, looking defensive. “I don’t know, I didn’t see anything! I was busy getting blood from some cute girls, and one of them fought back. I tried calling it, but it didn’t show up, and I had to run away! I found the dumb thing just lying on the ground. Someone had cut it apart, and put a knife in its ugly face.”

“Nice going,” Dabi drawled derisively, doing his best not to express his turbulent thoughts. Cut apart, a knife left behind, wasn’t a student… “That’s the last time Hand Guy is ever gonna trust you with a Noumu.”

“Hey, lay off a little, Dabi!” Twice piped up, coming to the pouting Toga’s defense. Then his tone of voice changed, and he immediately backtracked. “She’ll be lucky if he trusts her with a house plant, let alone a Noumu!”

Toga turned her shrieking fury on the immediately–remorseful Twice, leaving Dabi to his thoughts. Shit, shit. That was his Noumu that had gotten killed, the one he designed to cut those stupid little brats into heroic little shreds. No, there was no way a student had done it-if Midoriya had been responsible, it would have been impossible to ignore. The other pros had been tied up with Magne and Spinner, which could only mean it was a third party.

There was only one person he could imagine who was responsible, and it made his blood boil. It had to be that maniac in the metal mask-Stain’s killer. And of course, it took him until they were about to leave to figure it out. He clamped one fist in contained fury, feeling his staples pop and shift in his ruined skin. Now he’d have to wait for another chance to avenge the Hero Killer.

Ignoring Twice and Toga’s bickering, he ripped the radio off his belt and gripped it so hard the plastic casing cracked. “Three minutes,” he snarled into the receiver, “show up or get left behind.”

Almost before he’d taken himself off the channel, a swirling portcullis of shadows blossomed from the empty air, opening just wide enough for two bodies to come hurtling through. Spinner and Magne came tumbling out onto the dirt, looking scuffed and battered but otherwise uninjured. Good. They needed all the numbers they could salvage.
“Muscular, Moonfish, and Mustard have still not responded,” Kurogiri thrummed, his smeared yellow eyes forming at the top of the warp gate. The shadows coalesced into his shapeless mass, the almost-man that was their transportation. “But Mr. Compress should be on his way. We will extract as soon as he returns with the target.”

His faceless gaze shifted toward Dabi, clearly recognizing his pent-up anger, but not making any mention of it. “You should call back the Noumu, if you haven’t already. Shigaraki will be displeased if we do not return his favorite.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dabi muttered, half-considering ignoring the instructions out of spite before he switched to the channel specifically tuned to the Noumus. He had no idea why the hand freak had wanted a shitty, broken Noumu out on the field, but he was the boss. “Return to me,” he rasped into the receiver, listening to the other end for a moment. All he got back was heavy, inhuman breathing laced with static, so he clicked it off. Damn thing probably hadn’t even managed a single kill.

“How’d it go?” Dabi asked with an air of faux-casualness, shifting his gaze to Spinner and Magne. He couldn’t say he had any fondness for either of them, but they were hardly the most unlikeable members of the League. Magne was talented and efficient in her work, and Spinner was a kindred spirit, despite his obnoxious mannerisms and disrespectful imitation of Stain.

“Just fine, until one of those little brats got in the way!” Spinner shouted unnecessarily, cradling the remains of his completely ridiculous and over the top sword-made-of-smaller-knives. “Those so called ‘pro heroes’ stood no chance against our combined might!”

Dabi turned to Magne instead, giving her a flat look as he waited for an actual account of the events. “We kept the Pussycats busy long enough to retrieve the target, so I’d say it went as well as it needed to.” Despite her assurance, she looked particularly annoyed, and Dabi realized she didn’t have her… weird, magnetic girder-thing. Oh well. Better than her getting killed.

“Either of you see Compress on the way?”

“Right here, my compatriots!” A high, theatric voice bellowed out from over the treetops, drawing every eye to the slim, ostentatious figure perched at the top of a towering pine. Mr. Compressed tipped his hat jauntily, looking for all the world as though they weren’t on a time sensitive mission. Dabi would almost like him, if he wasn’t such a show-off narcissist.

“Where the hell’ve you been?” Dabi called up to him, slowly smothering his frustration.

“Shaking my pursuers, of course! Those children are quite pernicious! But I’ve retrieved the package, and left them in the dust. Let us be off!” Dabi rolled his eyes as Compress leapt nimbly from the treetop, his coat fluttering in the breeze, mask shining in the moonlight-and screaming as something struck him in the side, blood bursting across his abdomen in a crimson spray.

Dabi reared back in shock, mouth parting to shout a warning and eyes locked on the plummeting form of Mr. Compress, only for his words to be drowned out by a shrieking hiss. His eyes darted to the source, just barely making out a trio of silhouettes hurtling through the trees beneath an explosive cloud of steam. It was instant chaos.

“Fall back, through the warp gates!” Dabi shouted into the blinding steam, sucking in a scalding breath and raising a curving hand to the sky. He waited for only a split second, until the moment he could hear the thud of Compress hitting the ground. He reached for the cold, empty void inside of himself, drowning out all his fury, his panic, with passionless hatred. A cobalt geyser shrieked towards the sky, blazing through the conduit of his flesh. The rising heat stole the clouds of steam away with it, revealing the sudden battlefield in full.
Spinner and Magne were down, coated up to the eyeballs in compounding layers of crystalline ice. Dabi whipped around in a wreath of dying embers as something screaming, blond, and explosive rocketed past his head, only to watch as Kurogiri was consumed in a blinding eruption, shards of his metal armor rocketing through the clearing. Twice and Toga were barely avoiding being broiled alive by Shouto Todoroki, lashes of flame herding them towards the edge of the clearing.

Compress suddenly cried out in agony, and Dabi raised a trembling hand in his direction, locking eyes with some nearly-shirtless kid with vibrant red hair and his foot planted between Compress’s shoulder blades. Nearly hidden by the folds of Compress’s coat, the wooden handle of a knife jutted from the side of his stomach, the blade sunk in to the hilt.

“All right, here’s the deal,” the kid spoke, voice tight with righteous fury (how the hell hadn’t Dabi recognized him before—Eijirou Kirishima was the only kid in 1-A with such stupid hair) and eyes locked straight on Dabi’s, “you let us take our friends back, and we won’t have to kick your ass too hard before the pros show up.”

“You really got me between a rock and a hard place, kid,” Dabi drawled casually, masking his racing thoughts. He could try to fry the kid before he knew what hit him, but Compress was collateral they couldn’t afford. Toga and Twice could probably take Todoroki after a few minutes, but things might go south before then. Kirishima might get impatient and snap Compress’s neck—or that fuckin’ pain-in-the-ass Bakugou kid could blow their one ticket out of here into chunks. Fuck. There was only one thing he could rely on: their ace in the hole. He just had to hope the stupid fucking thing hurried up a little.

“Let’s just take things real slow and easy now. But uh, not too slow; I don’t want my friend bleedin’ out in the dirt, after all.” He studied the kid’s face closely, watching the harden mask slip just a tad at the mention of someone dying—good, he was a little fuckin’ boy scout, that was somethin’ Dabi could press him on. “Doubt it’d look too good for you, if you ended up killin’ some guy.”

The kid just barely faltered again, and Dabi had to hold in a smirk. He twitched his finger, testing, but those too-big red eyes stayed right on him. Distantly, could hear the Bakugou brat whispering threats to their ride, but he wasn’t too worried. He just had to buy enough time for…

Barely audible, between the dark-drenched trees, he could hear branches snapping.

Dabi grinned with manic fervor, and spoke.

“Noumu.”

A cannonball comprised of eighteen hundred pounds of tar black flesh and muscle fired from the forest’s maw, the screaming locomotive monster blitzing a trench through the soil in pursuit of its target. The red kid’s eyes widened in shock, skin turning to stone in anticipation of a blow he couldn’t dodge—but he wasn’t the target.

A muffled explosion sounded at Dabi’s back as he raised his palm, frigid hellfire pouring from between his fingertips, engulfing Eijirou Kirishima and licking at the holes in his ruined skin. His tenuous grasp on his Quirk had been just barely loosened by a surge of adrenaline, but it was enough to belch smoke from the gaps in his stitched together pieces. He could barely even feel the pain of roasting himself alive, numbed by his plan tying itself together.

He turned away for just a moment to check on Kurogiri, pleased to see that the bird-brained Noumu had done its job in dislodging Bakugou. It hadn’t managed to kill the brat, but he hardly expected it to, at least right away. Damn thing was broken, its legs twisted stumps of barely-reformed mass held together by steel bolts and rebar, only sturdy enough for a few quick dashes before it either slowed
down or fell apart. At the very least, it was still virtually indestructible, and was more than capable of holding off some high school brats while they escaped.

Prepared to drag Compress’s slightly-singed dead weight through a warp gate (and make sure that knife in the gut hadn’t killed him outright), he sauntered over as the smoke cleared, raising a foot to gently kick away the cindered remains of that stupid kid-

“You’ll have to try-“ dagger-sharp fingers shot out of the lingering smoke and dug into the meat of Dabi’s leg, pulling a choked shout from his throat, “-a little harder than that!” He snapped out a hand to reduce the kid’s head to ash, only for his center of balance to suddenly be yanked out from under him. He lurched forward uncontrollably, eyes widening—and nearly went blind as an iron-hard fist slugged him in the side of the head.

Dabi collapsed on his back in the dirt, vision swimming and pain exploding down the right side of his face. Nausea, sharp and acute, rose from the pit of his stomach and filled his mouth with ash and acid, and he struggled to turn his head far enough not to choke on it. His brains were rattled like they’d been tossed in a blender, but he still had sufficient control to grope for his Quirk, his palm heating up. He waited just long enough for the kid (already lobster-red, his Quirk wasn’t completely ineffective) to turn his back and start rifling through Compress’s pockets-

Dabi fired off a controlled blast of searing heat at the kid’s exposed back, a quick flash aimed to stun more than immolate, and shakily picked himself up off the ground. “Compress, give me the target!” He barked, slinging another handful of flames to keep Kirishima from retaliating. Compress ripped his mask askew with surprising strength, face screwed up in pain. The guy was pale as a corpse and drenched in sweat, but he seemed confident as he spat a pair of shiny marbles into the dirt, just close enough for Dabi to sprint towards them. Kirishima’s eyes widened, dashing away from the prone Compress and not even acknowledging the villain disappearing into a warp gate behind him.

“Kurogiri, let’s go!” Left his throat at the same instant the marbles clicked together in his palm, a wave of fire from his open hand sending Kirishima reeling.

“Todoroki, Bakugou! Get the guy with the scars!” he cried out before Dabi could roast him to death, his Quirk searing through his body in search for an outlet. His next gout of flames went wide, and his quick footwork was impeded by the puncture wounds in his leg. He braced himself for another skull cracking blow, only to blink when a pinhole warp gate opened up between them, deflecting the hit somewhere else.

Kurogiri had already begun extracting, warp gates opening up underneath the still-frozen Magne and Spinner to drop them off at the hideout. Relief lit up the inside of Dabi’s chest, and he lashed out in a flat-footed kick to send the infuriating red-head shit reeling away.

“Better luck next time,” he taunted, a sickly grin crawling across his face in spite of the searing pain it caused. He could feel the rushing wind of the warp gate opening up behind him, and see himself reflected in Kirishima’s wide, despairing gaze. He took a step back—and was almost set ablaze by a searing gout of flames, the warp gate rapidly winking away. Dabi whirled around, suddenly cornered as Shouto Todoroki closed in on him, face warped in a tight-lipped grimace and his left side shrouded in licking flames. He could still hear the symphony of staccato explosions and the Noumu’s wild screams, and silently vowed to rise from the grave and turn Tomura Shigaraki into ash for sticking him with a defective.

He ducked away from a hammer fist blow and whirled around to cut through Todoroki’s jet of fire with a cerulean discus as fine as a razor, hardly waiting for the flames to curl past him before he spread his fingers and unleashed a full power immolation. It fizzled out, predictably, against a jutting wall of ice, but that gave him just enough time to sweep a flaming lash at the advancing Kirishima
and sprint in the other direction as fast as his wounded leg and throbbing head injury would allow him.

Ahead of him, Kurogiri was frantically spewing warp gates between himself and the manically destructive Bakugou, all his confidence in battle shriveled away without his armor to protect him. The brat was screaming in incoherent rage, chunks of blistering hot smoke and crackling eruptions filling the air around him. The Noumu was pursuing him doggedly, its crippled legs hardly impeding the speed of its megaton punches and death sentence grapples. But, the damn thing was so single minded that Bakugou had managed to get Kurogiri between him and it, forcing him to evade two attackers at once.

Dabi swore under his breath, ears pricking with the sound of Todoroki and Kirishima’s pursuit. Twice and Toga were both gone, returned to the hideout because he’d given the order for everyone to retreat. Whose idea was it to put him in charge, again?

“You kids are a real pain in my ass,” he hissed, feeling the deep, searing boil in his veins that would burn him alive if he wasn’t careful. He swiped out a palm full of fire that ballooned out to consume his pursuers, not waiting to see if they’d burnt up or not. He tracked Bakugou’s wild, erratic trajectories with as much scrutiny as he could muster, looking for any sign of an opening, any momentary lull he could exploit-

“Kurogiri, aim for me!” Without waiting for acknowledgement he unleashed a torrent of vibrant cerulean fury, his nerves sizzling as smoke wiped out of his porous flesh. Kurogiri’s blurred yellow gaze snapped in his direction, and a warp gate absorbed the flames, redirecting them directly into the advancing Bakugou’s face. His aborted attack blew up in his face, sending him careening through the air but otherwise, disappointingly, sparing him a charbroiled fate.

He whipped back around to defend himself against Todoroki and Kirishima’s follow up, weaving a wall of flame-only for Kirishima to charge through it and plant a fist in Dabi’s gut, ripping a wheeze of agony out of him. He staggered backwards, never more grateful to hear the sound of an opening warp gate behind him-- only for another jet of red-orange flame to force it closed, lest the entire hideout burn down.

His hopes of escaping without serious injury were draining by the moment. Dabi feinted a blow with his dominant hand before he lashed out with the hand tightly clenching the marbles, flames exploding off his fist hot enough to roast this fucking kid, stone skin or not. Rather than dodge away or try to counter attack, Kirishima dodged into him, the flaming hook just barely sweeping past his head before he lunged. Dabi put a stranglehold on his Quirk, prepared to cloak himself in flames to drive the kid off-only for dagger-edged teeth to sink into the meat of his wrist, ripping a howl of agony out of his throat. His grip on the marbles loosened, eyes widening in shock and suffering both as they slipped from his fingers-

He overloaded his Quirk, all reigns loosed, fire exploding out of and underneath his flesh in equal measure. He could feel his hundred-times destroyed body baking from his own flame, the sickly smell of acrid smoke and burned meat filling his senses. Kirishima jolted away as the flames burned him even through his stone skin, and Dabi clenched his fist to catch-what felt like-at least one marble.

“Now!” Even before the words had left him, he could feel it happen. The ground shook as the Noumu threw itself at the only remaining enemies, jagged maw loosed in a drooling shriek. He could see Kirishima falling back, despair and fury etched on his blistering face. He could smell the burnt-rubber stench of Todoroki’s flames turning on the Noumu, struggling to fend it off. And, finally, the world opened up beneath him, the nightmarish balmy-cold-empty-caress of Kurogiri’s warp gate taking him away.
Dabi fell to the creaky floorboards of the bar with a grunt of pain, laid out amongst his battered fellows. He glanced up, bleary eyed, to find Compress laid out over a table, while Toga and Twice treated the gash in his abdomen. The knife had been hastily discarded, its blade sunken into the soft wood floor. Blood dripped from the corner of the table, collecting in a shiny pool beneath it.

“Well? Did you get him?” Shigaraki’s loathsome, slithering voice sounded from somewhere above him, and he found the strength to turn his head and send him a cool glare. Kurogiri was stood (floating?) beside him, eyes swirling in unease. Dabi held his squinty, crusted gaze, and rubbed a thumb against his palm. A single, greasy-smooth marble clicked against his stitches.

“Compress,” he choked out, voice ruined by the smoke that had been forced up it, “confirm it.” He tossed the marble away, letting it roll to a stop on the ground. Weakly, Mr. Compress’s fingers clicked together, and the sea-glass bead began expanding in a ball of light. With his remaining strength, Dabi picked himself up off the floor, legs trembling beneath him. He planted an arm against the bar, blood running down his wrist in thick rivulets. He glared balefully down at the form on the floor, unable to fully clench his fingers in a fist.

“You better be worth it, you little bastard,” he rasped, eyes locked on the silent, unmoving form of Izuku Midoriya.
Izuku Midoriya was unraveled. The very threads of his being had been teased apart by fractured needle points, left adrift in the dark, empty void that mirrored existence. The power fused into his blood, his bones, had been shattered and re-forged, and broken him. The Living Nightmare had cast him into nothingness, and he was not strong enough to return.

Fractals of shattered glass spun endlessly through the distant dark, unable to reflect even the faintest glimmer of consciousness. They were without light, without even the distant, baleful stars to glint off their surfaces. The Living Nightmare could not call to them, wires stretched too thin to reach. Its vast hunger had taken too much. The only solace to be taken, in what few neurons could still communicate, was that eternal peace had finally--

“Well, look who’s finally waking up.”

Izuku Midoriya choked and convulsed as the far-flung vestiges of his consciousness were impaled by countless nets of thorns, dragged across the vastness of non-being and brutally crammed back together inside of his skull. Buried in his chest, pain signals were greenlit, condensing in a deep ache that throbbed with every breath. His eyelids twitched, nerves failing to reconnect with his awakening mind for all of a second before his eyes flew open, confusion eclipsing every other emotion.

The first thing he realized was that he wasn’t alone. Across from him (sitting, he was sitting-wooden chair-dimly lit room-concrete walls and floors), legs splayed on either side of a cheap barstool, a man covered in purpling, patchwork scars and thick, glinting rows of surgical staples smiled at him humorlessly. One arm was wrapped in thick layers of gauze, and splotches of bruises on his face served as pale imitations of his gnarled scarring.

“You’ve been snoozin’ real deep, birthday boy. Almost missed the party.” The dark edge to his words didn’t go unnoticed, but… Izuku didn’t know what to make of it. Everything was fuzzy, memories still stitching themselves back together in the back of his head.

He blinked in response, feeling… sedated; not in the sense that there was a drug in his system, but more that… something was missing, and he felt like he should be more afraid. “Where.. a-am I?”

The words came slow and ponderous, all of his processing power devoted to remembering. What had he been doing?

The man chuckled under his breath, the edge of his damaged lips curling with amusement. “Guess it figures. After the night you had, anyone would be scrambled.” Izuku blinked again, a little more slowly. That didn’t really answer his question, but it felt like the answer was still just out of his reach.

“Y-you have nice e-eyes,” he noted absently, an idle observation unimpeded by his vocal filter. It wasn’t a lie; the man’s eyes were a striking cerulean, shining with an inner heat that resembled the mouths of plasma torches. The man did a double-take, dumbfounded, before bursting into laughter that rang off the walls. He choked on his outburst, slamming a closed fist over his chest before he managed to gasp in a breath of air.

“Holy fuckin’ shit kid, you’re a riot,” he wheezed breathlessly, eyes dancing with amusement and-something else. “Let’s hope that good attitude lasts, huh? It’ll make things a hell of a lot easier.” He stood up from his barstool, the edges of his ragged coat dangling to the middle of his shins, and turned, drawing Izuku’s attention to a simple metal door that had previously blended into the wall. He sharply rapped his knuckles against the door, waiting only for a few moments before the sound of a clicking tumbler echoed through the room.
The door creaked open, and unleashed a tidal wave of memory that dragged Izuku down into its crushing, paralyzing depths, and drowned him beneath its weight. His veins constricted, pulled taut and thin, the blood within turned to ash and black salt. His lungs spasmed, unable to draw a single modicum of oxygen. All of Izuku’s training, his nurtured courage, his drive towards heroism, the progress he had made and the lessons he’d been taught, crumbled into dust. Izuku froze, petrified, as Tomura Shigaraki entered the room.

A noose looped and drew around his chest, needlepoint ropes burrowed beneath his skin to squeeze. Every breath was shallow and pained, the bony fingers of his ribs digging into his lungs. Despair hummed a dirge in every cell of his body. His eyes were dry, stretched so thin by terror that they felt as if they might simply tear apart, ripped into shreds like tissue paper. Manic, bloodshot eyes caught on his like meat hooks in a carcass, rippling with a hatred so deep and visceral that Izuku could feel it squirming under his skin.

“Finally decided to log in, Izuku Midoriya?”

The sound of his name on Shigaraki’s cracked lips destroyed the last of his composure, and Izuku was beset by hysteria. Living Nightmare shattered the shackles of death in a great, coiling vortex, a black hole of razor wires that sunk its hooks into his bones and pulled until they nearly cracked. The cosmic horror loosed its clamoring maw, wires twisting and scraping in a rising cacophony that would deconstruct everything that breathed and everything that did not upon reaching its wailing cresendo--

Izuku choked as a torrent of black phosphorous fumes erupted from the pores in his arms, the acrid stench burning his eyes, mouth, and throat. Shigaraki reared back, terror etched into every crevice of his scarred, wrinkled visage, and--

…nothing happened.

Living Nightmare’s power turned endlessly over itself, folding and compressing and struggling against some barrier, until it dissipated entirely, leaving Izuku to pant and shudder in his chair, eyes wide in shock and his side spasming with pain.

The unfamiliar man wiped the look of surprise off his face, lips curling in relief. “Guess those cuffs came in handy, huh?”

Izuku jerked his hands up to inspect them, breath freezing in his throat at the sight of sleek, compact black cuffs fitted around his wrists, pressed so flush that the skin around them was red and irritated. “W-what…”

“Quirk suppressors,” Shigaraki hissed with hysterical amusement, his voice a stone tossed in a lawnmower blade. His fear had evaporated as surely as the smoke from Izuku’s arms, eyes burning with gleeful mania. “Without that Quirk of yours, you’re completely harmless. Just a Quirkless little brat.”

Oh. Well, that explained why Izuku had only just begun to reach appropriate levels of terror. He trembled without words, every molecule of his control spent to keep his tears at bay. If he allowed them to overpower him, it would be over. Rivers of salt would carve through his face, severing the mask that held him in check. He would collapse, wholly and utterly, in an implosion of despair that left nothing intact. Even as his vision wavered, the leering form of Tomura Shigaraki melting into a hundred flawed reflections, and he withered beneath a smear of carmine that yearned to swallow him whole, he did not cry. He couldn’t, he couldn’t, he couldn’t.

“So, you ready for him to uh, mingle with the gang?” The other villain’s lackadaisical question was
enough to rip Shigaraki’s gaze away from Izuku, and give him a split second to blink away his tears and suck in a ragged breath.

“No, it’s not time just yet.” The response was nearly petulant, Shigaraki’s lips set in a loose scowl as his hands deliberately and forcefully twisted at the fabric of his shirt. “Just stay in here and keep an eye on him until it’s time. Spinner will come in to let the brat out.”

He turned to leave, and the other villain mock-pouted at his stooped back, his playful expression marred by the genuine hatred in his eyes. The intensity of loathing sent a shiver down Izuku’s spine. “You think I can keep this kid entertained with just my charming self? Why don’t you lend him a game console? You can’t play *all* of them at the same time, after all.”

“Shut up Dabi,” Shigaraki snapped, voice ringing off the walls and making Izuku flinch when it struck against his skin. He spared only a dark, sneering glare at his subordinate (Dabi, apparently) before he slipped back out through the metal door, hinges squealing and tumblers clanking as it shut and locked behind him.

“W-w-what do you w-want with me?” Izuku blurted before he could control himself, the tension that had calcified him into a living statue shattered upon Shigaraki’s departure. “Y-you-you-if you wanted to k-kill me you would have a-already done it, I-I’m only a-alive because I have some v-value-leverage, a-as a hostage, or-or bait, a lure, trying to-to lure heroes, l-lure U.A. into a trap but why me you could have taken anyone-well, S-Shigaraki has a personal vendetta, i-it could be an irrational move, b-but then why a-avoid hurting me-“

“Tell ya what- - I’m in a decent mood, so I’ll humor some questions. Just don’t expect me to tell you sensitive info. And keep it to one at a time, chatterbox.”

Izuku swallowed the deluge of questions waiting to burst out of his throat, considering his words carefully. He shouldn’t push his luck. “…D-do you know why I-I’m here?”

“Couldn’t tell ya.” Dabi drawled, snickering when Izuku’s voice died and he sealed his lips back together. “Guess that wrinkled fuckhead really took the wind out of your sails. Can’t say I blame you-he makes my skin crawl. …Well, what’s left of it, at least.”

Dabi slouched lazily against the wall, nailing Izuku to his seat with a half-lidded gaze. “You’re a real little hero type, ain’tcha? It’s cute how worried you are about your pals.”

Izuku took a deep breath, clenching around the dread that bloomed at hearing he was supposed to be murdered. But, the way Dabi worded it was interesting. Shigaraki had wanted to kill him, but then made plans that got in the way of it? Maybe he could probe for more information on it later. At the moment, he had a more pressing concern. “W-were any of my c-classmates injured in the a-attack?”

“Nobody died, if that’s what you’re asking,” the villain drawled, as though the possibility of murdering teenagers was an afterthought. “You’re a real little hero type, ain’tcha? It’s cute how worried you are about your pals.” The mockery ran in rivulets down his chin, so thick that Izuku could nearly hear it splatter on the floor.

Izuku steadfastly ignored his remarks, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. Something pinched again in his side, and he drew a sharp breath through his teeth at the throb of pain. “H-how long has it
been, s-since the attack?”

“Only a couple hours. Sun’s only been up for a bit. We’ll be sure to drag you out to watch the news when it airs. Shouldn’t be too long now.” With a long sigh, Dabi reached into his coat pocket, producing a single, slightly crushed cigarette. He tapped the end against the tip of his finger, a blue flame sparking from his flesh and lighting it. The glowing cinders faded to a dull orange as he inhaled, and as he pulled it away to exhale, the smoke curled out from between the staples in his cheeks.

“Nobody’s comin’ to save you, kid,” he rasped, lead words carried on a cloud of smoke. “So don’t get any bright ideas. Just sit tight, and do as you’re told. Maybe, if you’re lucky…” Dabi’s lips curved in a grim sickle, amusement oozing from every hole in his face, “you’ll live long enough to see your next birthday.”

Izuku jumped in his chair as the door began rattling in its frame, each knock ringing out in a death knell. He bit the inside of his cheek, able to keep down his mounting horror only by the absence of Living Nightmare.

Dabi heaved a sigh and stood to unlatch the door, the hinges squealing as it was shoved open.

“They’re airing the story in ten minutes!” A grating, unfamiliar voice sounded. With Dabi standing in the doorway, Izuku could only catch a glimpse of long, flowing strips of fabric and green scales.

“Guess it’s time then. On your feet, kid.” Dabi gestured lazily, not looking back, and Izuku hesitantly rose from the chair. His legs trembled beneath him, barely steady enough to take a single step. Dabi’s voice accompanied him with each step towards the door, false amicability and poorly contained humor evident in it. “We’ll watch the news, you can meet the gang… and then the fun starts.”

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Every breath that Eijirou took was a lungful of embers, scorching his insides like a bellows in reverse. The air was a crackling mass of heat, pressing into his Hardened skin with branding fingers. He pushed against it, choking on mouthfuls of fire and reaching, straining, running and pursuing and chasing he had to catch up, he had to catch up!

The forest was doused in pitch, a swirling mire that swallowed the moon, swallowed the stars, and swallowed every step he left behind him. Blue and black scattered across reality in a litany of contusions, the crushing empty and the voracious blue blaze that gnawed on its carcass. It was only him and the fire, his panting breaths and the bloodthirsty screams and thundering explosions, his reaching, cutting fingers, and the glass prison clutched in a cruel palm. It was only Eijirou and him, his burning flesh and the ultramarine wraith, the victim and the arsonist.

Blood was spilling, painting him and parting beneath his touch, flesh like clay sculpted into death. The mouth of hell was splitting open and Eijirou yearned, it was right there he just had to reach just had to be fast enough just had to catch him just had to be good enough just had to get Midoriya back-

Eijirou Kirishima woke up with a ragged gasp, heart clanking desperately against his ribs. He sat up, panting for air, as stiff hospital sheets pooled in his lap. The heart monitor beside him beeped urgently and he squeezed his eyes shut against the noise, flinching at the vivid image of being doused in torrents of fire.

It was all just a nightmare, he reminded himself, doing his best to ignore the very real nightmare he’d woken up in. Things couldn’t end like they did in his dreams, raw despair drowning in flames. He--there had to be a way to make it right again, to fix his mistake.
Eijirou stared down at his bandaged wrapped hands, the pure white gauze covering nearly every inch of his upper body (first degree burns on sixty five percent of his skin, and second degree on twelve, the doctors had told him) and constricting his movements. Rather than the deep, throbbing burn that had drilled into his nerves on the way to the hospital, he was consumed by a maddening itch, dulled by whatever pain meds he was on.

A sudden knock at the door startled him out of his thoughts, his head snapping up in time to watch it slowly slide open. A few familiar heads poked through, stepping through to reveal that nearly the entirety of Class 1-A had stopped by to visit, save Jirou, Hagakure, Yaoyorozu, and… Conspicuously, Bakugou was absent as well.

“Hey, you’re up already!” Kaminari greeted with light friendliness, the smile on his face not quite as carefree as it normally was. A few other voices mingled with his, murmured greetings spilling together into meaningless noise. Eijirou could feel it already; the unease that gathered between them all, collecting in dark silhouettes of classmates that should be standing with them.

“H…hey, guys,” Eijirou uttered haltingly, momentarily stunned. “You… you all came to visit me?”

“Of course we did, blockhead!” Mina teased playfully, the strain in her voice almost unnoticed. “We’re not gonna drop you just cuz’ you’re a little well done!”

“It takes more than being burned alive to get rid of these leeches,” Shinsou muttered, pulling a surprised laugh out of Eijirou’s chest and a few put-on protests from the rest of the class, which he accepted with a wry smirk.

“Indeed, it would be remiss of us not to visit our injured classmates!” Iida interjected, hands slicing wildly through the air. “How are you feeling, Kirishima?”

“Kinda itchy, I guess,” Eijirou answered half-honestly, a faint, sheepish smile on his face. “The doc said I was lucky; if my burns had been any worse, I’d’ve needed a few skin grafts. How’s everyone else doin’? I know Jirou and Hagakure got hit by the gas, and Yaoyorozu got hurt…”

“From what we know, they’re all still unconscious, but in stable condition,” Iida replied, his voice slightly subdued. “Yaoyorozu took a nasty blow to the head, but the doctors found no sign of brain damage or internal bleeding.”

Eijirou let go of a breath he didn’t realize he was holding, a few of the bolts holding him pressure-cooker tight beginning to loosen.

“Mr. Aizawa is here as well,” Todoroki spoke up suddenly, face clouded by emotions that had been hammered and bent into something unrecognizable. “Three broken ribs and a bruised lung.” The grinding tightness of Todoroki’s otherwise flat words, like stones grinding against concrete, struck a chord inside of Eijirou. The façade of lightheartedness he wore began to slip.

A somberness overcame his classmates as well, in the form of averted eyes and troubled frowns. A lull formed, a pit into which hope could slip and suffocate. After a few moments of quiet, Tokoyami looked up to meet Eijirou’s eyes, his own duller than Eijirou had seen, lacking their usual sharpness.

“If none else are willing, I will take it upon myself to inform you: there has, as of yet, been no news about Midoriya’s whereabouts. The school is preparing a press release once the story breaks, where I imagine they will announce that rescue efforts are underway.” For a moment, Tokoyami’s stoicism faltered, the sharp edge of his beak and piercing light of his eyes turning dull. “I. would like to thank you, on behalf of both myself, and Midoriya. You did everything in your power to save both of us—“
“No!” Eijirou’s explosive interruption ricocheted off the hospital room’s walls, shocking Tokoyami into silence. Eijirou’s chest was burning as though he were being held under jets of flame for a second time, lungs constricting and a plume of rage sending coal black heat up his throat. “If I’d done everything I could, he’d still be here!”

“Kirishima,” Uraraka ventured with a steely edge to her compassion, visibly swallowing her tears as she stared him down, “it isn’t your fault.”

Maybe, logically, deep beneath his roasting heart he knew that was true, but that truth was swallowed by the smoke that had no choice but to pour out of him. “Yes it is! If I’d fought harder-- if I’d been faster--” The brutal honesty forcing its way out of his mouth was almost dizzying, its caustic razors splitting his tongue, and the roof of his mouth. “If I wasn’t so useless, I could have done something.”

There was a stinging moment of pause before Eijirou’s words began to register, both to himself and to his classmates. The blaze in his chest flash froze, a frigid hunk leeching the life from him. He stared down at the bedspread, clenched in his trembling fingers, to spare himself the possibility of seeing pitying looks. “….I think you guys should go. I.. thanks for coming to visit me.”

The only one who seemed to have any will to argue with him was Uraraka. “Are you sure? I.. we can stay for a little longer, if…” She trailed off, and the cold spot in Eijirou’s chest burrowed deeper at the sight of her worry.

“It’s fine,” he promised with a bald-faced lie, slapping on a smile. “I need to talk to my parents anyway, and see about follow-up treatment when I get discharged. You guys can always come visit another time.”

One by one, his classmates slipped out the door with murmured goodbyes, Uraraka giving him one last lingering look before she left alongside Iida and Tokoyami. The only other person still in the room was Todoroki, feet rooted to the floor.

“Seriously, you don’t have to stick around, man. It’s alright--“

“I’ll be back this evening,” Todoroki interjected bluntly, steamrolling Eijirou’s flimsy reassurance, “I spoke with Bakugou earlier, and he’ll be here too. We need to talk to you.”

Eijirou stared at him uncomprehendingly, unable to glean anything from Todoroki’s neutral expression. “Talk to me? About what?”

Todoroki did nothing but blink, a simple flicker of his eyelids, but for a moment Eijirou could see the fire burning behind them. “About rescuing Midoriya, of course.” Without further preamble he headed out the door, his flat words echoing between Eijirou’s ears, burrowing under his skin.

…Yeah. Failing once didn’t mean it was the end; he just had to try harder the second time.

--

The aperture of crushing concrete opened into a destitute den of villainy. The buzzing amber bar lights were harsh on Izuku’s vision after the comparatively dim room he’d woken up in, but the thumping tremor of self-preservation instinct barely allowed him to blink. His engorged pupils took in every inch of his surroundings as quickly as possible, racing thoughts overloaded by the overwhelming number of threats around him.

The hideout was nothing more than a run-down bar, all cracked vinyl seats and nicotine faded wallpaper under too-bright amber lights. The floorboards squealed under Izuku’s shaking footsteps,
and if he hadn’t already had the attention of everyone in the room, they would have done a fine job of giving him away.

He jumped so hard it felt like his skin would peel off when Dabi clapped a rough hand on his shoulder, the disfigured villain wearing little more than a weary smirk. “Here’s the gang, kid: Spinner is the scaly one,” he gestured vaguely to a reptilian man dressed in a suspiciously familiar manner, all buckles and flowing red cloth. Nearly a dozen knives were strapped onto his person, and the barely contained mania in his yellowed gaze sent a shiver down Izuku’s spine.

Dabi continued on, uncaring, “Shades is Magne, the weirdo in the suit is Twice,” side by side at the bar was a woman with enough musculature to put most pros to shame, with a leering, wide lipped grin and a pair of aviators that took up half her face. Beside her, in a full body spandex suit, ‘Twice’ was impossible to read, aside from the oddly expressive eyes of his face mask.

“Pigtails is Toga, don’t talk to her--“

Even as Dabi spoke, a girl that looked even younger than Izuku peeked up at him over the back of a booth, her stark blonde hair pulled into messy pigtails and her chewed lips pulled into an almost delirious grin, exposing her prominent canines.

“Hiiiiiii Izukun! Let’s be best friends !” She chirped in a gratingly sing-song tone of voice, her eyes boring greedy holes into Izuku’s face. Faintly, he could make out the rust-brown stain of dried blood on the collar of her cardigan.

“Compress is down for the count,” Dabi continued over Toga’s interruption, regarding her as he might a rat that had drowned in his sink, “so you won’t be meeting him. And you already know Kurogiri.” Izuku could hardly have missed the man shaped collection of opaque gasses, his swirling yellow eyes unmistakable. The addition of a bartender’s uniform, however, was almost comical.

“Welcome,” Kurogiri greeted, as though he hadn’t nearly killed Izuku and his friends only a few short months ago-as if he hadn’t done so again just a few hours ago. “You would do well to relax yourself, Izuku Midoriya. As long as you behave with proper decorum, no harm will come to you while you remain our... guest.”

Izuku stared at the wall behind Kurogiri, dead eyed. It seemed like they meant to keep him long-term, instead of doing... whatever they planned, and then killing or releasing him. It’s possible they really didn’t plan on hurting him, but it was impossible not to keep his guard up. He couldn’t trust professional villains- murderers. Maybe he’d be able to find a way out of the cuffs-- they had to be based on the Quirk suppression technology that the police used when capturing villains, but he’d never even imagined they could be made so compact, there had to be some sort of structural weakness that he could find when he wasn’t being supervised if he regained use of his Quirk he’d be able to escape even if he was under constant surveillance Living Nightmare was strong enough to subdue whatever guard was watching him and then he could use it to tunnel through the building--

The sudden sound of a CRT buzzing to life tore Izuku out of his frantic thoughts, attention snapping over to watch Spinner roll out a hulking box of a television on a plastic cart, the picture fuzzy but clearly showing a recognizable news logo.

“Take a seat,” Dabi muttered into his ear, the stench of ash and burnt flesh turning his stomach, “celebration’s starting, birthday boy.” The clammy hand on his shoulder pulled away, and Izuku watched numbly as Dabi loped over to take a seat at the bar.

Toga had practically leapt out of her booth to get a better look at the screen, and while her attention was turned away Izuku stumbled over to a booth far away from her, collapsing onto the hard vinyl.
“This station is crap!” Twice complained vulgarly, only to… immediately contradict himself? “Their reporting is both accurate and impartial!”

“Is our illustrious leader not joining us?” Magne questioned with a note of sardonicism, “I thought he’d be thrilled.”

“Tomura had no interest in joining us,” Kurogiri replied smoothly, with something like relief in his voice, “and it is likely for the best. His temper is too volatile for our guest.”

Spinner flashed a displeased grimace, his teeth oddly blunt for his reptilian appearance. “If Shigaraki just wants him dead then why did we go through the trouble of--“

“Because that isn’t the plan,” Dabi interrupted sharply, his glare snapping Spinner’s jaw shut.

“It’s such a shame,” Toga sighed airily, oblivious to the deeper subtext that Izuku was frantically attempting to unravel, “Izu would be even cuter if he was a little roughed up!” She suddenly turned to meet his gaze, and he froze under the sulfurous heat of her interest like a rabbit in the spotlight of a combine harvester. “I bet you’re real pretty when you cry, huh? Are you? Are you??”

Izuku trembled with the overwhelming urge to simply vanish, barely able to form a single syllable. “I-I-“

“Shut up,” Dabi groaned, ignoring Toga’s resulting pout as he snatched up the remote, “it’s starting.”

With the press of a button the sound began pouring through tinny speakers, a neatly pressed news anchor wearing a grave expression as she spoke, “-bring you our top story. A devastating attack occurred on a U.A. training camp just last night, carried out by the notorious League of Villains.”

“Of the forty students attending, only seventeen were not hospitalized, and one student, Class 1-A’s Izuku Midoriya, has been kidnapped,” her co-anchor continued, each word a needle piercing through Izuku’s throat. “Six pro heroes were stationed at the camp, including the Wild Wild Pussycats mountain rescue team. Two were hospitalized with serious injuries, and one is missing, believed to also have been taken by the League of Villains.”

“The group of villains were reported to be comprised of eight individuals, one of which was arrested, and two who were found deceased, the notorious criminals Moonfish and Muscular, seemingly by the actions of a third party. Investigations into this incident are pending.”

“At least it was the maniacs that got weeded out,” Dabi muttered under his breath, low enough that Izuku could barely hear it above the TV.

“U.A. itself could not be reached for comment on the incident, but our sources say they will be hosting a press conference in two days’ time. The school has been shut down until further notice.”

The anchor shuffled the papers on her desk, eyes tracking the teleprompter in front of her. “Word from the police is that investigations have already begun, and a rescue effort to retrieve both Izuku Midoriya and pro hero Ragdoll is underway. We now go live to Detective Naomasa Tsukauchi for an update on--“

The screen suddenly went dark, the news report vanishing to be replaced only by the words ‘AUDIO ONLY’ in the bottom left corner. Strangely enough, no audio came through. Dabi sighed, tossing the remote back onto the bar top. “Guess that’s it for the party. Someone better let fuckhead know his attack dogs bit the dust when he’s done, if he doesn’t already know.”

Izuku paid little mind to the uneasy glances shared between the members of the League, so
overwhelmed by the news report that he could barely breathe. So many people hurt, his classmates hurt, because-what, because Shigaraki held a grudge? Because he was an incomprehensible maniac who just wanted to hurt people because he could? Because Izuku had… insulted him, by not lying down and dying?

Without the static haze of Living Nightmare to turn all his negativity inwards, to swell it like a pustule until it finally popped and shattered him, his self-hatred was finally turning outwards. He shook with each harrowed breath, dragging each one inward with hooks so that he wouldn’t simply suffocate on the explosive surge of rage. He didn’t want it; he didn’t want his friends hurt, he didn’t want his mom to worry, he didn’t want anyone to die—he wanted to make the League disappear.

“Izuku Midoriya.” Izuku locked up at the sound of his name, spoken in the haunting timbre of Kurogiri’s voice. The swirling, igniting impulses in his head turned to ash, sifted apart by shame and terror at his own loss of control.

He barely remembered to look up, tearing his eyes away from the wood grain he’d been staring so heatedly at. “You have been summoned. Please come with me,” Kurogiri continued, stepping aside from the booth to give Izuku room to stand. His legs, no longer trembling, had stiffened into cadavers, each step dragging cold meat across the planked floor. He followed Kurogiri in something of a daze, leaving behind the noise of the bar and the haunting, lamplight vision of Toga for a dark, quiet side passage.

He felt removed from reality, like nothing was real and he’d wake up at camp without the taste of blood and ozone in his mouth, and he could vaguely realize the danger inherent in that feeling. A hero was supposed to be focused, clear headed and alert, vigilant to the danger that surrounded them. Izuku was just a body in the water.

“He’s here, Sensei.”

As soon as the words left his cracked lips, Izuku could feel an odd pressure growing in the base of his throat. He coughed to try to clear it, only for it to begin rapidly growing larger, a spreading, sickly cold rising up his throat. He panicked, hands flying to his throat as he began to scream-only for gushes of oily black sludge to spill out, coating and clinging to his face and neck. He gurgled in horror, fingers clutching uselessly as he choked and his vision was consumed by darkness. He was dead, he was dying he was dead he was drowning it was happening again again again--

As suddenly as his airways had filled, he could draw breath again, a ragged gasp ripping out of him as he sucked in a lungful of oxygen. He wheezed and hacked, eyes squeezed tightly shut, sunk to the floor on his hands and knees as he struggled to catch up to the fact that he wasn’t dead.

“As you, trash.” The harsh, grating hiss of Shigaraki’s voice sounded somewhere above him,
the only warning he got before four fingers were yanking him up by the hair, pulling a yowl of pain out of his sore, convulsing throat.

Izuku stumbled to his feet as quickly as he could, eyes snapping open to take in his surroundings. He was in an unfamiliar room, so dark he could hardly make out anything other than the sour stench of antiseptic and industrial cleaning chemicals and the vague, fuzzy shapes of furniture.

“Now now, Tomura, it’s quite rude of you to treat our guest so roughly. I’ve taught you better than that.” The unfamiliar voice snapped Izuku’s focus to the other side of the room, where an entire flock of hospital equipment, arranged in a semi-circle, was barely illuminated by their own running lights.

“Yes, Sensei,” Shigaraki groused, the clenched fist in Izuku’s hair mercifully releasing its grip. He stumbled half a step away from Shigaraki, his heart pureed by its senseless striking against his ribs.

“You may take your leave of us now, Tomura. I will call for you when it is time for him to return.”

Izuku gasped in uncontainable shock at the sight of Shigaraki’s stooped, spindly form suddenly being engulfed in a geyser of tarry sludge, which he only managed to glimpse coming from inside his mouth before it swallowed him whole and seeped out of existence. So it was some kind of teleportation Quirk?

Before he could ponder it further, a dim overhead light buzzed on, revealing the medical equipment in its dull grey light, as well as the shadowed figure in the middle of it all, propped up in an overstuffed recliner with a series of consoles on the desk in front of him.

“My apologies to you, young man. Tomura can be very… willful, when he is upset.” The voice was rich and smooth, carrying with it a hint of age that was almost… fatherly. Or it would have been, if not for the pins and needles sticking into Izuku’s stomach at the sound of it. “But I hope your stay has been comfortable otherwise. I should hate to know that you’ve been treated improperly.”

Izuku was dazed and reeling, still shaking from his brush with death, and the trauma it reflected. He struggled to make sense of things, where he was, why he was there, answering automatically in a choked, polite voice. “N…no, s-sir. I’m n-not.. I w-wasn’t hurt.” It was only half of a lie—the deep ache in the side of his chest, of a bruise so internal that it might be bone, wasn’t the fault of anyone in the bar.

“Excellent, truly. Proper decorum can be so difficult for some, and that is hardly a way to treat a guest.” The genuinely pleased note in the man’s voice threw Izuku off, further removing him from a reality he could make proper sense of. “Now, I’m sure you’re quite curious as to why I sent for you. Though, a boy as clever as you, I imagine you might already have some idea.”

“I-I’m sorry, sir, I d-don’t… know w-who you are?” Something, some instinct, kept Izuku cautious, made the very blood in his veins tremble with suspicion and fear. This man… something about him was dangerous.

“Truly? Did All Might not tell you?” It was there in his voice, hidden behind soft surprise and curiosity; he had a deeper knowledge, something dark and insidious, animalistic in its savagery.

Izuku didn’t know why he would ask about All Might. Did he know something that Izuku didn’t? Had he heard that they had some connection? Was the whole thing a misunderstanding? His thoughts were racing, and he had nowhere to voice them, no sense of security to explore them.

“T-tell me what, sir?”

Stifling silence reigned for moments, a grasping hand that teased its fingers along the corners of the
room, revealing in full the ease in which it could press inwards, and crush them into detritus. And then the man laughed. It was a low, restrained chuckle, a gauzy film of amusement on the surface, containing the brackish depths of guttural schadenfreude.

“Life is truly amusing,” the man uttered warmly, as though he did not leech all heat from the room around him. “Come, young man, have a seat so that we might converse.” As he spoke, Izuku’s attention was drawn to a simple wooden chair in front of the console, angled to face the recliner. Fearing the looming consequences of disobedience, Izuku did as bid, fingers clenching uncontrollably around the cuffs on his wrists. To think he would yearn for his own Hell, to embrace the torment he knew in place of the suffocating terror he did not.

Every step took him deeper in the mire, the clinging muck creeping up his shins, his thighs, his hips. He waded through the tangible malice, shaking when he finally lowered himself into the chair, the tide rising to his throat. He looked up, and saw the face of the man.

“You can call me All For One,” he smiled, empty lips imitating the pale echo of a handsome grin. They curled at the corners, white teeth filmy and incongruent in the faded light. Izuku had no eyes to meet, only the cold flash of enamel and the formless impression of eye sockets, shadowed by wrinkled, molten skin, overstretched and ropey with scar tissue. The scalp was torn and reknit, clay shaped by clumsy hands, overcompensating in twisting dips and peaks. A half dozen nozzles and tubes hung from his throat and the inseam of his cheek, artificial pumps and bladders pumping and wheezing in a wall behind him.

“It is truly a pleasure to finally speak with you face to face, Izuku Midoriya. I believe we have much to discuss.”
Chapter 56

The dim, concrete room around him possessed the air of a morgue, heavy with the stench of aged death and medicinal chemicals. Izuku might have even called it a tomb, were it not for the carcass sitting upright in front of him. The machines around him whirred and wheezed, pumping oxygen into the remains of his respiratory system. The EKG beeped a slow, steady rhythm, in exact contrast to the wild, uneven shuddering of Izuku’s own heart. He gazed straight down at the floor, and tried not to move.

“How tense…” All For One observed him passively, the faux-casual words goring Izuku through with barbed lances of fear. How could this man see him without eyes? Was the warping not his Quirk? Did he have some sort of sensory ability? “I have no intention of killing you, young man. Not after the trouble I’ve gone through to arrange this conversation.”

“How truly craven you must imagine me,” All For One mused, some dark amusement coiling up out of his mouth and blackening the air around it, “a killer of children. Do you really believe me so despicable?” It was a loaded question, of course; Izuku was being led, but the anger in him suddenly boiled to life, scalding and ravenous as it seeped up his throat.

“T-that’s why you sent a s-squad of murderers to k-kidnap me and at-attack my friends, right? B-because it’s beneath you?” He regretted it the moment it slipped past his lips, fear of consequence hammering the nail of paranoia into the base of his skull.

“And yet, isn’t it so curious… all of your classmates escaped with their lives.” Foreboding struck him as some emotion flitted across All For One’s face, too fleeting and incomplete for him to decipher. “In fact, as I recall, it was the Vanguard Action Squad alone that took casualties.” All For One’s teeth flashed, a white streak of cruelty. “I can only imagine who the culprit responsible might be.”

The blood drained out of Izuku’s face. The splinter of All For One’s bald-faced insinuation pierced beneath his skin, and began rapidly multiplying until every inch of his chest cavity blossomed with bristling guilt. He—it wasn’t his fault that Muscular had died. He was acting in self-defense, and Mincemeat had been the one to actually kill him. He’d done everything in his power to avoid killing him.

But was that enough, his doubt whispered. Would Muscular have even survived without Mincemeat’s intervention? He… Izuku had mutilated him, would it have been fatal, would he have just doomed Muscular to a slower, more painful death?

No, it—he had no other choice. There was nothing else he could have done… right?

“W-why am I really h-here?” Izuku’s jaw clacked like stones birthing sparks, his pitted bones quivering with the fear of the unknown. He knew, rationally, that the man in the chair in front of him was brittle, kept alive by tubes and wires, given a weapon only in his razor wit and poisonous words. But rationality had never once quelled the terror beneath his skin.

“You are here, because… when I look at you, Izuku Midoriya,” All for One languidly rolled the words around, piling their individual weights on a scale against a feather. “I see only tragedy.” He paused, almost grandiosely, as Izuku stared at him incomprehendingly. “You are a talented and intelligent young man, if your school records are any indication. Your zeal for heroism, while naïve,
shows your impressive ability to overcome obstacles and challenges placed in front of you in pursuit of a higher goal. You have potential, young man; potential that has been dashed by little more than a genetic fluke.

“You understand, don’t you?” Izuku could glean no warmth from the man’s tone—only cold surety, and some distant, simmering satisfaction. “You cannot be a hero as you are. Your Quirk will destroy you and everything you have built, everyone you have met. One tragic day, inevitably, you will lose control, and end another’s life. Perhaps…” liquid plastic flooded through Izuku’s veins as hollow sockets stared him down, the long shadow of the man in the chair coating him in a film of dread, “it has already happened?”

It was only the imprisonment of Living Nightmare that kept Izuku from breaking. Tingling shocks ran in circuits up and down his arms, his trembling fingers fist in his lap until his nails bit through the skin of his palms. He could feel his lips quiver, skewed and uneven, visions of choking slime and the slick, steaming scent of boiled flesh injecting into the base of his retinas. All For One’s mouth curled in cruel satisfaction, and fury welled up to vaporize Izuku’s despair and panic. A corpulent hatred filled his cavities in a great tide, so toxic that it corroded through his skin in wet, gaping honeycombs.

“Y-you don’t k-know anything.” The heat in his throat was a wildfire, gushing ash and smoke from between his lips. His eyes burned like they were boiling. His fingers twitched in his lap with hideous urges. The gears in his head sharpened into blades, gnashing to hurt, to destroy. “…T-that’s not the r-real reason, is it? Y-you—you know I’m a t-threat to you, and your L-League of Villains. It w-wasn’t morality that k-kept you from killing me, either. You’re afraid of w-what might happen. If my Quirk would d-destroy you when you tried. T-that’s why you made the s-suppression cuffs, isn’t it? Y-you’re afraid you can’t c-contain me without them.”

Silence reigned between them for a moment long enough that Izuku felt a spike of vicious vindication pierce through him, a victory against the man attempting to strangle him in a web of words. But it slowly dissolved as the only response he received was a toneless chuckle, distaste cloaked in amusement. He tensed in his seat, prepared to leap to his feet, when All For One’s hand slipped into his jacket pocket. But rather than a weapon as Izuku feared, he retrieved only a slim black remote, unmarked by any branding, or indeed any details other than a single protruding button.

“You are a bright boy, Izuku Midoriya. You used the information available to you to reach a logical conclusion.” All For One’s praise felt like kerosene, slick and heady, existing only to send him up in flames. “And I can hardly blame you for it being the wrong one. After all, you’re not playing with all the pieces.”

His thumb glanced over the remote before Izuku could move, the cuffs around his wrists beeping once before loosening, the mechanisms going completely slack instead of digging into the skin. Izuku sucked in a breath, petrified, and the scream that spilled in heaving gushes from his slackened mouth was as much Living Nightmare’s as it was his own. The chair beneath him skidded, legs screeching and skipping before it tipped over, and his twitching, seizing body was deposited on the floor.

The infernal engine beneath his skin shrieked and bellowed as it overloaded his blood vessels. Liquid malice bled through his pores in searing, opaque clouds that cloaked his entire body in the stench of decaying carcasses trapped in the sucking embrace of oil and tar. The machinations of Living Nightmare were oppressive and all consuming, stygian gears shrieking out static as he was ground between their teeth. His silhouette snapped out in a stain on the floor below him, a ghoulish stratum of glistening film that bisected the empty space between atomic bodies.
“How truly pitiable,” All For One tutted, his voice warped through a fluctuating bubble of static. Izuku could barely make him out through the acrid fumes, but even as raw unmaking snapped out his bones and flesh, he could feel the nightmare beginning to stabilize. The world slowly bled back into focus, despair flooding to meet it like an anvil on his tongue. Somehow, he had forgotten the overwhelming negativity that Living Nightmare dredged up within him; the fear he had felt only moments before was a waxy echo, melting in the blazing inferno of unnatural terror. He wanted to cry. He wanted to break. He wanted to die.

“What a sight you make, ‘future hero’. A villain sits before you, awaiting your justice, and all you can do is lie there. Will you not strike me down, hero? Will your righteous fury not quell my evil once and for all?” All For One’s biting words had become flesh rending, cutting to Izuku’s core and revealing the raw wiring underneath.

He grit his teeth and forced his shaking hands underneath him, fighting against the crushing pull of gravity. The weight of miasma barely allowed Izuku to rise to his knees in one motion, solid lines of numbness carving through his trembling arms. He swayed up to his feet, nearly falling with the effort, and met All For One’s ghoulish gaze through the phantasmagorical tint of Living Nightmare’s influence.

“What are you waiting for, hero? Kill me.” All For One had sat up straighter in his chair, anticipation bleeding from every pore in his skin as the wheezing, beeping machines around him hastened to a crescendo. In a snapshot, Izuku could see what would be left of him: half a torso and a pair of limp legs, raw insides spilling out over disintegrated leather and wood, the machines wailing and droning on either side as the ones behind him were reduced to slag and dust—nothing but a corpse in a tomb.

Wild eyed, Izuku raised the culling blade of his arm, fingers half curled into his palm, save for the index pointed lazily between All For One’s missing eyes. In an instant, Living Nightmare came to him. Wires wrapped around his bones in hunting tendrils, thrumming with the only hunger so vile that it could gnaw apart the bonds of matter itself. Its voice was low and howling in his chest, ringing through his fluids as if it might displace all the liquid in his body. Annihilation lived in the palm of his hand.

But he would never kill anyone ever again.

Burning tears dripped down Izuku’s face as his other arm snapped up behind him, poised to wrench apart the façade of solid walls and facilitate his escape. He primed Living Nightmare—

—and screamed as his entire body was crushed in a squeezing vise, bulging, serpentine tendrils encasing him, solid as stone and rough as concrete. Living Nightmare sputtered like a dying star as it was entombed once more, the sound of the cuffs reactivating drowned out by the ringing in Izuku’s ears. He gasped for breath, vision blurring as he wildly searched for the source of his attacker.

“How disappointing. Even your beloved Symbol of Peace understood the necessity of my death to maintain his false utopia. But he failed to take my life, and so have you.” All For One’s ringing disapproval was followed by the tendrils slacking, dropping Izuku unceremoniously back onto his unsteady feet. He followed their retreat in numb disbelief, the chalky, porous entities slithering back to their source.

“We will speak again soon.” All For One promised as the tendrils retreated underneath his sleeves, his chin rested on the back of his hand. “Perhaps tomorrow, you will be prepared to discuss your future.”

Before Izuku had a chance to speak, before he had a chance to protest his fate or process the events that had just taken place, a dark pressure built in the base of his throat. His gurgled shriek of terror
was abruptly silenced as the black fluids swallowed him whole, and left All For One alone in the dark.

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“Yes… Yes, I’m on my way now, just a few minutes out. Thank you for calling me… I will. See you then.”

Toshinori Yagi swiped to end the call on his cellphone with his free hand, eyes locked on the road in front of him. He tossed it carelessly onto the empty passenger seat, resuming his white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. Traffic was light—it wouldn’t take him long to reach the hospital.

All he had to do was pick up Aizawa, and drive him back to U.A. That was the only task he had to focus on. He didn’t need to think about what came after. It helped nobody to dwell on what had happened. He wouldn’t save anyone by thinking about his failure to protect his own student, to let Young Midoriya fall right into the villain’s clutches because he was so useless, too scared and narrow minded to do what needed to be done, Toshinori had tried to prepare him but he’d failed, all he’d done was hurt his students, fail them, lose their trust, lose their respect, and now Midoriya might lose his life—

“Stop it,” Toshinori hissed, daring to squeeze his eyes shut for all of a moment to roughly shake his head. His fingers ached from how tightly he gripped the steering wheel, knuckles nearly bursting through the thin skin. “Not important, it’s not important,” he whispered to himself over the growl of the engine, a mantra he’d used as a crutch for years.

He couldn’t allow himself to collapse under the pressure. Toshinori couldn’t allow himself to fail again, not while he was still needed. He was on the clock, which meant he had to smile. It felt cold and plastic on his thin, sallow face, a mockery of the grin that inspired hope and relief in the citizens that believed in him. But even when he was nothing more than a sham, a ghost of the ghost of All Might, that belief was enough to keep him moving. As long as one single person believed in him, needed him, he’d fight until his hands were dust.

So he smiled, and focused on what he had to do. He could see the hospital, at the end of the next block. Toshinori could endure the next few minutes, because Aizawa needed him to. And then he’d endure the minutes that came after, because his fellow teachers needed him.

Slowly, the tension unwound from his stiff, gawky shoulders, the tie around his neck no longer squeezing the air out of his skinny windpipe. He pulled into the parking lot, releasing his aching hands from the wheel to put the car in park and kill the engine. The sudden silence was almost tranquil, and he sat motionless in his seat for a few seconds before forcing himself to get up. The entrance to the hospital was, thankfully, free of foot traffic, allowing him to quickly enter into the waiting room. The distinct smell of medical care crept up on him, the bright fluorescent lights above him dimmed by the sunlight pouring in through the windows.

To his relief, Aizawa was already standing at the front desk, looking ill at ease in his rumpled clothing. He had a packet of discharge forms in one hand, and the other… carting a portable oxygen tank, the plastic tubing snaking up to his nostrils.

Something twisted in Toshinori’s chest, where his stomach used to be.

“Should you really be leaving the hospital already?” The moment the words escaped his mouth, he wished he could rewind time and slap himself across the face.
But instead of the scathing dressing-down he was expecting to receive, Aizawa only sent him a tired glare, his already sunken eyes marred by bags so dark they looked like bruises. He pushed away from the counter and walked right past Toshinori, leaving him to gawp at the other man’s back before hurrying after him.

“Sorry, that was rude of me, I—how are you feeling? I read the incident report, but, your injuries weren’t detailed—“

“You’d think silence was a villain, considering how often you try to beat it to death.” Aizawa’s raspy, mumbling insult had Toshinori’s jaw snapping shut, something like shame crawling across his skin as he silently unlocked the car.

It wasn’t until they were both seated inside, the oxygen tank tucked between Aizawa’s legs and the engine grumbling to life, that the silence broke again.

“Three broken ribs. Bruised lung. Took a bit to figure out my collarbone was bruised too. The old lady already came by, cleared me for discharge. The tank is just a precaution.” Toshinori glanced aside for a moment, but Aizawa’s gaze was firmly turned out the window.

“Oh, that… that’s good.” Fumbling for something else to say, the awkward silence stretched between them as the words fled from Toshinori’s grasp. He almost considered turning on the radio, but… strangely, he had the feeling Aizawa wouldn’t appreciate the sort of music he normally enjoyed.

All he could think about was the tension that resided between them, Aizawa’s clear disdain weighing on his shoulders. It had been weeks since they’d last spoken, time eaten by his teaching classes, and… David. The entire time, Aizawa’s assessment of his character and ability gnawed away at him, slowly chipping away the foundation of his confidence. And the worst part was, the entire time, all he could think was…

“You were right about me.” Toshinori’s admission came on the heels of a cough, his chest rattling wetly. He stared resolutely at the bumper of the car in front of him, even as he felt Aizawa’s searing gaze turn his way. “I didn’t… understand, what being a teacher meant. I could… I can organize a curriculum, and grade students, and do paperwork, but the actual teaching... I thought I could just use what I know, trust my gut, and everything would turn out great. I’m the Symbol of Peace—if anyone can teach students how to be great heroes, it should be me, right?

“I was so stupid.” Toshinori laughed mirthlessly, even as his weak heart cramped in his chest. “Even during the final exam, I,” pushed his students too hard, tried frantically to prepare them for a looming threat because every sign pointed to All For One’s return, and he’d been so terrified that the man would take away everything he cared about again, take away his students, “I let my own fears blind me. I did them more harm than good. I’m… sorry—“

“What are you apologizing to me for?” Aizawa interrupted him dispassionately, dark eyes narrowed at the side of Toshinori’s head. “I’m not the one you wronged. You should be working hard to earn forgiveness from your students, not from me. My opinion isn’t the important one.”

“It is important,” Toshinori rebuked, “because you’re a successful hero and an accomplished teacher. Something I’m not.”

“Enough with the pity party.” Suddenly, Aizawa’s tired voice was full of blades, as sharp as Toshinori could remember it. “Your woebegone lamenting isn’t productive. Did anything from those teaching seminars penetrate your hard head?” Wordlessly, Toshinori nodded. “Then use that. Be a better teacher, and right the mistakes you make instead of wallowing in them.”
Toshinori opened his mouth to respond, to agree, but an intrusive thought blindsided him so hard that he thought he might spit blood all over the dash. He clenched the steering wheel between his fingers, shoulders hunched as his knotted, weary muscles tightened, rubber bands stretched until just before they snapped.

“I… I didn’t get the chance to apologize to Young Midoriya before—” He tightened his jaw, teeth digging into his cheek until he could taste blood. The end of his sentence coiled in the air, as obvious as if it were painted on the ceiling.

“You’ll get the chance soon enough.” It wasn’t the words Aizawa had said, but the way he’d spoken them that struck a chord deep inside of Toshinori. He spoke plainly and absolutely, a fact as benign and assured as the color of the sky. The sun rose and fell, the flowers bloomed and died, and they’d get Izuku Midoriya back.

“Yes, I will. It must be a heavy burden on you,” Toshinori began, pausing just long enough to earn a curious look from Aizawa, “after all, being right about everything all the time is quite the responsibility.” Aizawa rolled his eyes and thunked his forehead against his window, bringing a smile to Toshinori’s face. And for the first time in weeks, it felt right.

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Really, when he thought about it, it hadn’t been too terribly long since the last time Eijirou Kirishima had felt like he did now: weak, helpless, a cowardly bystander frozen in fear and indecision, unable to make a difference. It had only been a little over a year, before he’d been able to embrace the mindset he’d needed to train hard enough to get into U.A.

And now he was in U.A. He’d gotten second in the entrance exam, placed eighth in the Quirk Apprehension Exam, defeated villains and made it to the quarter-finals of the Sport’s Festival—he’d proven himself, proven the strength of his Quirk and the strength of his passionate spirit.

And none of it meant anything, because he still felt useless. He grit his teeth and clenched his bandage wrapped hands into fists at his side, skulking outside of the hospital as he waited. It’d been a miracle that he’d managed to convince his mom to let him stay and see his friends, promising to be home before it got too late.

Maybe minutes had passed, or even hours—the haze of anger and frustration blurred his perception, the grainy concrete beneath his feet swarming like motes of static as he stared. Todoroki hadn’t specified a meeting time.

And Bakugou would be with him. There was a reason Eijirou avoided him whenever possible; they were unaligned, skewed in different directions in every way, and any contact between them only resulted in hard friction. Maybe, if his teeth were being pulled, he could admit that Bakugou’s skill and drive impressed him. He worked hard at everything he did, never afraid to shoot for the top spot, and didn’t let anything get in his way. And as much as Eijirou despised everything he’d done, he wasn’t blind to the effort Bakugou put in to get better, to be more than the cruel, loud mouthed bully he’d been.

But it all faded into steam whenever he saw Midoriya’s face, forever misaligned with Eijirou’s memory of the sweet, shy, soft and unassuming boy he’d first met. Just thinking it made him sick, because all those things were still true—but as much as Eijirou knew it changed nothing about him, it had still changed everything. He’d have to wear that mistake on his face for the rest of his life.

Maybe something had changed in him, too. When Bakugou had showed up to get on the bus to camp, and every one of his classmates went pale with shock, and Midoriya had nearly crumbled into
ash with upset… Eijirou had seen the handprint burned across his face, and thought, ‘good’. It made him sick to his stomach, like all that rage and vicious vindication had melted together into sludge in the pit of his gut. He didn’t consciously want anything bad to happen to Bakugou, but knowing that his dislike for someone could be so intense that he’d thought that, even for a moment… it was scary.

The sound of approaching footsteps broke Eijirou from his thoughts, and he quickly wiped the look of consternation off his face, internally promising to remain civil with Bakugou. He glanced up, spying Todoroki and Bakugou approaching, as expected.

“Hey,” he greeted a little flatly, giving them both a weak smile. Todoroki was as unreadable as ever, perfectly neutral in both stance and facial expression. Bakugou looked as agitated as he normally did, maybe slightly exacerbated by the bandaging on his ear and forehead.

“You here to join the pouting party too, Geodude?” A drawling, unexpected voice piped up from somewhere behind Bakugou, and Eijirou had to crane his neck to catch Shinsou’s amused smirk. His distinctive hair was flattened down by a knit beanie (probably the only reason Eijirou hadn’t immediately seen him), and he had a backpack slung on his shoulder by a single strap.

“Oh, hey. I didn’t realize you’d be here too.” Eijirou sent a questioning look at Todoroki, who only shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, I couldn’t just let my favorite disaster go and blow up his one chance to rescue Midoriya, now could I? You guys need at least one responsible party to supervise.”

“Dipshit overheard Icy Hot telling you about the meeting,” Bakugou explained shortly. “Wouldn’t fuckin’ leave me alone about it, so he’s in too.” His eyes locked with Eijirou’s, red like open wounds, and clearly dared him to put up a fuss.

Eijirou didn’t rise to the bait.

“So uh, what exactly is the plan? Todoroki didn’t really give me any details…” Again, Todoroki said nothing, only nodding faintly at Bakugou.

“…I overheard something, last night,” Bakugou muttered, any heat that had been in his voice fading away, “I walked past Ponytail’s room, and she wasn’t under yet. There was a cop in there with her, talkin’ about what happened. Apparently, she managed to slap some kinda tracker on that Noumu we fought. And she gave the police a receiver that’ll show ‘em right where it goes.”

“Which means we have a viable method to find him,” Todoroki concluded, pinning Eijirou with a look so intense that he could barely blink. “Once Yaoyorozu is cleared, we’ll convince her to make us another receiver, and follow it. And we’ll take him back.”

Determination pounded in Eijirou’s chest, a thunderous hammer that shaped his heart into liquid fire. He could hear that fire crackling between Todoroki’s teeth, see the warping heat behind his eyes. His hands trembled in his pockets until he tightened them into fists, barely resisting the impulse to Harden them and aggrieve his still healing burns.

“You’re damn right about that,” he breathed, the twisted metal cage in his chest loosening for the first time since he’d woken up. It took a moment longer for his thoughts to clear, something odd occurring to him. “Is that all you needed to tell me?” Really, when he thought about it, they probably could have waited until Yaoyorozu was better before bringing him into it, right?

“This is exactly why I’m here,” Shinsou interjected smoothly, “hard as your collective heads are, you’d probably just follow the tracker in a straight line and throw punches at anything in your way.
And, since that’s obviously illegal and would get all of you expelled, I graciously decided to be the voice of reason.”

“Shinsou’s right,” Todoroki admitted over the sound of Bakugou’s annoyed growl, “we can’t realistically expect to rescue Midoriya by fighting off the entire League of Villains ourselves. And even if we could defeat them, there’d be legal fallout as well. Which is why we need to come up with a way to rescue him without facing any villains.”

Kirishima’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “How are we supposed to—“

“I’m glad you asked.” Shinsou shrugged off his backpack and set it on the ground, leaning down to unseal the zipper. Inside, nestled in a dark grey jumpsuit amidst chunks of deconstructed orange armor, were a dozen marble-sized speakers, and an angular, gunmetal grey facemask. “Trick Question’s trove is at our disposal,” he presented proudly, a wry smile twisting his lips.

“Holy shit dude, you stole your duds and support items from the school?!?”

“What? No, dumbass—I have permission from Aizawa to take them home with me.” Shinsou shot Eijirou a look like he should have known better, but seriously, how was he supposed to know that?

“The point is, fucking Grape Mint Listerine over here can use his shit ‘nonviolently’, ” Bakugou spat the word like it had personally offended him, “to either brainwash a villain or fuckin’—I don’t know, get Izuku’s attention or something.”

Eijirou’s eyebrows began to draw together, a dozen more questions welling up inside of him, but Todoroki’s phone went off and interrupted him.

“We can reconvene tomorrow, to see if Yaoyorozu’s condition has improved,” Todoroki finalized, ignoring the phone buzzing in his pocket. “Until then, keep this all quiet. We don’t need anyone trying to intervene and stop us.”

“So keep your damn mouths shut,” Bakugou muttered, his normally too-loud voice almost lost in the sound of his footsteps. He left them all behind without a second glance, headed in the direction of the train station.

Shinsou zipped up his bag and slung it back over his shoulder, yawning into the crease of his arm. “I’ve got shit to do that doesn’t involve loitering. See you guys later.” With a jaunty wave that didn’t match the exhaustion on his face, Shinsou left them in the dust.

The evening sun cast its light across the darkening sky, a glowing maw that bored its way into the horizon’s mantle. The sound of passing cars and city life was an echo on the wind. Slowly, the passage of time cut into the base of Ejirou’s neck, every second peeling skin until it could be severed by the minute hand.

“…I should probably get home too,” he mumbled, unable to project anything approaching his normal level of cheer. He couldn’t meet Todoroki’s eyes. He turned to leave, resisting the urge to scratch his burns until they peeled under his fingernails, when a hand latched around his wrist. He turned his head in confusion, eyes darting up.

“You know that the point of this is to fulfill our own selfish desires, right?” Todoroki’s eyes were liquid, unable to achieve a solid state of emotion. “Nobody wants us to do this. Our classmates would tell us it’s wrong. Our teachers would forbid and punish us. Even Midoriya.. wouldn’t want us to put ourselves in danger for him. You understand that.”

It wasn’t a question, but Eijirou took it as one regardless. “Of course I do. But I can’t…” He stared
down at his own hand, caught in Todoroki’s grasp, fingers trembling with unrealized desires. “…I can’t be someone that just sits and watches when somebody needs help. I don’t want to be.”

Having apparently seen something in Eijirou’s pinched expression that he found agreeable, Todoroki nodded and released the grip around his wrist. Eijirou sent him a searching look, unsure of what he was trying to find, before he turned to leave again.

“Just remember that we’ll get him back, no matter what.” Some lilt in Todoroki’s voice gave Eijirou a moment of pause; it was like the caress of hope’s icy fingers. “Even if we fail, he’ll be okay.”

“…Yeah,” Eijirou breathed, some chain around his heart falling away into rust. “He’ll be okay.”

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Izuku emerged for a second time from a whirl of cold, gripping mire, oxygen rushing back into his cleared airways in a single harrowed gasp. The floor beneath his twitching hands was carpeted, rough fibers scraping against his fingers. Every choked, shuddering inhale released another wash of cold buzzing over his frozen thoughts, a permafrost of shock locking his mental processes into place. All he could do was slowly take in his surroundings and try to breathe.

The carpet stretched out under him was a pallid grey, cheaply made and roughly woven. It looked blue in the illumination of a computer monitor, set up on a cheap wooden desk. The tower fan hummed inside the computer itself, a boxy black monster taking up a fourth of the desk space. A bookshelf was up against the wall, filled to near bursting with hand labeled tapes and jewel cases. An ancient fan clicked rhythmically as it spun overhead, its rickety sounds nearly drowned out by the rapid tapping of fingers on a mechanical keyboard.

Izuku’s head rose, seemingly of its own accord; he felt like a passenger, passively watching someone else move beneath his skin. His unfocused eyes took in the tattered office chair sat in front of the computer, and the body that occupied it: the dark crescent of a curved spine, arachnid fingers plucking at the keyboard and mouse, the itching stench of dust and decay that seemed to seep from his very pores.

“Sensei finally sent you back, did he?” Shigaraki’s strangled hiss came to him through an ocean, faint and distorted. Izuku’s body stared at him passively, his conscious thought swirling in an endless fog. He didn’t do anything when Shigaraki rose from his chair, only watching in a numb haze as the villain stalked towards him, his heartbeat remaining deceptively slow as the distance between them shrank.

It was only when they were close enough to touch that Izuku was shoved back inside his own skull, breath turning to stones in the base of his throat. The visceral terror all crashed into him at once, a blitz of trauma that sent him into free fall. He choked and flailed to push himself away, only for Shigaraki’s sneaker to press down directly on his throat, pinning him beneath that shallow, malignant gaze.

“Going somewhere?” Shigaraki mused, voice pitched up with cruel mockery. Izuku could feel his pulse hammering against the rubber sole pressed against it. Wildly, he considered his options—he could try to displace Shigaraki’s uneven weight and knock him over, or dig his fingers into his achillies, or slam the cuff on his wrist into the delicate shin—but he knew that all he could do was lie there, frozen on the carpet. His throat closed up in imitation of anaphylactic shock, anxiety strangling his airways with more efficiency than Shigaraki could.

“Since you don’t have anywhere else to be, I thought we could chat for a while. There’s a lot of questions I have for you, you know. So you’re gonna be a good little NPC, and give me some
exposition. Got it?” He dug the tip of his shoe right into Izuku’s throat, making him gasp and sputter before the pressure eased off.

“W..w-what do you w-want to k-know?” He choked out, voice unsteady and pulse thumping erratically. He knew Shigaraki couldn’t kill him—his Sensei wouldn’t allow that—but acting rational and collected at a terrifying villain’s feet was a little beyond him.

Seemingly pleased by his cooperation, Shigaraki finally removed the pressure off his throat and took a step back, giving Izuku space to cough and shakily clutch his tender throat with a hand. He staggered to his feet despite the pervasive ache filling every crack and crevice of his body, eyes locked warily on Shigaraki. The soft blue light of the monitor made him formless and indistinct, a wraith of destruction barely shaped into a human form.

“I want you to tell me everything you know about a villain called Mincemeat.” Izuku’s eyes widened in surprise, the reaction immediately swallowed by Shigaraki’s haunting, hunting gaze. “You saw him that night in Hosu, didn’t you? And again in the forest; that piece of trash, killing my men, killing my Noumu… you know all about it, don’t you?” The scarred edges of Shigaraki’s lips pulled into a jagged scythe, mania leaking between his teeth like blood.

He laughed before Izuku could respond, the noise so high and broken that it sent him stumbling towards the far wall. “How perfect is this!? That hunk of shit, betraying me because of you, and now you’re going to help me kill him.” Lost in his own hysteria, his constricted pupils stared straight through Izuku’s flesh, contracted to the point where they might just explode from the tension. “So tell me, Izuku Midoriya. Tell me everything.”

“Y-you can’t kill him b-by yourself.” For a moment, the room was still. Shigaraki’s reptilian gaze bored into him, shot with blood and ephemeral hatred. Izuku considered the urge to slit his own throat, and left it for later review. He—he had no loyalty, to either the League of Villains or Mincemeat. They were both diametrically opposed to him and everything he believed in. Logistically, it was a viable option to let them destroy each other. He’d rather have no conflict at all, but that wasn’t the world he lived in, and he couldn’t say nothing, because even if Shigaraki wasn’t allowed to kill him, there were numerous methods of torture that didn’t rely on severe physical harm. Izuku had to be selfish. He had to consider his own self-preservation, for once in his life.

“H-his Quirk is incredibly v-versatile,” he continued shakily, pinned to the floor beneath Shigaraki’s silent gaze, “he’d b-be able to outmaneuver you, and a-avoid your hands, if he f-faced you in direct combat at all. H-he seems to p-prefer surprise attacks, and has o-only appeared when he feels that there is no danger to his person. I-in Hosu, my—when Shouto Todoroki showed up, he immediately retreated, and said something about Endeavor’s Quirk. It’s reasonable to assume that he’s not only faced Endeavor in combat at some unspecified point in the past, but has a weakness to fire type Quirks. You’d have to trap him somewhere with no possible exits, including ventilation, if his Quirk allows him to deconstruct his own body until he’s small or flexible enough to escape. He can withstand catastrophic damage as well, and is quickly able to reconstruct himself from dire wounds. You’d have to be extremely thorough to inflict any manner of permanent damage, if he can take permanent damage at all.”

Izuku’s rambling flood of words turned to steam and vapor as Shigaraki’s grin magnified, gleeful and flesh rending. “That’s quite the lore dump, Izuku Midoriya. I almost regret trying to kill you, when you’ve already proven so helpful.” Seemingly past trying to intimidate him (though he didn’t have to try very hard), Shigaraki sank back down into his chair, peering at him over his spindly, steepled fingers. “What about his motivations? What is he after?”

Izuku swallowed down his bubbling nausea, shrinking into himself under Shigaraki’s gaze. “I-I…
he’s—unstable. H-he thinks that b-by m-mutilating heroes, he’s inspiring... p-personal growth i-in them. He said he l-looks for people w-with ‘potential’, and h-hunts them down t-to ‘help’. H-he hates the League, b-because of… of the N-Noumus, I think, a-and said he’d personally k-kill all of you.”

“Just another irritating lunatic, then.” Shigaraki’s hand rose towards his neck, but before his fingers could dig into the flesh, he began tugging on the collar of his shirt instead. Distantly, he noted the odd gloves the villain wore, each missing one finger, as well as the brief flash of silver-flesh scars around one wrist. “Putting him down shouldn’t be too hard. And the quest rewards will be more than worth the trouble.” A wheezing laugh slipped out of Shigaraki’s throat, his eyes shining with an indistinct malice that sent needles crawling up Izuku’s back. “You’ve been a big help, Izuku Midoriya. Maybe I’ll even talk to Sensei about giving you a reward.”

The mere mention of All For One was enough to make Izuku’s organs heave and lurch like repelling magnets. He needed time to process, to understand what had happened in that cold, timeless room, but… something burned in the back of his mind, slowly dripping down to sizzle on his tongue. With the revelation that Shigaraki wasn’t the one pulling the strings, he’d taken on another dimension. He was unquestionably dangerous and terrifying, but with someone as cruel, cold, and manipulative as All For One—as his ‘Sensei’—taking advantage of him… was Shigaraki a victim, too?

Before the villain could turn back to his computer and ignore him, Izuku grasped hold of the shattering bravery inside his chest, whole only for the absence of cutting wires. “C-can I ask you s-something?”

Shigaraki’s fading attention snapped back to him, clear curiosity settling on his wrinkled visage. A moment of silence persisted that Izuku took as permission.

“W-why are you doing t-this? A…attacking my c-class, and t-trying to kill All Might. W-what does it accomplish?”

“I hate everything about this world,” Shigaraki rasped, his tone almost casual. Despite that, his eyes were guarded and searching, so intense that Izuku was sure they’d carve right through his skin. “Heroes, villains, peace and justice— it’s all a *circus* of garbage. People walk around with stupid smiles on their faces, like nothing bad could ever happen to them. No matter how bad it gets, the heroes will *always* save them. The only way to change a world like that is to break society’s trust in it. Killing the Symbol of Peace and crushing the top hero school is the best way to do it.”

Izuku struggled to swallow a knot of coiled chains, shaken by the icy, unshakeable conviction in Shigaraki’s voice. His hatred was so raw and ingrained that Izuku could nearly feel it beading on his skin. But… it all stemmed from a sense of betrayal, didn’t it? He was dissatisfied with injustice. That… wasn’t irredeemable. And it was a hero’s job to save anyone they could, no matter what.

Shigaraki’s convictions, as warped and steeped in violence as they were, burnt like kindling for Izuku’s own desire to see justice done. “A-and that would m-make you happy?” He bit the inside of his cheek when Shigaraki’s erratic pupils snapped directly on his own, his breathing shaky but stabilized. “Or… is it b-because it would m-make your Sensei h-happy?”

The silence that stretched between them rapidly frayed, fibers rotting and sawed apart by the blade’s edge of Shigaraki’s swelling paroxysm. Izuku’s bones rattled with regret, nails of panic clawing him from the base of his skull to the back of his throat. He’d gone too far, he’d said too much he’d made Shigaraki and now he was going to pay for it—

“I’m done talking. Go back to your cell, brat.” Shigaraki swiveled away from him in his chair, slipping his cheap headphones back on and flattening his wild, feathery hair. Izuku was frozen, hesitating in the dark of the room. “Unless you want me to set you up on a playdate with my Noumu,
Izuku stumbled out the door with his liquefied heart sloshing in his stomach. The hallway was just as dim as it was when he’d first walked through it, and the noise he’d left behind in the bar had petered out. He almost considered trying to escape, but he doubted the building had a single unsecured exit if Shigaraki was willing to let him walk around on his own. And if he failed, that might sever the thin line of safety that prevented him from simply being held down and murdered. Maybe if he somehow managed to get his cuffs off, he’d have a better chance, but until that happened he’d play the part of obedient prisoner.

Izuku trudged down the rickety steps leading to the bar, straining to hear any voices that might be present down below, fear gnawing at the nodules of his spine. He hesitantly crept around the corner into the bar, his pulse marginally slowing when he only found Twice and Dabi sat at the bar, the TV murmuring and the two of them embroiled in conversation.

He padded into the room as quietly as he could, bare feet barely audible against the floorboards. He hunched his shoulders, head down, and hoped to just… walk into the room, and be ignored. Izuku managed to cross half the bar, eyes locked on the out-of-place metal door he’d woken up behind.

“So, back from meeting the boss man, huh?” Dabi’s cold, rasping drawl froze Izuku’s feet to the floor, his fingers digging into the meat of his forearms. “What’d you think of him?”

Izuku trembled as he was assaulted with the phantom sensation of fluid building in his throat, the venomous bite of doubt, of mocking, cutting words, warm as blood. He turned slowly to meet Dabi’s apathetic gaze, and the blank mask of Twice. No matter what either of them had done, they were both just men—just people. And All For One was…

“Y-you should leave this p-place while you can.”

Izuku nearly sprinted the remaining distance between himself and the concrete room, squeezing his eyes shut against the echo of his own voice, shattered and bludgeoned into blood and powder. The door gave way under his shaking fingers, allowing him to slip inside before it thundered back into frame. Alone. He was finally alone again.

In his absence, a cheap futon had been shoved in the corner of the room, with a prepackaged convenience store meal and a pair of plastic chopsticks placed on the pillow, a bottle of water tucked beside it. He numbly knelt down to sit on the edge of it, his stomach cramping to remind him that he hadn’t eaten. He grabbed the chopsticks in one hand, spotting a folded piece of paper that had been hidden underneath them.

‘Meal from Kurogiri.
He’ll bring you food.
If you need bathroom, just knock on door.
Happy birthday.’

Izuku stared down at the blocky, slanted handwriting as the fragile struts holding him together began to creak and crumble. He stared down at it until his vision turned to watercolors, searing tears dripping uncontrollably down his face and staining the page. He swept it aside, his breath hitching.
and shuddering as he fell apart. The chopsticks clattered in his hand, and it took him three tries to get his thumb under the lip of the takeout container and open it.

He could barely taste the food passing over his tongue, chewing and swallowing in mechanical rhythm, blinking only when he couldn’t stand the burning weight of tears gathered in his eyes. He emptied the container and drained the bottle, even when it felt like his throat might squeeze shut until it severed his head from his neck.

He couldn’t break yet. He had to… take stock of himself, first. Izuku fumbled with the fabric of his dirty, blood stained shirt, only now able to perceive the layer of grime that had settled over him. He set it aside, the lettering on the front mocking him; ‘This garment cannot be used as a flotation device’, it read.

He felt like he was drowning.

Izuku’s gaze trailed up the smooth, unbroken flesh of his arms, held out as far away from the rest of him as they could go. He followed the trail of freckles that dotted his skin, all the way up until he reached… a ring of thorns, circling unbroken around his bicep, just below the curve of his shoulder. The trauma that saved his life was printed permanently on his skin, branded on him by a maniac with a meat cleaver.

Numbness crept down the length of his spine in prickling sheets, a virus crawling through the currents of his nervous-system to infest every crevice of his flesh. It took all his strength to slip back into his shirt and lie on the futon, curled up so tightly that he could only hope he’d vanish from existence.

It was only the cuffs on his wrist that prevented a total collapse; All For One’s cruelty made into his bitterly ironic relief. Izuku could still breathe, just barely, with the tide surging up around him. He could just barely think, wrapped in the thin blanket and pressed against the cold concrete wall.

It wouldn’t be forever. He’d be rescued from this place before too long. He just had to endure until that moment, to stay in one piece so that he might live to see the moment where he could safely fall apart. Even the looming dread of knowing he’d see All For One again, be thrust back into that choking grave to be mercilessly broken down, wasn’t enough to shatter him.

Izuku would survive. He would make it out okay, and the League of Villains would be defeated. And while he was still trapped, still drowning in the nightmare, he’d uncover the shadowed truth of All For One, and One For All.

He’d stay strong, even as he cried himself to sleep.

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Dabi quietly considered the solid metal door that had just shut in his and Twice’s faces, the image of dull, shadowed eyes and pale, trembling lips burning a permanent hole in his brain.

“Jeez, seems like that kid is cracking already, huh?” Twice’s inappropriately jovial tone filled the silence of the bar for a moment, loud enough to tear Dabi’s eyes away from the door. Like clockwork, Twice’s voice fell into a throaty, chilling contradiction. “What he just said made perfect sense to me!”

“…Yeah, crazy already,” Dabi muttered into the depths of his drink, the cold glass tapping against his lip piercing. He couldn’t shake the bleak honesty in the kid’s voice, like some kinda creepy ass prophecy from a horror movie. The kind where nobody took it seriously, and then they all ended up
dead.

The greasy amber bar lights felt cold and slimy on his ruined skin. The bracers on his arms that kept him from completely immolating himself suddenly weighed like shackles. Dabi considered the dissolving foam clinging to the inside of his glass, an unscratchable itch worming its way beneath his skin.

…Maybe he should have an exit strategy. Just in case.

Works inspired by this one: Give In by A_ToastToTheOutcasts, [podfic of] Daymare by Dr_Fumbles_McStupid, Evangellion by A_Person_of_worth (Storm_Clouds_and_Starshine)

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